

Jean Franco and the Power of Interpretation in Her Life and Thought

by

Magdalena Mayorga

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Table of Contents

About the author	ix
Prologue.....	xi
Introduction	xv
Chapter 1: Who was Jean Franco?	1
Chapter 2: Origins and Family Situation	7
Chapter 3: Her Identity and Deepest Influences	24
Chapter 4: Her Encounter with Latin America and Approximation towards Feminism and Literature	45
Chapter 5: The Power of Interpretation in Her Life and Thought	55
Chapter 6: Intertextual Dialogue with Jean Franco	90
Chapter 7: The Political Woman and Her Commitment to Feminism.....	125
Chapter 8: The Writer and Academic.....	148
Chapter 9: Love and Maternity	156
Chapter 10: Her Life's Meaning at 90.....	178
Chapter 11: My Friendship and Experiences with Jean.....	186
Bibliographical References.....	202

About the author

Magdalena Mayorga (Ecuador, 1949)

Academic Background: Education; Cooperation and development; Gender, ethnicity, and development; Planning.

Her professional practice has focused on university teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, international cooperation, and development initiatives with national and international organizations.

She has authored several books, including:

- *Feminism: Convergences and divergences. Generational gap or epistemological and political differences* (Manuela Sáenz Award 2022; for Arts and Sciences in the Field of Gender, Honorable Municipality of Quito, Ecuador);
- *Re-interpretative methodology for diagnoses of agricultural production systems*;
- *Cross-Cutting axes in education: gender, values, and environment* (co-authorship);
- *We are breaking imaginary borders*;
- *Citizenship, gender, ethnicity: Fields of reflection and debate* (Central University of Ecuador Award 2006);
- *Gender, family, ethnicity: A new reading of communities*;
- *Gender: Theoretical approaches and currents* (co-authorship);
- *Gender, epistemology, and development planning* (Central University of Ecuador Award 2005).

“Thousands of people know Jean and there’s no need for me to repeat who that is. She knew Borges would become Borges before he did himself, I think. She discovered the new Latin American novel forty years ago, when the only ones taking an interest in her were specialists on naturalism and regionalism”

(Tomás Eloy Martínez)¹.

¹ Martínez, T. E. 1934-2010. Argentine writer and journalist, screenwriter and essayist. First editor-in-chief of the news program Telenoche. As magazine editor, he was the first in his country to put a writer on the cover, Jorge Luis Borges on *Primera Plana*. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomas_Eloy_Martinez

Prologue

I became aware of the existence of feminist writer Jean Franco through her work *Las conspiradoras: La representación de la mujer en México* ("The Conspirators: Women's Representation in Mexico"), which I acquired due to its feminist theming. While leafing through the book I was impressed and my attention fully drawn. Back then I was not aware of her existence or trajectory, let alone of her position as a feminist and literary critic; nor of her importance in the world of the great writers and academics, or her predilection and high esteem for Latin American cultures.

A few years later, I established a personal relationship with Jean through my husband, poet Iván Oñate¹, whom he met in Mexico when she assisted his lecture on "Harold Bloom's Canon". Afterwards Jean, who was living in New York, traveled to Ecuador to visit Iván and his family. It was then that we personally met and I dug into her life, work and activism in leftist and feminist movements. But, on top of that, we developed a mutual affinity, sympathy and great friendship, and Jean became a part of our familiar universe.

I celebrate my moments of companionship, conversation and affection with Jean as a great privilege in my life. Now, in her absence, I honor her life and memory and hold in even deeper value that which she imparted. I can't stop seeing her in her study

¹ Iván Oñate, Ecuadorian poet, writer and academic (March 1948 - September 2025)

in New York, in front of her computer, working with the rigor and obsessiveness that defined her.

While journeying together, whether coming back from a walk or any such thing, Jean and I would always begin another adventure: that of talking about our mutual escapades as much as all the different people she'd met and the experiences she'd had, especially within the literary world. It was a pleasure to hear her refer with such ease and familiarity to her experiences with such literary characters as I consider "sacred monsters", distant and admired. And so, through her reminiscences I approached numerous personages from the arts, intellectualism, politics and feminism.

Whether she was moving through academia or the leftist and feminist movements, in her personal life or among those of us who had the chance to hear her and share her ideas and life, Jean opened and showed new paths, creating new ways of relating based on autonomy and freedom, as always exemplified in her own life.

I felt a spiritual and intellectual need to write about Jean Franco, an emblematic woman for her intellectual, academic, political and feminist trajectory as much as for the transgressive way in which she confronted and conducted her life, far from all manner of classical, gender, age or cultural stereotypes, and for her permanent critical regard in the face of any colonialist or dictatorial sentiment and all kinds of oppressive cultural patterns (Mayorga, 2022).

The proximity and conversation with a woman of worth and such caliber could do nothing but inspire the adoption of her ideas, to rethink them and in some way reshape them.

This book is structured around thoughts, reflections, opinions and information supplied by Jean and stoked by the long, warm chats during the moments of companionship and friendship that we shared at her house in New York and at my families in Ecuador, which in turn I qualify with my own ideas and reflections.

Through such chats, Franco externalizes in her own voice her life, perceptions, opinions and thoughts regarding personal, academic and political-feminist aspects, bringing us closer to understanding her life and work, providing a sort of portrait at her 90 years of age.

I had my own doubts regarding which of Franco's facets I should refer to. In the end I decided to refer especially to the ones I knew, experienced and felt in the days I personally shared with her and for which I hold the greatest of affinities.

Within the political, feminist, academic facets I approach, both personally and as a writer, I underline and emphasize a few theoretical and epistemological subjects that she developed to great lengths and are deeply intricate to her work.

Within this framework, I put special emphasis on what I consider to be the central theme of this book, "the power of interpretation". With this I develop the thought process behind the deconstruction/construction in which the individual is constantly involved, giving meaning and signification to all related concepts, to reality and to life itself, from the male and female experience and the ideas and meanings that influence its environment, creating their own

comprehension and interpretation; I also attempt to unravel these processes through Jean's life and thought.

I also speak of the "truths" and socially legitimized knowledge, so-called "common sense", apparently unique and natural. It showcases tradition, but also hides stereotypes of all sorts. This calls for common sense to be filtered through a critical and diverse gaze.

I conclude this chapter by alluding to the discourses, reflections of life itself and the ideological stance of the speaker, which "update" cultural patterns by featuring them in speech. These discourses inhabit "common sense" and structure cultural patterns in a space, historic setting and very specific circumstances.

I hope with this book to contribute to a better understanding of the personal world and the thought of Jean Franco, and to the discussion of the themes that caught her attention and reflection such as "the power of interpretation", feminism and culture.

Introduction¹

Jean Franco, throughout her academic and literary life, dedicated herself to the unraveling of complex intersections between gender, social class, culture and power in the Latin American context. Her approach was innovative and critical, revealing how patriarchal structures and oppressive systems do not function in isolation, but interweave across a fabric of inequality that define sociocultural and political reality. Through her work, Franco articulated a vision of feminism that challenges the conventional boundaries of political and academic discourse. Her approach, rigorous and passionate, linked gender dynamics to the region's economic and political conditions, as with the production and dissemination of culture, elucidating the forms of material and symbolic oppression that affect women as well as other subaltern groups. Establishing new theoretical frames for the comprehension of the power dynamics within the context of underdevelopment, globalization and social crisis, Franco distinguished herself for her capacity to link the historic with the contemporary, the theoretical to the experiential, in a reflection that always encompassed both the public and private sphere.

The reader of this book journeys into a work that doesn't just document the thought of the foremost intellectual feminists on Latin American Studies, it also reflects the profound ethics of their work. As this book illustrates, Franco's life was distinguished by a

¹ Next, I present a brief summary on Jean, written by her academic assistant and one of her best friends, who stood by her to the end of her days: Cristina Pérez Jiménez.

constant challenge of the established norms and a firm commitment to social justice. It is a fact that Franco led a monumental life, intertwined with some of the greatest historical events of the 20th century, from her personal experiences in postwar Europe, to her stop in Cuba after the attack on the Moncada Barracks, her residence in Guatemala during the military coup against Jacobo Árbenz and her exile halfway through the century in post-revolutionary Mexico, a place blooming with great culture and artistry, to her extensive travels throughout Latin America during the asphyxiating years of dictatorships and her more recent foray into the US-Mexico border, blemished by femicides and the Narco-state. In this multitude of experiences, this book, as well as Jean Franco's work itself, calls us to question the supposed dominant element and consider new forms of resistance and emancipation.

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Chapter 1

Who was Jean Franco?

Jean Franco (*née* Swindells), (03/30/1924 – 12/14/2022), was born in Dukinfield, Cheshire (United Kingdom), part of the Greater Manchester County in North West England. Afterwards she was naturalized as an American citizen. She was first married to John Park and second to Juan Antonio Franco¹, a Guatemalan painter, whom she later divorced but whose surname she retained as she wanted to identify with Latin America, considering it an act of solidarity with the number of ongoing movements in this region.

She obtained a Bachelor's degree and majored in Art History at the University of Manchester. She was later the recipient of a scholarship to research art abroad in Europe, which was crucial to broadening her horizons.

She was an outstanding literary critic and the first professor on Latin American literature in England, with a highly esteemed reputation in the academic world where she shaped several generations. She was an eminent professor at King's College at the University of London, taught at the Universities of Essex and Stanford, and worked as a Spanish teacher at the University of

¹ Juan Antonio Franco was born in Guatemala City in 1920. In 1963 he abandoned his studies at the National School of Agriculture in order to get into the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1941 he studied at the Esmeralda School of Mexico. In <https://aprende.guatemala.com/historia/personajes/biografia-de-juan-antonio-franco-pintor-guatemalteco/>

Columbia. Later she became the Director of the Hemispheric Institute at the New York University.²

She was Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature of Latin America at the University of Columbia and is considered a pioneer in the field. Beginning in the late 1960s she dedicated her career to the study of Latin American culture and politics. Due to her prolific work, she received many awards by several governments as well as associations related to Latin American studies, among them:

- In 1992 she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Essex.
- In 1996 she won a PEN award for lifetime contribution to the worldwide dissemination of Latin American literature in English.
- In 2000, the Latin American Studies Association awarded her the Kalman Silvert Award for her contributions to Latin American Studies.
- In 2002 she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Manchester.
- Her book *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* was awarded the Bolton-Johnson Prize by the Confederacy of Latin American Historians in recognition of the best work on the History of Latin America published in the English language in 2003.

² Of the Argentine Economic Culture Fund, 2023. Authors in <https://fce.com.ar/autores/jean-franco/>

For her academic achievements she obtained the Gabriela Mistral Medal in Chile, the Andrés Bello Medal in Venezuela and the Carlos Monsiváis Award in Mexico.

Jean Franco is a model of all things literary, feminist and political in current Latin American studies. Her critical approach was a constant, as was her ideologically leftist posture, both of which were crucial elements throughout her work.

She was a noted and prolific writer in the fields of literature and feminism, and her works have had a profound impact.

Franco championed the idea that, due to its inherent worth, Latin American literature required and indeed had to be approached so as to address its specificities and varying cultural contexts, as opposed to the then prevailing treatment: focusing on the discussion of classical figures such as “Cervantes or Federico García Lorca”.

She was a precursor of historical-cultural Latin American studies back when these were getting started, back in the decades of the 60s and 70s, fields that were male-dominated where only ones who took an interest were specialists on naturalism and regionalism. She was also a precursor of cultural studies with a perspective that was both feminist and political.

She contributed to a better understanding of Latin American culture and history and its sensibility for resistance and transgression from a feminist perspective, as well as women’s political engagement. She was a staunch defender of the gay and queer movements, firm in her anti-imperialist thinking, and had

nothing but affinity and solidarity for leftist ideology and leftist groups.

She fought valiantly over writers, artists and activists, establishing a network of freethinkers and freedom fighters that transcended time and space. Along with other writers she showcased “the importance of Latin American literature and its ongoing dialogue with politics”.

Jean was “a pioneer in the development of Latin American studies in the English language”. A mighty literary critic, she championed the value of Latin American writers and literature within the Spanish language. She posited that Latin America deserved its own focus, far and away from any preconceived canon. This notion developed at a time when Latin America was largely ignored as a producer of literature and quality writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges and César Vallejo. She helped broaden the spectrum of Latin American writers and vied for their widespread diffusion in the English language.

Franco suffered sex discrimination in the flesh: near the beginning of her career in England, she was met with censorship over her role as a female historian, among other chauvinistic demonstrations from her male colleagues. These and other personal experiences, as well as other women around the world, strongly influenced her into becoming one of the first feminists to foster the development of feminism itself in Latin America, especially from the perspective of academia, writings and solidarity, which in turn influenced generations of feminists across the continent, pioneering “cultural criticism from a feminist perspective”.

Her unique trajectory allowed her to acquaint herself and relate to multiple writers and artists that became a part of her inner circle. She brought such figures into everyday life, praising their value but also getting to know them on a more human level. She never forgot the day Cortázar went to meet her at her house in suburban London, where he had to hunch over given his height and the low ceiling hanging in every room.

Her anecdotes and references to her literary friendships were innumerable, and she'd share them with us over many after-dinner conversations, during out trips to the Sierra and the beaches of the Ecuadorian coast, while walking down the parks and streets of New York. She told us that the first time that she interviewed Jorge Luis Borges, he issued an enigmatic phrase: "You don't look English". We ruminated over the possible meaning of such a statement. Evidently it couldn't possibly be owed to her physical appearance, and therefore, the phrase will endure as an enigma.

It was most normal to hear her talk about her experiences with Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Augusto Monterroso, Ricardo Piglia, Tomás Eloy Martínez, Carlos Monsiváis, Ángel Rama, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Pablo Neruda, Juan Carlos Onetti and an infinity of other creators and intellectuals across America and Europe.

Franco ended up being fast friends with the wives of many of these writers. She recalled, for example, the car trip she shared with Mercedes Barcha and García Márquez in order to get to know the Alhambra. It was at the door that, noting the beginning of a drizzle, García Márquez refused to leave the car, arguing that getting wet would bring bad luck. She remembered the still young

children of Vargas Llosa and Patricia Llosa playing under the dinner room table while Jean chatted with their parents. The wife of Nobel Prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias, “a nice Argentine lady”, begged her to go shopping with her for bed sheets, such was her obsession for collecting linen wherever they might travel. She reminisced about the obsequious attention Neruda received from his wife, far out-stepping the boundaries of any mutually valued relationship. She referred to her meeting Borges in ‘68 at a library in Buenos Aires, then later in London where the writer had gone with his mother Leonor Acevedo and, eventually, in the United States. All unforgettable anecdotes from this valuable woman who loved Latin American literature so much.

As a prominent writer, she poured down her experience, reflections and thinking into several books and articles published across various countries.

Chapter 2

Origins and Family Situation

Jean Franco belonged to an economically limited family. She spent her childhood and adolescence under economical and material duress, made worse by the impact of World War Two and the constant threats and fears provoked by it. Her social and familial context were subject to traditional values with which she did not get along. The family atmosphere was loaded with a feeling of frustration, as she mentions:

My father, Willam Ward Swindells, left school for work when he was 12. My mother, Ella Newton, trained to be a secretary but never got to work, which left in her a feeling of permanent bitterness as she never got to do what she wanted. That feeling was compounded with the unease she felt over her husband's name, which sounds eerily close to "swindle". (Franco, J. 2014. In dialogue with Mayorga, M.).¹

Jean had a son, Alexis Park, who lives in London and with whom she maintained a close relationship. She had two sisters: "Polín" (Pauline), 18 years her junior, who got a degree in electronics and worked in London. She never married and she alone survives Jean. Franco would visit her whenever she went to London. The other sister, Shyla, three years younger than Jean, was a nurse who got married and went to live abroad to Canada; she was subjected to abuse by her husband as a consequence of his drinking, so she returned to England where she died in a domestic accident.

¹ Magdalena Mayorga, Ecuadorian, academic, feminist, Jean's friend.

Additionally, Jean also had a brother who, resenting the circumstances of his familial context, abandoned his home and left nary a trace of his life.

At some point her family moved to Hyde, a small town that neighbored Jean's birthplace, situated between two much bigger towns, lacking a real center or any character at all. However, at first, she was too little to be disquieted by this. She recalls that every town had cotton factories², most peculiar at the time.

Jean's childhood and adolescence were spent against the background of the Interwar Period (1918-1939) and the beginnings of World War Two (1939-1945), with Great Britain acting as one of the Allied powers. As is well known, this was a time during which international relationships suffered a significant shift as authoritarian regimes and fascist ideologies were consolidated against the crisis of liberal democracy. The world suffered a great economic depression between 1929 and 1933 after capitalist countries enjoyed an economic boon during the '20s, with the United States in the lead. At the same time, this was a period that saw the rise of workers' movements, as inspired by socialism and communism.

Also present was the German vengeful spirit, born from the impositions of the Treaty of Versailles, as well as the rise of fascism

² At the beginning of the XIXth century, the cotton industry had transformed the face of Northern England and ushered a vertiginous rise of cotton cities. The population of Manchester, the region's capital of cotton-production, which spanned 108.000 inhabitants in 1821, tripled within 30 years. Reader's Digest Selections. From: Cotton, from England to the World. In <https://www.selecciones.com.ar/selecciones/sabias-que/algodon-de-inglaterra-al-mundo>

in Italy in the '20s, the Japanese invasion of China in the '30s, and Hitler's consolidation the Nazi Party in Germany by 1933, fueled further by France and the UK's declaration of war against Nazi Germany in 1939 following Germany's invasion of Poland.

The persistent need from certain countries for territorial domination, as well as the strong ongoing economic depression, bred conflict and instability in the lives of the peoples involved on an economic, political and social level; conditions that would only worsen and eventually spark World War Two.

Childhood and adolescence in these towns were typically framed by the daily struggle in practical matters of survival, along with the unemployment, insecurity and fear caused by the Interwar Period and World War Two. Perhaps this was one of the many aspects that motivated sensible, talented people like Jean to turn to imagination and the act of creation as a conduit for their vital projections elsewhere, far from frustration, someplace where creative and intellectual realization could be feasible.

Hyde was a town submerged in said context. According to Franco, the complete absence of anything remotely interesting about it meant that, around the 1950s, certain macabre events would acquire notoriety and turn into anecdotes that would momentarily shake up its denizens from the monotony and mundanity of everyday life: "The murder of someone's children by their partner, or the story of some physician, a 'Doctor Death' who would kill patients in order to collect the money from their wills".

The town's lack of opportunities for personal fulfillment, along with the economic limitations of Franco's family, shaped her

prevailing perception of her hometown as one of “ugliness”. Adding to this was the fact that the neighborhood kids would call her “Suini”, a nickname that meant “horrible” as far as she was concerned. All these elements would influence her aesthetic conception of life and, later on, would fuel her desire to leave that place.

Her parents bought a bakery in Hyde that had a charcoal oven in the back. Jean remembers her parents leading the tireless lives of bakers, though mostly her mother who, on top of everything else, would also care for the family. The double shift meant Jean had little time for herself, let alone spending it with friends. She was outraged by a situation she considered inadmissible and unheard of. It painted a certain picture and she wanted nothing to do with it.

The reality of Jean’s mother and father, perfectly tailored to the gender distribution of labor as ordained by the dominant patriarchal logic, along with their social class, didn’t allow for her mother to opt for anything outside the gender norms of the time, assuming the socially underrated responsibility of reproductive labor and care giving, while furthermore running the bakery business, a role that was emotionally involved and physically demanding yet didn’t lead to any kind of autonomy, economic or otherwise.

There’s a tendency to idealize this sort of activity, usually feminine, with affirmations and reflections addressing reproductive labor and care giving, such as it is, as a humanizing calling given the nature of a subject-subject relationship. Said affirmations neither expose nor observe gender inequality or the

oppression of women in this dynamic, a task that corresponds “exclusively” to women, apparently “by natural design”. Consequently, this work is as dehumanizing as actual productive labor, which is based on a subject-object relationship, where employers and workers establish alienated dynamics, with the former exploiting the latter and the latter doing the same to women.

Gender stereotypes and appraisals culturally justify the social denomination of women to reproductive labor, along with the implied oppression, which is at once interpreted by both women and men as correlating with the attributes of what is considered a socially valued and accepted woman.

Generally, the oppression and gender inequality that affect women are masked by women themselves with stereotypes designed to present them as natural or normal which must be accepted with resignation, without complaint and in silence, otherwise an attribute of women’s reason for being.

Jean’s mother lived in a time when she was obligated to abide by an unwanted life, burdened by manifest feelings of malaise, frustration and dissatisfaction. This too became a burden in her daughter’s life, yet an awareness blossomed within her that pushed her to escape such environment and seek distant horizons. This refers to the strength and power within that which can be projected in any one direction from a certain understanding – that being, in this case, the interpretation of a situation and certain family dynamics.

Franco recognized plainly and without any pretense the existence, within her family, of a domineering paternal dynamic, of her mother being oppressed and undervalued, and the subordination of her family due to its social class. This situation forced the children, then minors, to go into work and live a basically unsatisfying life. Her experiences with this reality provoked in Jean an unwillingness to project herself in a similar life, and drove her to search for other lifestyle alternatives, developing a kind of cultural and symbolic “currency”.

The town families, together with Franco's, were unable to escape the broad international context that was brought forth by World War Two. They were affected by the economic crisis that was desolating Europe as well as the ensuing unemployment. Franco remembers the long lines of men looking for work: “The whole thing only ‘ended’ with catastrophe: war took the men from the village”.

This absence diminished the workforce and spurred the demand for female labor, a convenient thing because their pay was considerably lower than men's³. However, it was within the context of this crisis that the stigma, as well as several gender demarcations regarding work that was considered properly male or female, came undone, which helped diminish work segregation, especially within the industrial workforce.

³ “The United Kingdom suffered a scarcity within its workforce after calling to arms an estimated 1.5 million peoples, with an additional 775.000 joining munitions factories and other such services by 1942. It was during this ‘work hunger’ that “propaganda doubled in order to get people to join the workforce and the war effort. Women were the public objective of many diverse forms of propaganda, since they were paid considerably less than men”.

It was of no real concern that women were beginning to occupy the same jobs that men had been plying so far. Even if women were taking these jobs, and were displaying equal skill to that of a male worker, they received a pay that was significantly lower due to their gender. Within the engineering field alone, the number of qualified and semi-qualified female workers rose from 75% to 85% from 1940 to 1942.⁴

However, the diminishment of segregation within the industry did not help overcome the gender pay gap.

Despite the marked poverty and unemployment brought forth by the war, Franco's parents were relatively "privileged" for running a family business, both stable and self-owned (the combined bakery and shop), and yet as extenuating as it was the family still suffered material needs. On the matter, Franco relates:

We kids couldn't do anything but basic supports, such as delivering bread. From 8 forward I had to deliver bread to sanatoriums (tuberculosis hospitals) and maternity wards; around midday I would accompany my father in selling cakes at the factories. My mother would run the store and he would bake the bread. My family had very limited resources due to our economic conditioning, especially during my childhood, just enough for a basic life that I personally wasn't happy with. (Franco, J. 2014. In dialogue with Mayorga, M.)

Within this context of war people lived shackled by a permanent feeling of fear, threat and overreaction, a constant state of escape response that only added to the problem of survival. Franco's life

⁴ In <https://www.selecciones.com.ar/selecciones/sabias-que/algodon-de-inglaterra-al-mundo>

was surrounded by constant physical threat, compounded by a lack of affection and protection from her parents and their harsh lives, so she sought out those things in her grandmother:

I was just a girl when I started my first year of secondary school. The first few days of classes were dedicated to bomb threat safety drills and wearing gas masks, all by the age of 10. As a consequence of the war, we always lived with shortages and food rationing, though thanks for my parents' shop we never starved so long as we lived frugally. We could only afford clothes with coupons, for example. People would file outside the store as soon as shoes were in stock.

When the air-raid sirens blared, everyone had to flee to the underground shelters. The fear and menace that produced the bombings in the city took very specific shapes in my life, like witnessing the death of a person who happened to be walking near my house – which deepened my fears – or a bombing in Manchester not far away from Hyde, or the crimson flames of a fire that rose with the might of a warning or some kind of taunt.

Threat and fear invaded every minute, moment and place, installing themselves as routine and a part of myself. There was simply no other way of living, especially once the air-raids commenced and panic took over the people.

The atmosphere of war had a strong impact in myself, especially the constant fear, never knowing where the bombs might drop yet knowing it'd be impossible to escape the blast. It's an extremely stark experience that marks you and conditions you for life. One day I fled to my grandmother's

house thinking her love would make that place safer, although it wasn't at all. (Franco, J. 2014. In dialogue with Mayorga, M.)

This experience confirms, much like other similar or even more tragic or dramatic ones, that it is pretty easy to talk about the war when far removed from its threat. Without the first-hand experience of something of such magnitude it is impossible to even begin approaching what it truly means. One can only imagine its significance in an all-too distant fashion, without the related circumstances or emotions of actually going through it. Even so, a person who retells their own experience after having overcome the actual danger, protected as they may be and without further menace, can hardly bring across the true sense of size and urgency. Time allows memory to take hold, and fear becomes but a flash. Franco says:

The one big negative event that I personally experienced after the war was the attack on the Twin Towers. However, although I was in New York at the time, I experienced it as a remote thing, the fallout of it all being so localized. Worries and political or criminal speculations aside, it didn't result in a harsh unavoidable reality for me, nor did it instill in me the need to flee. (Franco, J. 2014. In dialogue with Mayorga, M.)

Franco lived with her family together with her brother and sisters until she left for college. The specifics of her family life and her relationship with her siblings gave her the feeling of a strange life, as she says:

It seemed to me that I belonged to a different world altogether, such was the tremendous rivalry between my siblings. We were all put to work but there was a resentment towards me for being

the youngest and most spoiled. Grandma was my route to happiness and escape. She was adorable, and I would spend most of my time with her.

I didn't like anything about my family, harsh as it was living with them. My mother was crushed by work and we felt that impact. What I liked the most about my living situation was my maternal grandmother (Mary Newton). Grandpa had died when I was 2 years old. Grandma lived off his pension as a carpenter. My paternal grandparents had died earlier after suffering of severe rheumatism. (Franco, J. 2014. In dialogue with Mayorga, M.)

Jean lays bare her feelings about her family, openly and sincerely. She speaks plainly of the general malaise in which parents and siblings lived and interacted. At no point does she mythologize her parents or the family life, rather stripping, directly and repeatedly, the veil of "bliss and understanding" with which one normally associates family, which typically relies on the masking, hiding and silencing of true feelings. Her family situation was limiting, but she had the "instinct" to question the belief that such things must be passively accepted or that she had to project a life with a similar logic for herself.

In doing away with the myth of the family as being "happy and indisputable", Franco would develop a lifelong aversion towards the image of the nuclear family. She fraught an identity for herself, hand-waving the family environment and prioritizing instead the creation of one for herself based on an imaginary, different horizon, searching for a sense of belonging in an array of wildly different contexts.

She also found respite with some members of her extended family who provided stability, well-being and safety whenever she approached them:

Within my family I had a special affinity for an uncle who had moved to Canada. He was a fun person who would give me sweets as a kid; besides, I enjoyed his stories of the people who would leave the town for good. I also had a spinster aunt, Pessie, who always seemed a bit ridiculous to me, but she very much liked going on long walks in the countryside; I joined her every Sunday since the town is surrounded by a beautiful wildness, and I was a good walker, too. (Franco, J. 2014. In dialogue with Mayorga, M.)

Perhaps it was the magic of such stories that shaped the fancies that would later appear in her narrations and the writing of many books, and perhaps it was because of her fancy for long walks that she liked Aunt Pessie as much, too. The lengthy park that runs parallel to the Hudson River and neighbored her home on Riverside Dr., Manhattan, would serve a similar purpose.

By her own reckoning, neither her father nor her mother had a positive influence on her way of being. She avoids any kinds of platitudes by mentioning that she and her siblings wished to physically escape the family bosom along with any possibility of becoming like their parents. They all wanted to abandon their parents, even the most spoiled of their daughters. The one son left and despite much searching was never heard of again – a source of tragedy for their mother.

Jean's mother never understood her children's ambition to flee their home and suffered for it. Meanwhile, her father would find

release in all kinds of typical male entertainment, widely accepted in the region as the paradigm for man's reason of being: "He would embody the caricature of the partying man whose wife stayed subordinate at home". (Franco, J. 2014. In dialogue with Mayorga, M.)

Franco recognizes that she felt the oppression of living up to the gender stereotypes of femininity since she was very little, having been so perfectly showcased within her own family, especially by her mother and one of her sisters. Around this time, she discovered the joy and the benefit in transgressing against these stereotypes: "School was very important to me; I would play hockey as well as the more varied games played by boys".

Back then she was already experiencing in the flesh the distortions spawned by gender inequality, as based on the prevailing cultural pattern. This experience would stoke in her a sense of rebelliousness and resistance, which later devolved – after several influences, both individual and collective – in her lifelong stance as a feminist.

Her wide imagination and early unrest clashed with the daily frustrations suffered in her hometown and in her family. There was never enough room for emotional support within the forceful daily grind and no actual physical comfort at home. For her, the only source of escape was her grandmother:

My grandmother lived in a very spacious house that had previously belonged to a factory and came with a sizable garden. As a girl this was where I most enjoyed myself – I loved my grandma and she had all the time in the world for me. Not