

1-1-2010

## Heroines, Hierarchies, and Space: The Fiction of Cecilia Absatz

Naomi Lindstrom

*University of Texas at Austin*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Spanish Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Lindstrom, Naomi (2010) "Heroines, Hierarchies, and Space: The Fiction of Cecilia Absatz," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 34: Iss. 1, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1709>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

## Heroines, Hierarchies, and Space: The Fiction of Cecilia Absatz

### Abstract

This examination of the fiction of Cecilia Absatz (Argentina, 1943), covers three novels: *Féiguele* (1976), the 1982 *Té con canela* 'Tea with cinnamon' and the 1985 *Los años pares* 'The Even-Numbered Years.' The continuities between the three texts, and especially the similarity of their female protagonists, who age from adolescence to the threshold of middle age, allow these novels to be read as a series. The primary focus of this study is the maturation of the protagonists as they struggle for autonomy while navigating different types of space. These include space that is marked by gender; identified as Jewish; and dominated by members of various elites, whether defined by wealth and lineage, by celebrity, or by specialized cultural knowledge or skills. The protagonists are at a disadvantage in different environments: being female in a corporate workplace dominated by powerful males; craving individuality and solitude in a Jewish space in which community is the ideal; and being barely middle-class in milieus where money, accomplishments, and social connections are crucial. Though in many episodes the heroines, out of insecurity and inexperience, allow themselves to be intimidated and manipulated, they analyze their experiences, learn, and seek to strengthen their autonomy. Only in the third of the novels does the protagonist succeed in breaking the hold that more powerful and prestigious men hold over her and establishing a space for herself.

### Keywords

Cecilia Absatz, *Féiguele*, *Té con canela*, Tea with cinnamon, *Los años pares*, The Even-Numbered Years, female protagonists, adolescence, middle age, autonomy, space, navigating space, jewish identity, gender identity, class identity, gender conflict, gender struggles

## Heroines, Hierarchies, and Space: The Fiction of Cecilia Absatz

Naomi Lindstrom  
*University of Texas at Austin*

The novels of Cecilia Absatz (Argentina, 1943), journalist, editor, and creative writer, stand out for the sardonic voices of their heroines and narrators, their casual frankness about sexuality and the body, their mordant satire, and their antiauthoritarian and feminist stance. Absatz lived through the repressive Argentine military régime of 1976-83, and the value of her writing lies partly in the insights it provides into that period. Rather than representing extreme violations of human rights, such as disappearances and torture, her fiction communicates the contradictions and anxieties of everyday existence in an Argentina under authoritarian rule. This essay examines her brief novel *Féiguele*, published in 1976 along with short stories as *Féiguele y otras mujeres* 'Féiguele and other women,' the first edition of which was suppressed by the military government,<sup>1</sup> and two full-length novels, the 1982 *Té con canela* 'Tea with cinnamon' and the 1985 *Los años pares* 'The Even-Numbered Years.'<sup>2</sup>

Despite their differences—for example, *Té*, with its fragmented narrative structure, requires greater concentration on the reader's part—the three novels exhibit significant commonalities. They center on the intimate experiences of protagonists who, while not the same character, have a number of features in common. In *Féiguele* the heroine is a young adolescent, while in the other two novels she is a sexually active woman. In each novel the protagonist is from Buenos Aires, from a Jewish family situated somewhere on the lower reaches of the middle class, outwardly bold, yet haunted by constant insecurity. The intimate experiences of these heroines are laid bare, whether in first or third person, with exceptional frank-

ness; for example, when the protagonist of *Los años* recognizes how she has been manipulated, her entire body rebels: “She vomited a fricassee of pork seasoned with rancor and peppers four years ago. She defecated an explosion, rock and black syrup. She menstruated a single clot, the size of a pomegranate” (*Los años* 160).<sup>3</sup> Because of the strong resemblance between the three heroines, the progression from adolescence to adulthood, and the fact that the protagonists are shown learning from their experiences, it is fair to read the three novels together as a tripartite *Bildungsroman*.

The aspect of the three novels that is the primary focus of this study is the maturation of the protagonists as they struggle for autonomy while navigating different types of space. These include space that is marked by gender; identified as Jewish; and dominated by members of various elites, whether defined by wealth and lineage, by celebrity, or by specialized cultural knowledge or skills. The essential commonality among these is the sense of unease that they provoke in the protagonists, who often feel out of place, unworthy, and ridiculous in a terrain that they perceive as alien. Their resulting insecurity drives them to accept the domination of powerful males or to comply laboriously with social conventions that they find absurd. Although they are seen submitting to those of higher status, these women characters evince a capacity for critical analysis. They take stock of their situations and, through various strategies, seek to create a space of their own where they will escape pressure to meet expectations that have been imposed on them.

While gender relations are prominent, the other factors that complicate the protagonists’ struggle are their problematic relations with their Jewish backgrounds and with the stratified, status-obsessed society in which they must make their way. The heroines of Absatz’s novels are “nominally Jewish” (Lockhart 3) women who attenuate their family and community ties. As is frequently observed, Jewish life is by nature communal: while conversion is possible, Jewish identity is for the most part inherited from and nurtured in the family, and Jewish observances and folkways are difficult to maintain without the support of a community. The much-cited scholar of Jewish life Raphael Patai, after evaluating the evidence for various answers to the old question “Who Is a Jew?,” concludes that, whether for those born Jewish or for converts, the crucial element is

a “feeling of belongingness to the Jewish people” (26). Absatz’s heroines go to the other extreme from this cultivation of group feeling, rejecting any “feeling of belongingness,” whether Jewish or not; they avoid their families and the Jewish community without joining any alternate social group. As a result, as Mónica Flori points out, these characters “have only fleeting relationships” (“Essay” 190). Despite their determination not to move in Jewish circles, they are haunted by an awareness of their origin.

Class factors and financial and social status further complicate the situation of the protagonists. As the children and grandchildren of immigrants who arrived in Argentina with few assets, they perceive themselves as being at a disadvantage vis-à-vis characters from old-line families of the haute bourgeoisie and landed aristocracy. Absatz’s adult protagonists, while efficient and generally educated, lack any professional credentials or exceptional skills and talents that might place them in demand; they are employees dependent on the good will of a superior. When on the turf of lawyers and executives, they feel daunted; accomplished intellectuals and artists render them awestruck.

The first of the three texts, *Féiguele*, is a short novel narrated by a fourteen-year-old girl who sarcastically describes everyday scenes before telling of a traumatic betrayal. Besides suffering the usual complications of adolescence, *Féiguele* is fat, a feature that she gives as her defining characteristic; the first words of her narrative are “My name is *Féiguele* and I’m very fat” (7). The teenager has some harsh observations about the society she lives in, especially the expectation that girls should focus their energies on enhancing their physical allure to attract a male companion.

*Féiguele* has begun to identify certain spaces in which she feels most acutely the social pressures placed on her as she develops into a woman. In her sour account of a family vacation, she observes that “In Mar del Plata I seem much fatter than I do in Buenos Aires” (35), owing to the ambience of a seaside resort, where swimwear places figures on display and vacationers have time to scrutinize them. The protagonist learns to avoid certain sites, such as the beach and its walkway, where a woman’s body is perceived as an object for male evaluation and where strangers call out to her “Who says there’s no

meat in Argentina?” (35).

The pervasive theme of the protagonist's fatness serves several functions. It is associated with rebellion, although only to a certain point. For Féiguele, as in the eloquent (but misleading) title of Susie Orbach's best-selling volume, “fat is a feminist issue.”<sup>4</sup> In some regards Féiguele's weight might be viewed as “an attempt to break free of society's sex stereotypes” (Orbach 5). Féiguele is indeed a figure of rebellion, and her perspective as a target of mockery allows her to see more clearly social expectations concerning the shapes of women's bodies. Nonetheless, even as she bitterly attacks others' attitudes toward her corpulence, she shares their negative assessment.

At the same time, Féiguele's narrative suggests a link between being fat and being Jewish. However, it is not a cause-and-effect relation relying on what Ricardo Feierstein in his 2007 *Vida cotidiana de los judíos argentinos* ‘Daily Life of Argentine Jews’ has summarized as the “image of the overprotective mother ... continually handing [her children's] sweaters and sandwiches to protect their health and avoid malnutrition” (31). The idea of a Jewish family obsessed with feeding its members may certainly be found in Latin American literature, for example, in the 2006 novel *Por que sou gorda, mamãe?* ‘Why am I fat, Mama?’ by the Brazilian Cíntia Moscovich. Here the first-person narrator identifies the memory of the “miserable, frozen Jewish villages of Europe” where her family endured “the hunger of nothing but cabbage or potatoes to eat” as the source of their habits once settled in Brazil: “the lunch table in our home was a form of excess... Our table meant: eat, you need not go hungry” (23). Absatz never reproduces this familiar image. Féiguele is the embarrassing exception in an otherwise trim family, a situation that increases her resentment at having to form part of the image-conscious household. Her narrative links “fat” with “Jewish” as the two attributes that most acutely exacerbate her sense of otherness. As will be seen, the adult protagonists of the two later novels are not only thinner but also “less Jewish” in the sense that they have distanced themselves from family and repressed the signs of their origin.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, as an involuntary participant in everyday Jewish life, Féiguele describes it with virulent bitterness. She characterizes her father and his friends, who are merely speaking Yid-

dish, as “buffoons” (37) who fill her with shame. In another scene, Féiguele’s mother tries to include her in a party where the older woman’s friends speak Spanish using Yiddish forms of personal names. Merely being inside a circle of Jewish women enrages Féiguele, who in her narrative unleashes a petty diatribe against the women’s manicures, voices, and choice of cigarettes, betraying an irrational horror at being in spaces marked by Jewish life and having to hear Yiddish. Spoken Yiddish constitutes, among other things, an “agglutinating factor” (Feierstein 137) binding together Jewish individuals and groups from different parts of Eastern Europe. Rejecting the concept of being part of a cultural community, Féiguele abhors places where hearing Yiddish forces upon her an awareness of the group spirit that animates Jewish life.

Uneventful scenes like those just discussed, in which the narrator’s function is to describe with revulsion, comprise most of the novel. Toward the end, though, Féiguele becomes the protagonist of a dramatic episode, in which her first date is exposed as a plot to humiliate her; following the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, she is left wiser by the painful events. According to Flori, after the betrayal Féiguele is shown “choosing to be alone instead of becoming dependent on a man” (“Essay” 188). This statement is less applicable to Féiguele than to the heroines of Absatz’s later novels, who struggle with the decision to withdraw from their relations with manipulative men and instead savor the experience of solitude. However, Féiguele has little opportunity to create this form of refuge for herself; as a young adolescent, she is only beginning to win the right to move about independently. She informs the reader with evident pride: “I take taxis by myself” (27) and recounts some pedestrian errands proudly accomplished alone. Nonetheless, her liberty of movement is restricted, and she does not yet have the option of establishing a zone where she can distance herself from society. The generation of such spaces will only be seen in the subsequent novels.

Absatz’s second novel, *Té con canela*, whose complex narrative construction involves an unstable fluctuation between first- and third-person pronouns, centers upon an unnamed protagonist who shares Féiguele’s biography, but has reached adulthood. *Té* takes place within a tightly delimited temporal and spatial frame: a Sun-

day and the following Monday until 8:00 p.m. The Monday is May 25, a national holiday commemorating the first stirrings of the Argentine independence movement. During this time, the protagonist remains in her apartment, mostly in her bed, where she composes diary entries and critically assesses the way in which she has been living.

This confinement is prompted not only by the practical necessity of recovering from a severe hangover, but also by a desire to take time out and establish a distance between herself and social pressures. As Flori observes, although the protagonist is seeking her own independence, the May 25 holiday “signifies male achievements and official commemorations” (“Essay” 194) from which she is alienated. It should be remembered that the novel was published during the waning months of the military regime, which attempted to revive popular support through exaggerated displays of patriotism, another reason why the heroine might recoil from the holiday.

As the protagonist begins to review her recent experiences, she initially appears to embody perfectly the tough, independent career woman. On her own since eighteen, she is to outward appearances successful at the public relations firm where she works. Nonetheless, her description of her workspace signals that she feels out of place in the stratified corporate world, with its emphasis on image-building, conspicuous consumption, and status symbols; she observes, with embarrassed discomfort, that her office “is big and everything in it is exaggerated: the thickness of the carpet, the price of the paintings” (54). She later reveals that she quit this job, exhausted by the pressure to maintain an unflinching façade of standardized, business-like cheer: “I left the job because I wanted to cry ... I hadn’t cried in five years” (88).

Further fissures in the protagonist’s hard-shelled persona are revealed in the course of her two-day exercise in introspection. Both in the office and in her personal life, she organizes her activities around men who are above her in the social hierarchy, whether through position, wealth, connections, or some other advantageous attribute. At work, she devotes her time to placating the general manager of her company, one of several underhanded male characters whose treachery is eventually unmasked in Absatz’s narratives. The manager, on the pretext of mentoring her, demonstrates

his control over the protagonist by invading her space, entering her office unannounced and even gaining access to her house. In the protagonist's sexual life, she exhibits the same tendency to arrange her existence around a high-ranking male. The crisis that has led to her retreat is triggered by her rejection by a man whom she had been plotting to seduce.

As in *Féiguele*, the protagonist's situation is complicated by her tortuously ambivalent relationship to her culture of origin and her desire to escape any environment suggestive of Jewish life. When her father died, "They had not spoken for two years or seen one another for six months" (84). The protagonist, who "hated Yiddish, although she spoke it quite well" (83), has avoided her father out of a desire to disconnect herself from the language. After he dies, she regrets not having visited him more often, but as she wistfully fantasizes about the interaction that they might have enjoyed, she envisions them interacting without language (84). Despite her remorse, at no point is the protagonist seen with family or in any other space associated with a shared Jewish life. Though she manages to escape hearing Yiddish spoken aloud, the language haunts her through memory. The epigraph of the chapter "Féiguele" (in the novel *Té*) is the lyrics of the well-known Yiddish folksong of the same title, which ends with an invitation to drink beer together. The epigraph appears to represent Yiddish words that, as the protagonist enters a bar, involuntarily come into her mind despite her efforts to suppress the language and its communal implications.

Overwhelmed by these contradictions in her life, the protagonist secludes herself in what is simultaneously a withdrawal into depression and a retreat in search of clarity. The exceptional zone that she creates is one variant of the "paradoxical space" that the feminist geographer Gillian Rose has conceptualized:

... the sense of space which I argue is associated with the emergent subject of feminism. It is also paradoxical, by which I mean that spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map—center and margin, inside and outside—are occupied simultaneously. ("Politics" 140)

On the negative side, the heroine's forty-eight hour confinement

begins with binge drinking occasioned by sexual rejection. The protagonist lingers unbathed in her bed, which becomes transformed into a “mud puddle” of leftovers and papers (138-39). At the same time, she is energetically writing diary entries and analyzing, at times with considerable insight, the ways in which the independence she seeks constantly eludes her. Although she was already living alone, only during this crisis does she begin to generate in her home the “room of one’s own” that Virginia Woolf famously identifies as the fundamental need of a woman hoping to exercise her mind.

Among the many scenes that the protagonist revisits, she confers a particular significance upon an episode in which she was overwhelmed with desire for a woman. The protagonist, who had irreflexively assumed herself to be heterosexual, now recognizes and names what she experienced, recreating through her writing her arousal upon seeing the body, naked from the waist up, of a young woman in a sauna:

I was a man who loved her. My God, I was a man who loved her.

I desired that woman. I wanted to take her in my arms and make love to her until she forgot all about me and remembered herself. I wanted to embrace her and let her drink me all up to become stronger and more beautiful. (70)

While at the time the heroine was dazed, fleeing the sauna in panic and confusion, in her reflective solitude she understands clearly what she experienced that day.

Teresa De Lauretis in “The Seductions of Lesbianism” analyzes the tendency of heterosexual women writers to interpret all too freely the idea of a “lesbian continuum,” as set forth by Adrienne Rich in her much-cited essay of 1980, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” In De Lauretis’s view, these authors construe solidarity among women as an implicit or metaphorical form of lesbianism, even when the element of erotic desire is absent. For De Lauretis, such a figurative concept of lesbianism omits “the explicitly sexual and desiring aspect of women’s relation to women that lesbianism does, and sisterhood or feminism does not, carry,” permitting an agreeable “fantasy of female seduction” (197) that

may be enjoyed even by women who only desire men. Far from projecting such an asexual version of lesbianism, in this chapter of *Té* the protagonist unequivocally recognizes the physical desire of one woman for another: “An electric current shot through my entire being and remained rumbling in the belly ... the blood hammered in my head, my temperature rose” (67).<sup>6</sup>

While this and other entries suggest that the heroine is gaining an awareness of herself in relation to others, she abandons her new insights as soon as she resumes contact with the social world. She deserts her retreat when she is invited to dinner by her new companion. This character is a businessman who reminds her of Jorge Salcedo, a leading man of mid-century Argentine film and a paragon of highly conventional masculinity. The new suitor expertly bedazzles the protagonist by hinting that he possesses both a personal fortune and advantageous ties to the military regime. Given the painful struggle toward critical consciousness to which the protagonist has consecrated her retreat, her companion’s links to a repressive regime and efforts to exert power over her should logically alarm her. However, like Absatz’s other insecure heroines, this one is susceptible to being overwhelmed by a dominant, high-status man; she adopts a passive pattern of behavior and encourages the man to make all decisions for her. This parody of traditional courtship, in which both partners enjoy incarnating gender stereotypes, leaves her “Aroused. Sexually aroused” (121).

When her suitor calls, the protagonist reverts to placing all her hopes on a link to a male companion of high position. She envisions herself as “the wife of a future Cabinet member” (137), pursued by reporters and photographers, and “a Winner” (139). In her imagination, marriage to a power-monger will allow her to avenge the treachery of her former boss, who “will automatically become my husband’s employee” (139). By the end of the novel, her bedroom, which she had nearly transformed into an oasis of critical consciousness, becomes the dressing room where she prepares to surrender her will. As Rose observes, “Paradoxical space may not remain emancipatory” (160); here, its liberating nature reveals itself to be fleeting, and the narrative becomes a *Bildungsroman* of failure, in which the lessons learned are quickly forgotten.

*Los años pares* traces a process of learning and maturation undergone by its adult protagonist, Clara Auslander. Clara's surname, meaning "foreigner," points to the sense that she often experiences of being in alien territory. Like the heroine of *Té*, Clara at first gives the impression of enjoying considerable sexual freedom and liberty of movement. But her independence is also only apparent; as Flori notes, "She defines herself by means of a man" ("Identidad" 92). While this observation points to one major problem of the novel's plot, a parallel thematic line involves Clara's inability to locate herself in Argentine society; she interacts with different social strata, ethnic groups, and artistic and intellectual élites without finding a place in any of them.

The third-person narrator often relates Clara's thoughts (as well as, occasionally, those of other characters), but only shares her outlook in certain passages. During the chapters in which Clara is hopelessly in love with an artist, the narrator stands back and mocks her: "Clara saw in him the all-encompassing, justice-restoring gaze that Jesus must have had, a gaze that covers everything with love, transforms the grotesque and conquers wickedness" (62); as Ester Gimbernat González notes, the speaker is ridiculing Clara's "addictive taste for romantic love" (95). However, once Clara develops a critical awareness of her behavior and begins to create a space for herself, the narrator ceases to satirize her and adopts a perspective coinciding with that of the protagonist, signaling the favorable outcome of her struggle for clarity.

Of the characters who speak in the narrative, Clara appears to be the only one who is Jewish, a factor that exacerbates her sense of never belonging; in addition, she is of lower social class and has less money than those around her. She appears isolated from her family, which is not mentioned in the novel. Through her precarious employment on the edges of the theater and art worlds, first as a puppet seamstress and later as the editor of a short-lived cultural magazine, Clara comes into contact with, and is overwhelmed by, movers and shakers, prominent artists, patrons, and celebrities. She repeatedly finds herself the odd person out at events dominated by members of the art-world elite and families with prestigious Castilian and Basque surnames. Her since-dissolved marriage to a theater director had thrust her into a circle of artist-intellectuals whose

common bond was their privileged knowledge of the arts; unable to follow their allusive conversation, mortified and dumbstruck, Clara became again the “foreigner.”

At a posh reception, experiencing her usual sense of being out of place, Clara meets Eric, a Dutch painter who is creating a vogue around himself in Buenos Aires. He effortlessly conquers the heroine and recruits her as his interpreter on a tour of the Andean region. From the outset, their relations are marked by inequality along lines of gender, status, and money. Clara devotes almost all her time to attracting and retaining Eric, while, as a rising star in the art world, he considers her of scant importance and skillfully exploits her emotional and financial insecurity. Through the incidents related in the narrative, Clara comes to recognize her mistakes, takes stock of her situation, and changes her life. She develops her career and, in the final episodes, succeeds in breaking Eric’s hold on her to establish a space of her own.

Buenos Aires is the setting for the early days of their affair. The ways that the two inhabit the urban space exemplify stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. The ingratiating, successful young painter wanders all over the city. He meets people and soaks in the urban environment as an artist, but also as a *flâneur*; as Doreen Massey has observed, the *flâneur* is “irretrievably male” (234). Clara, in contrast, sacrifices her independence and remains confined to the domestic space, where she obsessively cooks for Eric without knowing whether he will come to appreciate her laborious dedication to his pleasure.

Leaving the cosmopolitan environment for a tour of Andean lands, the two become an inseparable but unequal couple. The journey exacerbates Clara’s chronic sense of foreignness, but at the same time it triggers a classical encounter with herself. For her, the most valuable aspect of the ill-fated trip is what she learns about cultural identities. Revolted by European tourists convinced of their superiority, Clara attempts to develop a South American identity for herself. But when she approaches the inhabitants of the region, addressing them in Spanish in an effort to establish a bond, her white skin sets her apart and they reject her overtures “as soon as they discovered that she wasn’t asking ‘How much does it cost’” (126). As a result, Clara makes a resolution: “she would no longer get off the

train”; she sets herself apart from both the foreign tourists and the indigenous souvenir sellers, opting to generate a space apart (127).

In the next section of the narrative, Clara throws all her energies into editing a magazine. Her office assumes an exceptional importance to her as a place where she can exercise a certain degree of control: “She loved her office” (96), the narrator asserts. However, when it is announced that the magazine will cease publication, Clara is about to lose this space of autonomy. In the final episodes of the novel, she undertakes the creation of another space of her own, this time in her house.

To do so, Clara must learn to maintain control over her house and patio. She has been allowing her dwelling place to be “invaded” (97), as she comes to recognize, by Eric. The painter assumes that Clara will host him during his stays in Buenos Aires, ignoring her expressions of reluctance. While losing the battle of wills, Clara visualizes her house as “a boxing ring where a bilingual, mismatched bout was playing out. A stronger boxer who invades ... and a weaker boxer who lets the invasion happen” (97). Yet after having resentfully admitted Eric into her house, Clara suddenly summons her resolve and ejects him, saying “I need to be alone in my house” (105). The narrator, clearly approving, draws attention to the significance of this action: “She had never done anything like that” (106). Clara has made a first step toward creating the “room of one’s own” that has been missing from her existence.

The heroine’s process of learning and maturation is not yet complete, as becomes evident when Eric arrives unannounced and insists on taking her to a party. The narrator, who had been telling of Clara’s newfound independence sympathetically, reverts to the mordant tone used to narrate her infatuation with Eric: “The stupid woman felt flattered” (153). In the final episodes of the novel, Clara flees the party and returns to her house to eliminate, through vomiting, sweating, defecation, and menstruation, the toxicity created by the painter’s manipulation. The next day, she comes to the realization that she must reclaim her own house and, by extension, herself. The household is cluttered with reminders of the men who have betrayed the protagonist; her kitchen has fallen into neglect because she can only cook to please another.

At the end of the narrative, Clara has reappropriated her house,

purging it and transforming it into her own space. With this denouement, Clara resolves one problem, her tendency to seek out and invite the domination of males above her in the social hierarchy. But the novel appears to abandon, in its last chapters, another of the protagonist's dilemmas: her lack of a place either in Jewish life, which she has spurned, or in any other cultural community. Nonetheless, the last scenes contain a resolution to this secondary issue. The narrator points out the peculiar horror that Christmas inspires in Clara: for her, "it's just a question of surviving" the day (144). Clara recoils from Christmas, not as a Jewish woman overwhelmed by the excessive display of Christian symbology, but as a single, childless person surrounded by idealized images of family festivities. To conquer her dread of Christmas, Clara defines herself by her solitude: "She thought ... I learned that I am a person alone.... To admit that was as painful as freeing up constipated bowels" (148). This self-identification constitutes a radical response to the question that has haunted the protagonist all through the novel: to what social group could she possibly belong? The assertion that she has no place in any particular set of human beings provides the answer.

The three novels exhibit a progression. In *Féiguele*, the teenage protagonist realizes that, in certain locations, gender expectations become more acute, and she seeks to avoid these sites; she also longs to flee spaces marked by a Jewish life lived in common, whether among family or friends. However, her young age allows little opportunity for her to choose the spaces she inhabits. The protagonist of *Té* appears to enjoy freedom of movement, but subsumes herself to men who possess wealth, prestige, and power; her relations with Jewish life are equally contradictory. During a crisis, she manages to establish, for two days, a refuge where she can critically question her addiction to masculine domination. At the novel's end, though, she abandons her quest for clarity; both her unequal relations with men and her troubled links to social groups remain unresolved.

At the beginning of *Los años*, Clara is another apparently liberated woman with a habit of acquiescing to unequal relations. Of the three protagonists, she is the only one who at the end of the narrative has carved out a space for herself. In the closing chapters, Clara resolves as well her perennial sense of foreignness, although

in this case the answer to her isolation from cultural groups consists, not of transforming her situation, but in learning to recognize and acknowledge it. The first two novels come to an end leaving the protagonist still in the grips of the basic dilemmas that motivate the plot. Only in the third novel does the *Bildungsroman*-like plot end in successful maturation. In *Los años*, Clara succeeds in establishing the space of her own that the earlier protagonists had not been able to create. At the same time, *Los años* brings to a conclusion the complicated relationship between the protagonist and sociocultural groups—whether a family, a community, a social stratum, or a shared South American identity—when she renounces altogether this aspect of human society.

### Notes

1 According to the author, in “Conversation with Cecilia Absatz” (Flori 205), the military government censored *Féiguele* for its language; another factor was the progressive stance of the publisher, Ediciones de la Flor. After the restoration of democracy in 1983, the book came back into circulation.

2 The author’s 1995 *¿Dónde estás amor de mi vida, que no te puedo encontrar?* ‘Where are you, love of my life, that I can’t find you?’ is not in the same series of novels. While the three novels discussed here all focus on the experiences and perceptions of a single female protagonist, *Dónde estás* features multiple plot lines involving a diverse set of male and female characters. Darrell Lockhart (4-5) observes that *Dónde estás* is much more light-hearted in tone than the same author’s previous novels.

3 All translations are my own.

4 Despite its resounding title and the exposition of some feminist concepts in the early sections, Orbach’s book soon reveals itself to be a weight-loss guide.

5 Overweight, a painful theme in *Féiguele*, comes in for a light-hearted treatment in *Té*, as the heroine imagines herself using New Age philosophy to lose ten troublesome kilos. The topic disappears in *Los años*.

6 While the stranger in the sauna is clearly an object of desire, the protagonist’s long-running relation with a younger woman may be equally well interpreted as a female friendship or a lesbian attachment.

### Works Cited

Absatz, Cecilia. *Los años pares*. Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1985.

- . *¿Dónde estás, amor de mi vida, que no te puedo encontrar? Sobre una idea de Juan José Jusid*. Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe/Seix Barral, 1995.
- . *Féiguele y otras mujeres*. 1976. Buenos Aires: Stock Cero, 2002.
- . *Té con canela*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1982.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. "The Seductions of Lesbianism: Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory and the Maternal Imaginary." *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994. 149-202.
- Feierstein, Ricardo. *Vida cotidiana de los judíos argentinos: del gueto al country*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2007.
- Flori, Mónica. "Alicia Steimberg y Cecilia Absatz: dos narradoras argentinas." *Chasqui: Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana* 17.2 (Nov. 1998): 83-92.
- . "Conversation with Cecilia Absatz." *Streams of Silver: Six Contemporary Women Writers from Argentina*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1995. 204-11.
- . "Essay" on Absatz. *Streams* 185-204.
- . "Identidad y discurso de la femineidad en *Los años pares* de Cecilia Absatz." *Explicación de Textos Literarios* 22.2 (1993-1994): 87-97.
- Gimbernat González, Ester. "En los nones de *Los años pares*." *Aventuras del desacuerdo: novelistas argentinas de los 80*. Buenos Aires: Vergara, 1992. 94-99.
- Lockhart, Darrell B. "Cecilia Absatz." Lockhart, ed., *Jewish Writers of Latin America: A Dictionary*. New York: Garland, 1997. 1-7.
- Massey, Doreen. "Flexible Sexism." *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge, Eng.: Polity, 1994. 212-48.
- Moscovich, Cíntia. *Por que sou gorda, mamãe?* Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2006.
- Orbach, Susie. *Fat Is a Feminist Issue: How to Lose Weight Permanently without Dieting*. 1978. New York: Paddington, 1984.
- Patai, Raphael. "Who Is a Jew?" *The Jewish Mind*. New York: Scribner's, 1977. 15-27.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." 1980. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986. 23-75.
- Rose, Gillian. "A Politics of Paradoxical Space." *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. Cambridge, Eng.: Polity, 1993. 137-60.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, 1929.