

Of Epicene Particles and Other Misleading Tricks

Gender Ambiguity in Silvina Ocampo's
"Carta perdida en un cajón"

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ABSTRACT

"Carta perdida en un cajón" [Letter lost in a drawer] is a paradigmatic example of simultaneous ambiguities at work in Silvina Ocampo's fiction (1903–1993). In this short story published in 1959, pronouns and shifters, as well as endings that mark gender, cooperate to erase certainties and make the reader actively seek clues to understand the exchange the short story sets up. By scrutinizing its manuscript, I examine Ocampo's writing and revision strategies and elaborate on some of her creative processes in her search for ambiguity. Through five key compositional moves I have identified in her manuscripts, my essay focuses on how Ocampo revises and ramps up the writerly effect of gender ambiguity that allowed the construction of queer identities in her fiction. I argue that the insertion of epicene particles and insults — which are less common in Spanish than gendered ones —, added at later stages of revision, demonstrate the intentional pursuit of a reading marked by confusion around the depiction of a non-normative desire. Genetic criticism allows us to reveal the painstaking process by which queer desire nudges its way into expression.

NARRATIVES THAT BEGIN IN *MEDIAS RES* STRIKE READERS WITH A PROLIFERATION OF unknown facts that need to be discovered. What is happening? Who is telling the story? What is it about? Why do things matter? Who are the characters? When is this happening? And where? All these questions catch the reader off-guard when the action has already begun before the narrative commencement and, thus, the reader's arrival. In Silvina Ocampo's "Carta perdida en un cajón" [Letter lost in a drawer], where the narration continues — never having begun properly — such a destabilizing effect is more acute due to the fact that its incipit is in the second person: it is a question, and, at the same time, its tone is that of an invective: "¿Cuánto tiempo hace que no pienso en otra cosa que en ti, imbécil, que te intercalas entre las líneas del libro que leo, dentro de la música que oigo, en el interior de los objetos que miro?" [How long have

I been thinking about nothing else than you, imbecile, who intersperses along the lines of the book I read, inside the music I hear, inside of the objects I look at?] (1999, 243). This opening situates the narrator at a highly emotional and heated point and places the reader in the implicated — maybe titillated, maybe uncomfortable — position of voyeur: that letter is clearly not for us and it does not seem to contemplate us as possible readers. But our voyeurism is a lettered one: we peek at a writing scene — that of the letter announced from the title — which is itself a confession and a verbal attack.

This first sentence clearly presents a very confusing scene: the narrative voice cannot help obsessively evoking someone with intense hatred; that person is the addressee of these words. In this scene of enunciation, feeling is the only unmistakable puzzle that can be solved so far. Other questions burgeon then: who are these people? What happened between them? Is this a couple of some sort? Not so consciously, one of the features that we tend to identify in this speech event is the gender of both the addresser and the addressee. The first working hypothesis tends to lead to a heterosexual couple:¹ The heteronormative imagination quickly distributes feminine and masculine roles as a conditioned reflex in any intense emotional exchange, a reflex also encouraged by a misleading reference to a heterosexual couple: “Ningún amante habrá pensado tanto en su amada como yo en ti” [No lover would have thought so much about his female lover as I have about you] (1999, 241).² And many readers — after observing so much intensity involved in the first epithet, “imbécil”, combined with the resentful obsession developed in the first paragraph — would not hesitate to ascribe a feminine gendered role to the narrative voice of this hateful, overexcited and overemotional character.³ But in the four-page short story, the first paragraph takes up one page and does not reveal the gender of the first or the second person: this, in Spanish, is striking. While the predominant use of the second person helps conceal the gender (unlike it would if using the third, where pronouns, as in English, are gendered), this

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1. My teaching experience confirmed my own suspicion as a reader: most students began reading the story with the working hypothesis that this letter would be part of a heterosexual couple's fight and were disoriented when that expectation was not confirmed but challenged.
 2. Here “ningún amante” does not necessarily denote a male lover, since generalization in Spanish is constructed through the masculine form of “ningún” and “amante”; a noun that is actually a present participle is epicene.
 3. Most of my students also concurred with this assumption, even though over fifty years have passed since this short story was first published.

is still very unusual — especially considering how this page contains many epithets and references in a language that forces the expression of feminine or masculine gender in many adjectives. It is not until the narrative gets to a highly gendered space — the boarding school — that gender ambiguity begins to be dismantled and each character's femi-nine gender is disclosed. Until that scene arrives, we have read one fourth of the short story, discovering that this relationship is intensely revolting and that it started back during childhood — but nothing more (that is, we know nothing about the source or reason for all these adverse feelings).

I argue that Ocampo could easily foresee this reading reaction and has intentionally tricked us into completing voids in this scene with our own prejudices (even emphasizing the hetero overtones of her story before tearing them down). If the crazed addresser is a woman, what gender are we assigning to the addressee of so much emotion? Heterosexual complacency might lead an unwary reader to assume that the addressee is a man, but the short story does not reveal these identities until well advanced in the narration. And it does not insist on them: only four occasions in the whole story are gender-fixed constructions. But before we continue, let's describe what happens in "Carta perdida en un cajón". If we reorganize the information for the sake of clarity, the short story is about two friends, the narrator — a woman — and Alba Cristián — another woman —, who had shared some time in a boarding school when they were younger. The animosity of the opening lines permeates the whole text and was born back then. They met a couple of times after childhood that are briefly mentioned in the story, and one last time, described more fully, which includes a fantasy of suicide. We learn of the narrator's plans to kill Alba and her change of heart. Because of the narrator's hateful tirades, L. — a male character who presumably was her partner at some point — became interested in Alba and ultimately leaves the narrator for her. The short story ends with a sort of veiled menace in which there is a combination or overlap of three different endings: the closure of the story, the conclusion of the letter, and the culmination of the narrator's life.

One of the most important Argentine writers of the twentieth century, Silvina Ocampo (1903–1993) was "unjustifiably overshadowed by esteemed peers", as Patricia Nisbet Klingenberg once put it (2003, 111), alluding not only to her older sister Victoria Ocampo, founder and director of *Sur* magazine, but also to her husband Adolfo Bioy Casares and their close friend Jorge Luis Borges. Ocampo mostly wrote poems and short stories, and began publishing her fiction in 1937, with her book *Viaje olvidado* (published in English in 2019 as *Forgotten Journey*, translated by Suzanne Jill Levine

and Katie Lateef-Jan); her inaugural book of poems, *Espacios métricos*, was first published in 1942 and received important awards (anthologies of her fiction were available in English in 1988 and 2015, under the titles *Leopoldina's Dream* and *Thus Were their Faces*, respectively, both translated by Daniel Balderston).⁴ Critical attention has noted Ocampo's unusual child characters, as well as her challenging female depictions, among the most important focuses in her fiction.⁵ Several critics have identified ambiguities as core features of her poetics. Less attention has been paid to how these ambiguities are key to representing non-normative sexual desires, something essential in the short story I will be analyzing. Access to the manuscripts revealed that this specific type of ambiguity was carefully crafted and constructed in the making of this short story. Through a genetic analysis of her manuscripts, my essay focuses on how Ocampo revises and intensifies the writerly effect that hinges upon the questions I have posed above. I argue that the insertion of epicene particles and insults — which are less common in Spanish than gendered ones — at later stages of revision demonstrate the intentional pursuit of a reading marked by confusion around the depiction of a non-normative desire.

The manuscript: first draft, main insertion, and a change in tense

“Carta perdida en un cajón” is a paradigmatic example of simultaneous ambiguities at work in Silvina Ocampo's fiction and one where pronouns and shifters, as well as endings that mark gender, cooperate to erase certainties and make the reader actively seek clues to understand the exchange the short story sets up. By scrutinizing its manuscript, I examine Ocampo's writing and revision strategies and elaborate on some of her creative processes in her search for ambiguity. As one of the most remarkable and most commented upon features of her writing, I argue that ambiguity is the effect of a delicate linguistic machinery that Ocampo achieved with a careful calibration through rewriting and corrections. My questions when encountering the manuscript concerned identifying the linguistic resources Ocampo was relying on to — in such a subtle and successful

4. Also available in English is *The Promise* (OCAMPO 2019); Ocampo's *novella* was published in Spanish only in 2010.

5. For some essential scholarship on childhood in Ocampo's work see BALDERSTON 1983, MACKINTOSH 2003, and PODLUBNE 2014. On female depictions, see KLINGENBERG 1999, OSTROV 1996, and ZAPATA 2005.

manner— conceal gender identities for so long. Her generative moves will clarify how to approach the representation of queer desire and the creation of queer voices.

The private archive currently owned by Ocampo's heirs holds several versions of this short story, both handwritten and typed. Besides the first manuscript in the notebook (identified here as pages 1–16 in a longer school notebook with no numbers),⁶ there also are three other versions. Two are typewritten versions that I will mention only briefly: the first, called “Original suelto” [Loose original], is probably an early typed version in which the final sentence is a handwritten addition; while the second, “Original de imprenta” [Original for the print], is a version with page numbers from what was supposed to be the book. There are also galley proofs with handwritten corrections. Most compositional decisions and changes around gender identities were made during the first writing stage, so my analysis focuses on the entirely handwritten school notebook, with only one exception (where indecision about this topic remained clear beyond the first stage).

When encountering the manuscript — a total of thirteen pages in a school notebook, a common writing material for Ocampo — two compositional stages can be clearly distinguished by the inks used in each case: five pages to which eight more were later added in the middle of the story (described in the following paragraphs). They were not necessarily written too far apart in time, but there are some pages in between the two, in which fragments of a different short story, “La continuación” [The continuation], on which I will comment at the end of this essay, are drafted. Most of the manuscript is in blue fountain pen ink, with corrections in a darker blue, and the ending is in a different, lighter kind of blue ink, presumably made by a regular pen. Some later minor amendments were introduced with a black pencil. These different writing tools speak of an intense revi-

6. Although manuscripts in the Ocampo archive are clearly organized and classified, they are not identified under a formal MS denomination system I could reproduce here. I thus refer to each of them using the title assigned by Ocampo, mainly focusing on the 16 pages devoted to the handwritten first version of this short story in a school notebook (cited here as “Notebook”), and numbered sequentially (including two pages devoted to “La continuación” inserted between pages 9 and 10). The first hand-written draft of “Carta perdida en un cajón” begins on the second half of the page numbered as 1 and finishes on the first half of the page numbered as 16. The only significant addition was handwritten in the typescript titled “Original suelto”. I thank Ernesto Montequin for his help with the Ocampo Papers.

sion craft in action, where decisions were revisited many times during the writing and revision stages.

In Ocampo's writing process of this short story, I have identified five key compositional moves that I have grouped in categories to analyze their duplicitous effects: first, a long plot-related insertion; second, a tense change; third, significant lexical additions; fourth, the redistribution of characters in the communicative scene; and fifth, some meaningful omissions that result from processes of erasure. I will describe each of these moves and then try to make sense of the reading effects derived from the coexistence of all of them in the published version.

Ocampo's first move was to add five more pages to the original eight. This had the effect of giving more substance to the relationship between Alba and the narrator, introducing their shared time in childhood. Although the original version reads well, the insertion flows seamlessly, and it would not have been possible to have inferred this compositional move from the published version. Ocampo does not insert the pages between the insulting introductory part (or diatribe) and the final encounter — two clear and distinct moments — but once this final encounter is already briefly presented, taking and leaving readers there while looking back at the past. This interruption of the final scene with a long intermission of the past creates some additional tension. Also, this is a point to which the narrator can easily return, having left readers with this scene presented.

The structure of the short story is as follows: The first part, which I call the diatribe, is one fourth of the total length of the short story and is followed by a brief list of meetings after childhood, called "furtivos encuentros" [furtive meetings], until the last one is mentioned and interrupted with these sentences that situate the narration in a friend's house: "No olvidaré aquel último encuentro, tampoco olvido los otros, pero el último me parece más significativo. Cuando advertí tu presencia en aquella casa perdí por la fracción de un segundo el conocimiento. Tus pies lascivos estaban desnudos" [I will not forget that last meeting, I do not forget the others either, but the last one seems to me more meaningful. When I realized you were at that house, I lost consciousness for a fragment of a second. Your lascivious feet were naked] (1999, 243–44). After the insertion of the childhood flashback, this last meeting resumes with "Aquel día, en casa de nuestros amigos" [That day, in our friend's house] (1999, 245), taking readers to the house again. During that last meeting there are suicidal ideations, the fantasy about killing Alba, and the ending when L. leaves the narrator for Alba.

The insertion falls in what was at the time the middle of the short story and adds an important detail to the plot: it is the flashback about the ori-

gin of the narrator's relationship with Alba Cristián, the addressee. Some of the petty episodes described include the presence of Máxima Parisi, a third party who is the cause for jealousy. This triangulation of desire, here homosocial, reappears at the end of the short story but with the presence of a man, L.⁷ This addition features two different sorts of prose: it includes a longer narrative section about their shared infancy, full of short anecdotes; and a slightly shorter expository section, where ideas about friendship (happiness, childhood friends) are presented from a detached, almost cynical point of view. The school notebook shows that Ocampo began to write this section in the midst of the narration about childhood and then moved it to a separate, later paragraph on its own. In short, the writing process was anything but linear. Ocampo's precise rearrangements, some recorded in explicit marginal notes on how to switch whole paragraphs or insert new sentences, affect the meaning of the published version. Among these penciled notes we find organizing instructions such as "Otra página continuar" [continues on other page] (Notebook, 14) and "volver a la página anterior 2" [go back to previous page] (Notebook, 15), as well as arrows and numbers added in the last stage of Ocampo's writing in the notebook (see Fig. 1).

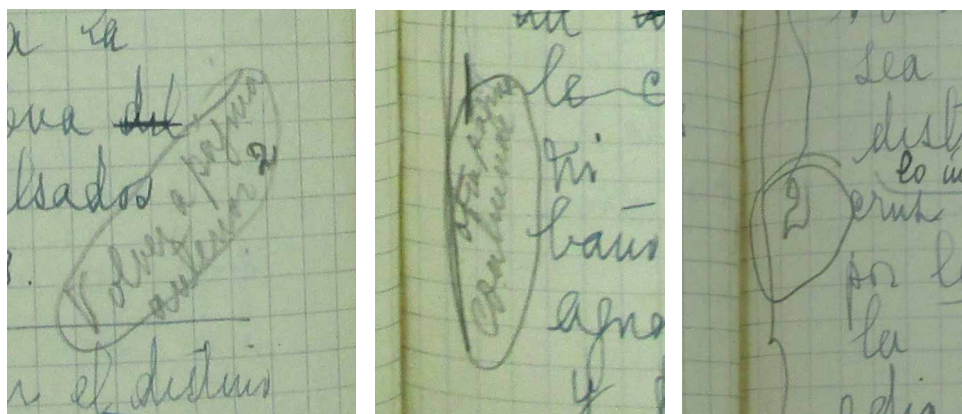


Figure 1. Reorganization instructions at a later stage ["Volver a página anterior 2"; "otra página continuar"; "2"].

7. These relationships could be interpreted through René Girard's notion of "mimetic desire", in which the "mediator" operates to create a triangle of desire between the women through the man in question. This pattern also appears in "La continuación", where we find a biographical detail that could be linked to the Mexican writer Elena Garro, married at the time, friend of Ocampo's, and lover of her husband.

The idea of circumventing all preambles and explanations at the beginning and situating the reader in a heated moment through that first urgent question is present in the first draft. But the idea of building a shared past to justify the present is not. In the published version of the short story, hatred is a consequence of that common history; in the writing process it is actually a cause, a need that led Ocampo to write its prehistory as an afterthought, an explanation or a first version of the relationship. Creating an origin for this present loathing is then a subsequent creative move. The flashback also adds new layers of interpretation, offering many hints that speak about jealousy and possession between the narrator and Alba, including details of intimacy when the three friends go to Palermo — e.g., Máxima leans on Alba’s shoulder in the bus — and minutiae about their friendship — e.g., Alba’s use of the narrator not to be alone when Máxima was ill. The insertion even includes an allusion to Adam and Eve and the serpent that is twisting in the narrator’s heart: “En el fondo de mi corazón se retorció una serpiente semejante a la que hizo que Adán y Eva fueran expulsados del Paraíso” [At the bottom of my heart a serpent was squirming, similar to the one that made Adam and Eve to be thrown away from Paradise] (1999, 244). This is the second misleading heterosexual reference that reinforces the analogy between this friendship and a traditional man-woman bond.

In a second move, Ocampo alters verbal tenses. In the first eight pages of the manuscript, we can observe that the story was originally written in the past tense, in a more traditional storytelling combination of imperfect and preterit; in the published versión, however, Ocampo switches into the present tense, rephrasing, for example, “cuánto tiempo hacía que no pensaba” into “cuánto tiempo hace que no pienso” [“for how long hadn’t I thought” into “for how long haven’t I thought”]; “la música que oía” into “la música que oigo” [“the music I used to hear” into “the music I hear”]; “las frases que decías” into “las frases que dices” [“the sentences you used to say” into “the sentences you say”] (Notebook, 2), and so on (see Fig. 2). This is a later move in the writing process, since this change can be seen throughout the whole manuscript and did not happen during the first writing stage itself (such as other changes Ocampo decided while writing).⁸ The additional five pages, on the contrary, are already written directly in the present tense

8. Ocampo’s writing processes involved a lot of thinking on the page: her manuscripts reveal several successive ideas on the same page, replacements whose traces include scratching, overwriting, and inserting. In their analysis of four short stories by Ocampo, Balderston et al. (2012) state that in her writing processes “there is a proliferation of insertion between lines and different invasions to marginal spaces” and that her “rewriting and correction work is abundant,

from the start, which shows the exact moment in the writing process when that change occurred.

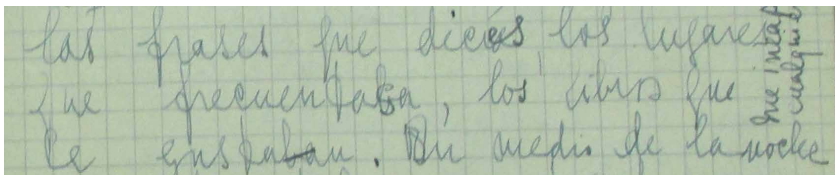
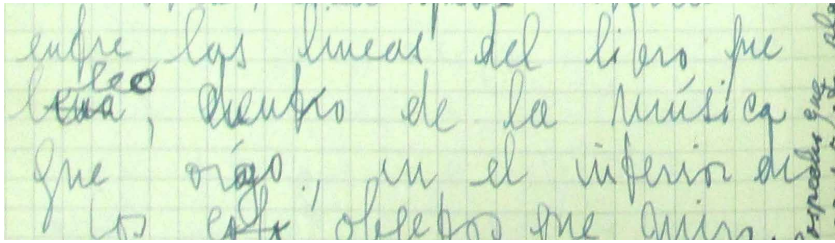


Figure 2. Traces of change of verbal tense [“entre las líneas del libro que leía<eo>, dentro de la música que oía<go>, en el interior de”; “las frases que decía<es>, los lugares que frecuentaba<s>, los libros que le gustaban”.]

Ocampo’s revision of tenses — her movement of the action of speaking/writing/narrating from past to present — allows us to see four very clearly demarcated moments on the narrative’s surface: the oldest one, the childhood; a later one, when L. fell for Alba as an unintended result of the narrator’s very own passionate diatribes; the most recent past, the last encounter; and the enunciation scene, whose present tense brings up to date the urgency of the letter. Past tenses, imperfect and preterite, are reserved for previous scenes, and the future only appears at the end, where prediction and threat merge to project the present beyond the narration towards death. The present stands out as an urgent tense, privileging the here and now, while at the same time confusing the generative moment with the interpretive one. In this sense, the reading scene that a letter presupposes is somehow paradoxical: the “now” is the now of the time of writing, but then, at a different time, the “now” works as a shifter and is updated by the reader, who fulfills it accordingly in a necessarily different manner. Additionally, when it comes to narrative logic, the present tense

while the basic structure of each short story is set since the first version” (my translations).

brings action — or in this case feelings — to readers due to its immediacy. The intensity of emotion is amplified by its temporal closeness.

Epicene insults, change of person and deliberate gender erasures

The third move I want to discuss happens at the level of Ocampo’s lexicon and involves the insertion of epithets. While Ocampo adds other words and even sentences in the revision process, I want to consider insults specifically, as well as some personal pronouns not present in the first version. These elements, added systematically at a later stage of the compositional process, are an essential and distinctive part of this short story. Some of them are “Imbécil” [imbecile], “Bestia” [beast], “tu ser tan despreciable” [your so despicable self], and “cara de piraña” [piranha face]⁹ (see Fig. 3). If we analyze these words beyond how intense and sometimes descriptive, unexpected, and uncommon they are, we actually see a very precise control in their selection. None of them betrays the gender of the insulted person at any time because all these epithets are carefully epicene — they apply to men or women addressees. By themselves these insults would be merely inventive. But taken together with the other four types of editorial strategies that the manuscript records they gain a measure of intentionality that goes beyond her delight in the expressive possibilities of Spanish. They speak to Ocampo’s desire to heighten the misleading effect of an *in medias res* narrative that is already turned up a degree by opening with a letter.

The fourth move is the change from third person to second, which reorganizes the speech act and redistributes characters in this scene. In the first draft, the person who ended up becoming the addressee of the letter — Alba — was presented or built in the third person: so “suyo” [hers/his]

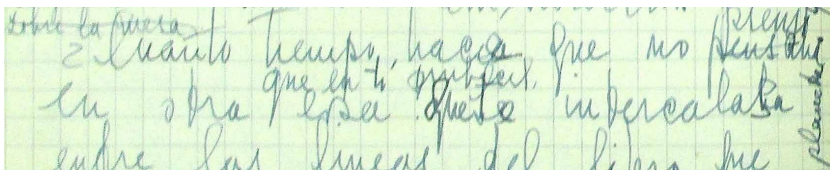


Figure 3. Addition of epicene insults [“¿Cuánto tiempo hacía que no pensaba <pienso> en otra <que en ti imbecil> cosa”]

9. I had never before seen the last formulation, cara de piraña, until I read this story.

turns into “tuyo” [yours]; “se intercalaba” [she/he interfered] to “te intercalas” [you interfere]; and “decía” [she/he said] into “dices” [you say], to give a few examples (see Fig. 4). This change is verifiable throughout the first eight pages — the additional five pages already present the second person as an integral part of the narrative surface from scratch. I suspect that this editorial change was simultaneous with Ocampo’s previous intervention with the insults. My hypothesis is supported by a fact of Spanish grammar: in Spanish, verbs carry both pieces of information in their suffixes. They have a stem that rarely changes and carries the lexical information, while the rest of the word is inflected to reflect two sets of information: time, aspect, and mode, as well as person and number to agree with the subject. The archival record shows that time, aspect, and person in this editorial process do not change successively but in the same systematic operation. This is not compulsory (each change could happen separately), but I see from the archival record that all of the changes were made at the same time: the same operation that brought the story to the present shifted the attention of the narrator to focus on a “you” rather than on a “him” or “her”.

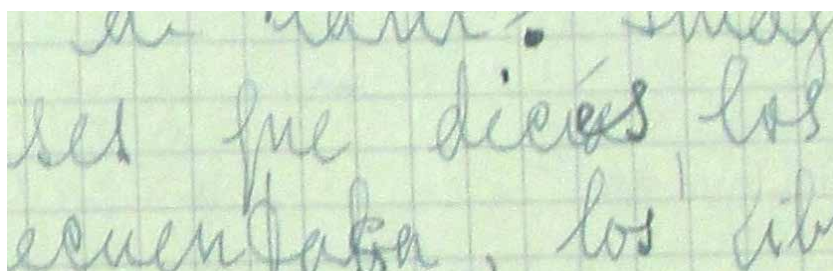
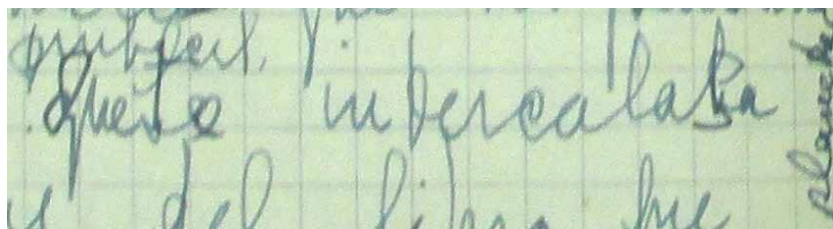


Figure 4. Traces of change of person [“que se<te> intercalaba<s>”; “que de<i>cía<es>”]

This brings us to the most important difference between the third and the second person singular in Spanish (as in other languages). The hated

person was invoked as a third person and became the second person after this compositional shift. But instead of gaining precision, it loses it: gender definition is erased. According to Emile Benveniste, “the first two persons are not on the same plane as the third, [. . .] the third person is always treated differently and not like a real verbal ‘person’” and, what is more, “the ‘third person’ is not a ‘person,’ it is really the verbal form whose function is to express the ‘non-person’” (1971, 143). Thus, “‘I-you’”, Benveniste points out, “possesses the sign of person” (1971, 146). When Ocampo switches from the third to the second, she is not only reorganizing the enunciation scene, but also conferring personhood to the character of Alba Cristián. Less traditional and more disquieting, this apparent minor move has important interpretive consequences due to the fact that in Spanish the second person is unmarked by gender as it is for the third. Thus changing from the third to the second person allows for gender concealment in a way the third person form does not.

Finally, there are other significant omissions that cooperate with gender concealment and ambiguity. Some of these are clear erasures and the intention is coherent, as well as the result — when Ocampo struggles, no traces of this indecision can be found in the published version. One example of the deletions is the omission of “yo sola” [by myself] in the sentence “reconstruir [yo sola] el Partenón” [to reconstruct all by myself the Parthenon] (Notebook, 12) that works as a transition at the beginning of the long insertion, when she is about to describe their lives as young girls at school (see Fig. 5). In Spanish, the adjective (*sola*) would have betrayed the gender of the narrator and, while this is what Ocampo had written in her first attempt, she later removed it before continuing with the second section of the story in her school notebook. In another example, when a sentence would have revealed the gender of the addressee (while still in the third person) there are many crossing outs and corrections which at some point said “ella” [she]. Another clear example of these deletions is where the first version stated “A veces <con mis amigos> llevaba <o> el diálogo a lugares donde debía nombrarla” [Sometimes <with my friends> I used to take the dialogue to places where I should name her] with the first pen (Notebook, 2). The last four words were later scratched with a darker pen, the same pen that added the friends to the scene; the published version thus reads: “A veces, con mis amigos, llevo el diálogo a temas que fatalmente atraen comentarios sobre tu modo de vivir” [Sometimes, with my friends, I take the dialogue to topics that fatally attract comments on your way of living] (1999, 241). The erasure of Alba’s gender from these instances is absolute (see Fig. 6).

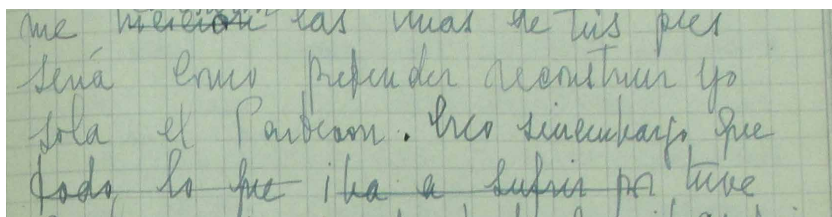


Figure 5. Deletion of gender marks [“sería como pretender reconstruir yo sola el Partenon”]

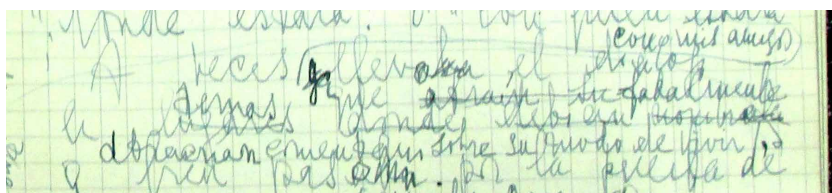


Figure 6. Deletion of gender marks [“A veces <con mis amigos> <yo> llevaba <el> el diálogo a lugares <temas que atraían su fatalmente atraerían comentarios sobre su modo de vivir> donde debía nombrarla”]

Clear traces of a similar erasure can be found in the title. The first attempt (the first section in the notebook) is incomplete and reads “Carta a una” [Letter to one], where the indefinite article is already suggesting the female gender of the addressee. Then “Carta perdida” is tried (before she finished the second section of the narrative by hand) and the adjective is later crossed out with a single line. The title in the final handwritten manuscript is just “Carta” [Letter], as if Ocampo were hesitant or unsure about her non-normative or queered use of a highly gendered language like Spanish. One title that appears in the first version that is typed reads “Dos amigas” [Two female friends] (see Fig. 7, “Original suelto, 1”). That title, as explicit as it can be, did not hide the secret of the short story but states it as a reading premise, and it does not escape Ocampo’s revisionary pen. It would have given away all the secret and ruined the narrative trick, while also predetermining the possibility of a queer reading. In the final published version, she reinstates the older “Carta perdida” and adds “en un cajón”, once again misdirecting readerly attention away from the key players and their gender/sexual identifications towards the inert, inoffensive drawer that the letter was in. The fact that this idea reappeared once the short story found its final form, that is, Ocampo retitling her narration in

such an explicit manner, shows the tensions that were still at play in depicting this love. All these failed attempts are crucial to understand a complex ongoing process, a struggle to find a manner to express something whose emergence was stimulating and exciting. Along with a more general search for ambiguity, gender identities are calculatedly removed from the narrative surface. The effect of gender concealment is consistent and it has one clear direction.

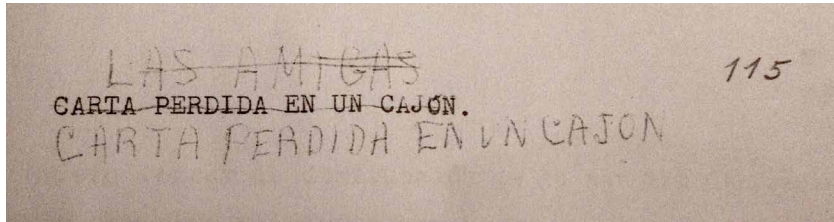
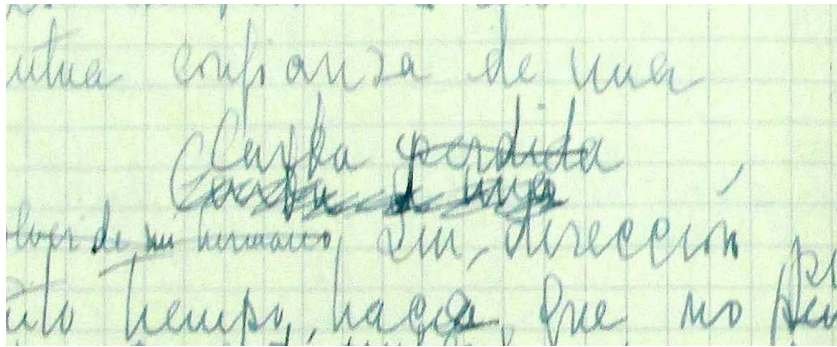


Figure 7. Hesitations around the title [“Carta de una <Carta perdida> Sin dirección”; “CARTA PERDIDA EN UN CAJÓN <LAS AMIGAS> <CARTA PERDIDA EN UN CAJON>” <115>”]

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The other short story whose opening interrupts the manuscript of “Carta perdida” is “La continuación” — another short story published in the same volume and also narrated in the second person. It too begins with a mysterious setting and similar gender opacity: “En los estantes del dormitorio

encontrarás el libro de medicina, el pañuelo de seda y el dinero que me prestaste. No hables de mí con mi madre. No hables de mí con Hernán, no olvides que tiene doce años y que mi actitud lo ha impresionado mucho” [In the bedroom shelves you will find the medical book, the silk handkerchief and the money you lent me. Do not talk about me with my mother. Do not talk about me to Hernán, do not forget that he is twelve and my attitude has made a big impression on him] (1959, 178). It also includes a suicide plan and a triangulation of passion, as well as an overarching lack of gender definition of the main characters. These coincidences speak to a definite intention or aesthetic exploration around matters of gender, representation, and passion.

Ocampo is intentionally queering the literary space through formal literary deceptions. Published in her short story volume *La furia y otros relatos* in 1959 in Buenos Aires, “Carta perdida” (as well as “La continuación”) appears in a context where apparent heteronormativity dominated Argentine public life and literature. Although some fictions depicting homosexual bonds were published during the previous two decades — mostly in translation, as a “foreign” commodity, or in not very widespread publishing houses —, it was not until almost ten years later that same sex desire became socially visible.¹⁰ (In 1967 the creation of the Grupo Nuestro Mundo [Our World Group] gave homosexuality a public presence by introducing a series of open demands.¹¹)

Critics have pointed out that *La furia y otros relatos*, as well as her following book *Las invitadas* published two years later, reveal an intensification of Ocampo’s creative explorations and freedom. Judith Podlubne, for example,

10. Tirso was the first publishing house openly dedicated to the promotion of European (mostly French) homoerotic literature in Spanish, introducing what today would be called intersectional depictions of queer peoples. Founded in mid-1950 by Renato Pellegrini and Abelardo Arias, it also published Argentine works. For more on this, see PERALTA 2012, 2013, 2018.

11. Leftist in its origin, it congregated mainly blue-collar workers with political as well as gender identity demands — which meant it was also rejected by more traditional left political groups. Four years later, the leader of this working-class association, mainly integrated by lower class members and union leaders, was joined by a group of visible Argentine intellectuals, such as Juan José Sebreli, Manuel Puig, and Juan José Hernández, to name just a few, and this new institution was called Frente de Liberación Homosexual [Homosexual Liberation Front]. For more about this history, see BAZÁN 2004 and PERALTA 2013.

describes her “risks and excesses” (2012, 216) in *La furia*, while Adriana Mancini refers to “instability” regarding “the configuration of space, time and characters” (1997, 271) and points out several “contradictions to logics” at different linguistic levels (1997, 272).¹² It remains to be explored how these risks, excesses, and instability were also challenging gender representation in literature and sexual heteronormativity. This article is pointing towards how these short stories, through very careful revisions, work to expand a sexual sensibility in the literary imagination. Genetic criticism, in this case as in others, can reveal the painstaking process by which queer desire nudges its way into expression.

As Laura Arnés suggests in her article “Las voces del secreto: pasiones lesbianas en Silvina Ocampo, Julio Cortázar y Sylvia Molloy”, there is some sort of lack of structure when constructing lesbian voices:

In a context where what is “thinkable” and “sayable” respond to a system and, in consequence, to a heterosexual and sexist imaginary and narrative, lesbian protagonists, as social subjects immersed in a (heterosexual) tradition that does not correspond to them, will find themselves with no paradigm (this is, with no sense) at their disposal. There would not be an inhabitable structure for their desire. Thus, clearly, the problem does not only affect reading: writing will find itself as well with the problem of how to write this impossible desire.

(2010, 30, my translation)

Ocampo finds a voice and a structure of her own to write this “impossible desire”. It is not a traditional one or a comfortable one either. Reading this short story is not *easy*, as it was not easy for Ocampo to write it. To create a voice and a scene to voice this desire required several generative moves that led to a misleading initial reading and some redistribution of our assumptions. This active reading requires a moment of self-reflection, and that effect is masterful.

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12. “Toda lógica es contradicha; la dirección de la causalidad, la certeza consecutiva, la noción de totalidad, la referencia en la deixis, la oposición y la semejanza se disuelven y los relatos, sin alejarse de situaciones cotidianas ni de espacios íntimos confiables, acompañan los tropiezos de las reglas de la razón con formas en las que predomina la fragmentación, una sintaxis irreverente y un uso arbitrario de modos y tiempos verbales” (Mancini 1997, 272).

Although I separated Ocampo's generative moves for analysis and exposition purposes, their effects coexist on the page, happening at the same time, even if they were introduced at subsequent stages; and for the reader they arrive as part of the same printed succession of neat and well-organized words. Interpreting these moves should transcend the merely descriptive: what were each of these strategies adding to the initial story to alter the narrative surface? The first, the insertion of the flashback, gave some background for the action, creating a sense of depth for the foreground to have density and introduce an earlier love triangle. The second, tense change, added urgency, immediacy, giving the impression that we can even hear this enraged person's agitated breath. The epicene insults increased the intensity of the emotion, while the second person opened the narration to the reader, apparently breaking the fourth wall and including the reader as part of the scene. All these carefully managed effects contribute, with the omissions and the silenced gender identities, to construct one lesbian voice that oscillates between concealment and urgency, lack of definition and intensity. The careful while hesitant writing process revolves around this Sapphic relationship which struggles to speak its name.

The use of the position of voyeur for readers of the letter is combined with Ocampo's trickery around epicene particles and gender erasures to create a disquieting reading effect. The voyeur is simultaneously attracted and repelled, or at least cautious and hesitant about their position as a peeper upon a situation that does not concern them. This discomfort, which is not the same as ordinary discomfort that people generally move quickly to dispel, is the suitable position for readers who might be quick to dismiss or censor Ocampo's work but whom she instead tricks into participating in her "twisted" queer narrative. There was something exciting and important about depicting homosexual love to authors in the repressed mid-century Argentine literary landscape. Ocampo seems to have wanted to push the boundaries of accepted fiction and when threatened by censors and authority figures, or even self-censorship, she retreated to the level of the sentence to enact her literary deceptions. Her work also raises awareness of heteronormative reading protocols.

A short story asking readers to expand their sensibility and to acknowledge a feeling prior to ascribing gender identities to people connected by it is a bold move for 1959. This strategic initial concealment is not trying to pass something for what it is not in order to be able to be: quite on the contrary, it is asking readers to actively face their own prejudices and reor-

ganize gender assumptions through the act of reading. Ocampo's generative moves implicitly rely on metaphors of understanding to depict a quite forbidden desire and turn into an aesthetic invitation to glimpse a scene of homosexual desire through reading as voyeurism.¹³

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