



Gabriela Mistral's
Letters to Doris Dana

Edited And Translated By Velma García-Gorena

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mistral, Gabriela, 1889–1957 author. | García-Gorena, Velma editor translator.
Title: Gabriela Mistral's letters to Doris Dana / edited and translated by Velma García-Gorena.
Description: Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018. |
Includes bibliographical references and index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2017037662 (print) | LCCN 2017048853 (e-book) |
ISBN 9780826359575 (e-book) | ISBN 9780826359568 (printed case: alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Mistral, Gabriela, 1889-1957—Correspondence. | Mistral, Gabriela, 1889–1957—
Friends and associates. | Authors, Chilean—20th century—Correspondence. | Dana, Doris—
Correspondence. | Mistral, Gabriela, 1889–1957—Friends and associates. | Authors, American—
20th century—Correspondence.
Classification: LCC PQ8097.G6 (e-book) | LCC PQ8097.G6 Z48 2018 (print) |
DDC 861/.62 [B] —dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017037662>

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Following Gabriela Mistral's wishes as stated in her last will and testament, all royalties from
this book will be donated to the Franciscan Order to benefit the children of Mistral's
home village, Montegrande, Chile.

The author is grateful to Doris Atkinson for the inclusion of her essay
“Doris Dana and Her Family,” © Doris Atkinson.

Cover photograph courtesy Archivo del Escritor, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile.

Designed by Felicia Cedillos
Composed in Minion Pro 10.25/14

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Acknowledgments

A group of my translated letters between Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana was first published in the winter 2015 issue of the *Massachusetts Review* and is included in this book with permission. I benefited from the excellent work of editors Jim Hicks and Emily Wojcik.

I would like to thank the Franciscan Order of Chile and the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile for permission to use Gabriela Mistral's photographs and letters. I would also like to thank Pedro Pablo Zegers, the head of the Writers' Archive of the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile and the editor of *Gabriela Mistral, Niña Errante: Cartas a Doris Dana*, for his insight into working with Gabriela Mistral's correspondence. María Elena Wood, the director of the documentary *Locas Mujeres*, provided me with the note dated October 1948, and she also shared her copies of Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana's audio recordings. I am very grateful.

During the spring semester of 2014 I participated in Professor Regina Galasso's graduate translation workshop in the Comparative Literature Department of the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. Professor Galasso gave me invaluable advice and comments on my work, and I'm grateful for her support. Kate Berson, also from the University of Massachusetts, read several parts of the manuscript and made extensive comments. Kate and I are now collaborating on the translation of Gabriela Mistral's last book of poetry, *Poema de Chile*.

I wish to thank Suzanne Gottschang and Leslie King, my colleagues at Smith College. They patiently listened to me talk for hours about this project, and finally they gently but persuasively suggested that I should stop talking and finish my work. I couldn't ask for finer friends and colleagues.

I would like to acknowledge the generous support of my home institution, Smith College. A sabbatical during the calendar year 2014 allowed me to spend long hours on this translation, and a Committee on Faculty Compensation and Grant Development funded my research trip to Chile that year. In addition, my student assistant, Leah Parker-Bernstein, provided invaluable help with the images of Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana. Finally, Kathleen Gauger, the administrative assistant for the Project on Women and Social Change at Smith, was a constant source of support during the many stages of this book.

I would also like to thank my editor at the University of New Mexico Press, Elise McHugh, as well as two anonymous reviewers for the press. Their comments were insightful, and I'm grateful for Elise's patience as I finished the book. In addition, I wish to thank copyeditor Judith Antonelli for her excellent work.

Finally, I'd like to thank Doris Atkinson and Susan Smith, whom I met several years ago while doing my research on Gabriela Mistral's correspondence. Doris and Susan encouraged me to begin translating Mistral's letters and political writing. They are now my dear friends, and I dedicate this book to them, along with my partner, Laura; my son, David; and *mi mamá postiza*, Sara González Bricaire of Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana

Their Lives and Letters

This book is a translation of the correspondence between the Chilean poet and Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957), and her companion and executor, the North American writer Doris Dana (1920–2006). These letters, the vast majority of which are by Mistral, were written from 1948 to 1956, ending a few months before the poet’s death in January 1957. Dana kept the letters for almost fifty years; after her death in 2006, her niece and executor, Doris Atkinson, donated them, along with Mistral’s other papers, to the National Library of Chile. The letters recount details of Mistral’s creative process and tell of her personal life, her work as a Chilean diplomat, and her views on international politics and human rights. The correspondence also reveals that the women had a romantic relationship, which Dana had always denied.

Gabriela Mistral is not particularly well-known in the English-speaking world, especially compared to her compatriot and fellow Nobel Prize winner, Pablo Neruda. Whereas a significant amount of Neruda’s work is available in English, this is not the case for much of Mistral’s poetry and political writing. These letters, then, will give an English-speaking audience a better understanding of her life and its impact on her literary production. In her letters, Mistral discussed her work habits as she wrote and edited her last two books of poetry, *Lagar* (which means “winepress”), published in 1954, and *Poema de Chile*, published posthumously in 1967. The correspondence also reveals the everyday difficulties and anxieties of a prominent woman who was involved in a secret same-sex relationship in the 1940s and 1950s.

Some have argued that these personal letters should never have been made public and should not have been published.¹ But Atkinson, who served as

Mistral's recent literary executor, read and pondered her aunt's and Mistral's wills and found no language indicating that the letters should be destroyed or kept private. She therefore decided to release them. A similar controversy recently emerged over Willa Cather's letters. Cather, however, had actively attempted to hide some of her correspondence, and her will stated that her letters should not be published or quoted. Despite her wishes, her letters were published after her will expired.²

Nevertheless, perhaps the most important reason for translating and publishing this correspondence is that Mistral's letters constitute an important part of her literary production. Mistral took letter writing very seriously: she devoted part of each day to this activity, and her *legado* (legacy) is filled with her correspondence with many of the top literary, cultural, and political figures of her time. The Chilean scholar Lorena Garrido Donoso has argued that Mistral saw herself as belonging to a female literary network. She created and maintained this network via "the only available mechanism at that time: letters."³ Mistral maintained a long and extensive correspondence with Latin American writers such as Victoria Ocampo, Cecilia Meireles, and Esther de Cáceres, and she mentored younger female writers such as the Mexicans Dolores Castro and Rosario Castellanos and the Chilean Olga Acevedo. She communicated with all these writers primarily through her correspondence.

Gabriela Mistral regarded epistolary writing as a form of literary production located somewhere between prose and verse. In her second book of poetry, *Tala* (Tree Felling), she wrote, "Letters that travel far and are written every three to five years tend to set what's very temporal—the week, the year—and what's very trifling—the birthday, the new year, a change of house—to the wind. And when, moreover, a letter is written on the warm embers of poetry with a rhythm somewhat cut short and some rhymes intruding, with both rhythm and rhyme lingering in the air, the letter turns into a playful thing, pulled here and there by the verse and the prose that dispute it."⁴

These letters also are of great significance because they help to dispel the "Santa Gabriela" myth of the poet's life. For many years the Chilean government and some scholars had portrayed Mistral as a sad religious spinster whose poetry recounted the events of her tragic life, marked by the suicide of her boyfriend when she was a young woman. Some scholars thus argued that her literary work focusing on women and children reflected her thwarted desire for a husband and children. The biggest challenge to this perspective came in 2002 with the publication of Licia Fiol-Matta's *A Queer Mother for*

the Nation, which dismantled the traditional portrayal of the poet's life and argued that in fact Mistral was a closeted lesbian. This book caused a great deal of controversy in Latin America and in the literary world. At that time scholars were speculating about Mistral's personal life and sexuality, but there was no evidence to counter the traditional view of her life and work. These translated letters now reveal that the poet was not a chaste, traditionally Catholic spinster; Gabriela Mistral was in love with Doris Dana and never expressed a desire for a heterosexual relationship. Moreover, although Mistral embraced aspects of Catholicism, she also wrote about feeling a connection to her Jewish ancestors as well as an admiration for Buddhist ideas and practices.

Overall, even though these letters help to contextualize Mistral's life and work, it is important to note that the quality of the writing is uneven and does not match that of much of her poetry, essays, or other correspondence. These letters' intended audience was Doris Dana and no one else. Mistral was often extremely busy when she wrote to Dana, and thus at times the letters' content is repetitive and the topics range from the mundane (finances) to the transcendent, such as commentary on her own literary work, international politics, and the threat of war—often with abrupt transition.

In addition to contributing to an understanding of Mistral's life and work, these letters are significant for the growing literature in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ) history. The personal correspondence of noted twentieth-century female writers and public figures such as Elizabeth Bishop, Teresa de la Parra, and Eleanor Roosevelt has been entirely or partially destroyed or altered in order to cover up same-sex relationships. Thus this translated correspondence between Mistral and Dana should be of interest to scholars of mid-twentieth century LGBTQ communities.⁵

In addition to publishing the correspondence between Mistral and Dana, I have also provided some other letters *about* Mistral (appendix A), brief biographies of some of the individuals mentioned in the correspondence (appendix B), and a chronology of Mistral's life (appendix C).

Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957)

Gabriela Mistral was born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga in the Elqui Valley, a rural area in northern Chile, in 1889. A poet and a journalist, she was the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in literature (1945), and she remains

the only female Latin American Nobel laureate. Her father, a schoolteacher who wrote poetry, abandoned the family when she was three years old. She received only two years of formal education but received some schooling from her older sister, who was also a teacher. By the age of fifteen Mistral herself was forced to become a rural public schoolteacher in order to support her family. She was transferred to schools throughout northern and southern Chile and eventually worked her way up to become the principal of a prestigious girls' high school in Santiago. During these years as a rural schoolteacher, Mistral began publishing her poetry in regional newspapers, and her fame grew quickly.⁶

By the early 1920s Mistral was well-known throughout the Spanish-speaking world, both for her poetry and for her support of rural education. Thus in 1922 the newly formed Mexican revolutionary government invited her to come to Mexico to establish the country's new rural school system. While in Mexico she met writers and artists such as José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, and Diego Rivera. During this period these intellectuals and revolutionaries emphasized the indigenous side of Mexican culture. Subsequently Mistral identified as a *mestiza*—of both Spanish and indigenous ancestry—and focused on the plight of indigenous people in much of her published work.⁷

Although she is known primarily for her poetry, Mistral also wrote numerous essays on human rights, Latin American politics, and world peace. She became an ardent defender of the human rights of women, children, and indigenous people and addressed the United Nations twice, promoting the rights of children and supporting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Her early poetry often touched on the world of mothers and children. Her later poetry, especially in *Lagar*, expressed the anguish of women who had been abandoned by their husbands or partners and who had suffered losses during wartime, for example.

Throughout her life Mistral complained that Chilean society did not treat her well, perhaps because she was not from Santiago, she was not a member of the privileged class, and she was considered to have a masculine appearance: she was unusually tall and was known for her plain, unfashionable attire. Indeed, her first book of poetry, *Desolación* (Desolation), was published not in Chile but in New York, as a result of the enthusiasm and support of Federico de Onís of Columbia University's Spanish Department.⁸ Chilean publishers had not expressed interest in Mistral's work during the early years of her literary career. In addition, years later, when Mistral had become an

established and renowned writer, she did not receive Chile's highest literary award until seven years after she had won the Nobel Prize.

Mistral understandably was not always comfortable in Chile, and after spending two years in Mexico in the 1920s she returned to her home country for only two brief visits, in 1938 and 1954. Throughout much of her adult life she was a member of the Chilean diplomatic corps and spent time in Europe, the United States, Brazil, and, on two occasions, Mexico. While in the United States in the 1930s she taught at Barnard, Columbia, and Middlebury Colleges. Mistral was not from a wealthy family, and, like many Latin American writers of her era, she relied on her diplomatic salary to support her creative work. At times she also turned to journalism to augment her modest diplomatic salary.

Doris Dana (1920–2006)

Doris Atkinson, Doris Dana's niece, notes in her essay in this book that Doris Dana was born in New York City to a wealthy family. Her grandfather founded two financial newspapers, and during her childhood Dana split her time between an apartment on Fifth Avenue and an estate in upstate New York. She had two sisters: Ethel, a physician in California, and Leora, an actress who appeared on Broadway, in movies, and on television.

Doris Dana first saw Gabriela Mistral at Barnard College in 1946. Mistral had won the Nobel Prize the previous year, and she had been invited to speak at universities and institutions throughout the world, including Barnard. Dana, a graduate of Barnard, was in the audience at a lecture in which Mistral spoke about the horrors of war, which she called an "industry of hate." Dana was immediately infatuated with Mistral, later writing in a letter of March 19, 1948, "Two years ago I had the pleasure of seeing you in person at a speech you gave at Barnard College, here in New York. At that time my shyness, together with my deficient knowledge of Spanish, as well as the fear of joining those who were crowding around you, prevented me from approaching you to say hello and to say a few words. I still vividly remember how upset I was when I saw the suffering reflected in your eyes during those trying moments."

Dana immediately began studying Spanish, and two years later she translated an essay Mistral had written about Thomas Mann; the translation, "The Other German Disaster," was published in an edited volume. In 1948 Dana wrote to Mistral and drove from New York City to Santa Barbara, California,

to deliver the book to her personally. In a conversation recorded in 1955 Dana said that the two had become a couple on October 1, 1948.⁹

Mistral was often frustrated with Dana because Dana wrote to Mistral very infrequently during their times apart. In a letter of April 22, 1949, Dana explained that she had never been a prolific correspondent and that she never wrote long letters: “Remember that I’ve *never* written a twelve-page letter, not in English, Russian, or Sanskrit.” But there is probably an additional reason for Dana’s failure to write. As Atkinson explains in her afterword in this book, Dana suffered from mental illness—most likely bipolar disorder—and was under the care of a psychiatrist in New York. This factor would also account for why she often did not write to Mistral for extended periods.

The Letters

Gabriela Mistral was a famous public intellectual in the Spanish-speaking world during her lifetime. After winning the Nobel Prize in 1945, she became increasingly popular in Chile, her home country, and she was also revered in Mexico, where she lived immediately after the Mexican Revolution, from 1922 to 1924, and later from 1948 to 1950. The Chilean government celebrated Mistral during her later years and after her death. Today she is on the Chilean 5,000-peso note, roughly US\$10. She is known as the “mother of the nation,” and the government—especially the conservative military regime of General Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990)—depicted her as a pious, long-suffering spinster who wrote poetry extolling the world of motherhood and children.¹⁰ Dana, who served as Mistral’s literary executor, was portrayed as her secretary.

Mistral suffered from pancreatic cancer and died in 1957, leaving all her possessions, including her literary papers, to Dana, who had accompanied her during the last nine years of her life in Mexico, Italy, and Roslyn, New York. Dana subsequently allowed relatively few scholars access to Mistral’s papers. She died in November 2006 and left Mistral’s legado to her niece, Doris Atkinson. With her partner, Susan Smith, Atkinson decided that Mistral’s papers had to be made public, and she decided to donate all of Mistral’s possessions to the National Library of Chile, with the stipulation that all scholars and students would have access and that all the materials would be available online. The Chilean government, headed by Michelle Bachelet, agreed to these conditions. After several years of work, a team of librarians at the National Library of Chile has made much of the new legado available online.¹¹

Elizabeth Horan and Luis Vargas, both renowned Mistral scholars, viewed Mistral's papers immediately after Dana's death and spotted many previously unknown essays and photographs, as well as drafts of published poetry and some unpublished poems and essays. In addition, Dana had preserved more than 200 letters that she and Mistral had written to each other (included in this book), along with almost fifty hours of recorded conversations in which Mistral can be heard working, reading her poetry, and socializing with friends and acquaintances, including the North American writer Carson McCullers.

In 2010, soon after their discovery, Mistral's letters to Dana were published as a book in Chile and Spain, with the title *Gabriela Mistral, Niña Errante* (Wandering Girl), and Chilean society was quickly in an uproar over the revelations: the letters and recordings showed that rather than being a demure, nunlike figure, Gabriela Mistral was actually a passionate woman who was in love with Doris Dana, her supposed secretary. The recordings also revealed that Mistral loved to laugh, drink, smoke, and sing bawdy Mexican songs. Although at times she mourned the death of her son (whom she had adopted in 1926), she was hardly a long-suffering, chaste, heterosexual spinster, as Chileans had been taught. Yet the rest of the Spanish-speaking world was not as distressed by these revelations, and an article in the Spanish paper *El País* mocked the outraged Chilean conservatives in 2009.¹²

There are recurring themes in the correspondence between Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana. Throughout the correspondence Mistral alluded to her literary work, especially her last book of poetry, *Poema de Chile*. In *Poema* a mother figure, Mistral herself, returns to Chile after her death, and her ghost travels throughout the countryside accompanied by an indigenous boy from the Atacama Desert and a *huemul*, an Andean deer. The poems refer to Chile's diverse flora and fauna and include commentary on city-country relations and on class and racial differences. Since animals, plants, and geography play a prominent role in this book, Mistral often wrote in her letters about her research in botany, on minerals, and on animals. Her correspondence as a whole reveals that many friends and secretaries helped her with the *Poema de Chile* manuscript. In a letter to Doris Dana and Palma Guillén on April 20, 1949, the poet wrote that her former companion and secretary, Coni Saleva, had copied and typed many of these poems, and she asked Dana to continue with that work.

Unfortunately, although Mistral wrote hundreds of poems for the collection, she never completed *Poema de Chile*. Dana published the book ten years

after Mistral's death, in 1967. In her introduction Dana described the difficulty of deciding how to organize the many poems, given that Mistral had left no explicit instructions about how she envisioned the finished work. In her correspondence with Dana, the poet wrote about working on and editing this set of poems and indicated that she considered *Poema de Chile* to be one of her most important works.

The letters refer constantly to Mistral's relationship with Dana, and the poet expressed her sadness, anxiety, and anger over Dana's absence. The two had become a couple in late 1948 and had been living in the cities of Jalapa and Veracruz, Mexico. After several months together, Dana had to return to New York City, her home, to work and take care of personal matters. Dana was young and beautiful, and Mistral worried that she would find a younger partner and never return. Dana was not a prolific correspondent, and during especially long periods of silence Mistral became either despondent or angry, often even telling Dana that the relationship was over.

The correspondence is filled with references to the two women's jealousy. Initially Mistral was worried about a male psychiatrist in Dana's past, but ultimately she was most concerned about a woman known only as M. M. in the correspondence. M. M. was Margarita Madrigal (1912–1983), born in Costa Rica to a Costa Rican father and an American mother from Kansas City. Madrigal was a well-regarded expert in the foreign-language field, publishing more than twenty books. The letters indicate that Madrigal and Dana had had a romantic relationship, which made Mistral extremely jealous, and the fact that Madrigal was living in Puebla—not far from Jalapa and Veracruz—only added to Mistral's anxiety and jealousy. Madrigal was living with her sister, Marcela Madrigal de Arta-Sánchez, and her family. In a letter of April 10, 1949, Mistral fumed that she had found a stack of photos in which Dana was “flirting with all of . . . the Dana-Arta-Sánchez clan” and had considered cutting up the pictures.

Dana also expressed jealousy in the correspondence. She was primarily worried about Emma Godoy (1918–1989; no relation to Gabriela Mistral/Lucila Godoy). Godoy was a Mexican writer and college professor who wrote poetry and later became a radio personality and a defender of the rights of the elderly. Godoy often visited Jalapa and Veracruz and seemed to have been infatuated with Mistral. In a letter of April 15, 1949, Mistral reassured Dana that there was nothing going on between them and that she shouldn't worry because Godoy was “sleeping at the other end of the hotel.” In a letter

in Mistral's papers at the National Library of Chile, Godoy wrote that she had postponed marriage because her friendship with Mistral could cause problems.¹³

Overall, however, the letters clearly indicate that Mistral was determined to hold on to Dana. By the late 1940s, when the correspondence began, Mistral had lost all her close family members: her mother, her sister, and her niece had died, and her son, Juan Miguel Godoy, had passed away as well. Mistral felt completely alone and often wrote that Dana was her only reason for living.

Mistral's prolonged mourning over losing Juan Miguel (whom she called Yin-Yin) is a significant theme in these letters. Her son had committed suicide in 1943 at age seventeen, when the two were living in Brazil. Mistral was grief-stricken and felt guilty about his death; she expressed her sadness especially on the anniversary of his death and on holidays and special occasions. Mistral had embraced theosophy several decades before, and she often spoke of being aware of Yin-Yin's presence. On November 30, 1949, when she thought Doris was leaving her, she lamented her "two failures": losing Dana and her son.

Yet another common topic in the correspondence is Mistral's incessant desire to buy property and/or to move. Mistral referred to herself as a *paticoca* (crazy wanderer) and said that in this regard she was just like her father. Since her adolescence, when she had begun teaching in many different schools throughout Chile, Mistral had moved constantly. After leaving Chile in 1922, she rarely stayed in one place for more than two years. In the early letters between Dana and Mistral, when both of them lived in Mexico, Mistral wrote about moving constantly—changing hotels, living in Jalapa and then Veracruz, and staying at two haciendas, El Lencero and La Orduña. Mistral was almost obsessive in her desire to buy property, referring constantly to wanting *una casa con huerto*, a house with a yard and garden. The Mexican government was impressed with Mistral's efforts in establishing the country's rural school system in the 1920s, so in 1948, out of gratitude, the government granted her a large tract of land in Miradores, a very scenic area near Jalapa. Mistral began house construction there but abruptly returned the property to the government and soon left for Italy. When the correspondence in this book begins, Mistral owned two houses in California, which she had purchased with her Nobel Prize money, and two in Brazil, where she had lived during the early to mid-1940s.

Mistral also often wrote about international affairs, and she was especially

concerned about impending war. She had lived in Spain and other parts of Europe during the Spanish Civil War, and in her position as consul she had befriended and helped many Spanish refugees, including the politicians Victoria Kent and Luis Nicolau d'Olwer. Her concern led her to donate proceeds from her second book of poetry, *Tala* (published by her friend Victoria O'Campo in Argentina) to Spanish children who were orphaned as a result of the war.¹⁴ She was also living in Europe at the beginning of World War II and showed a great deal of sympathy for the plight of European Jews. These experiences led Mistral to become a pacifist and to despise xenophobia. In her letters to Dana she expressed the fear of another possible war, and she was especially concerned about how they would get back together and where they would live. Although the Mexican government had greeted her with open arms and had granted her land to encourage her to stay, Mistral's experience with nationalism and xenophobia there compelled her to leave in 1950.

As I noted above, Gabriela Mistral was not from an affluent family, and she had had to support herself since adolescence. Thus in these letters she shows a constant concern about financial matters. There are many references to the Chilean government and whether she would continue to receive her consular salary. During the early 1930s the government had abruptly cut off her salary, which had forced her to write articles for several Latin American newspapers to support herself and her mother. This experience left her with a constant anxiety about money, and in her correspondence she also expressed concerns about Dana's financial situation, even though Dana was ostensibly from a wealthy family. In countless letters Mistral included checks to cover Dana's living and travel expenses. Of course, if one reads between the lines, it appears that at times Mistral used money as a tool to lure Dana back to her.

Similarly, Mistral wrote constantly about her health problems. She was diagnosed with advanced diabetes in 1946 while living in Santa Barbara, California. Diabetic complications led to periodic problems with her vision, and she also complained of cardiovascular and other ailments. She often wrote about experiencing heart arrhythmia as well as debilitating headaches. However, as in the case of financial matters, during the early years of their relationship Mistral may have been utilizing and exaggerating her health problems as a way to get Dana to respond to her letters and return to her.

In addition to writing about diabetes, Mistral often referred to concerns about memory loss and brain disturbances. In a letter of June 24, 1952, written

while she was living in Naples, Italy, she described a particularly disturbing incident: “All of a sudden I felt as if my brain had changed, in other words, I felt a huge amount of confusion in my poor brain, like a person who’s come out of a flat, level place and has fallen into the middle of a carousel. It didn’t involve incoherent thinking or talking but I had a feeling that my head had left me, as if it belonged to a sick person who’s been starving for months, and I felt as weak as a baby.”

Mistral did not seek medical care after this incident, so it is impossible to know if she suffered a mild stroke or something else. Her letters do indicate, however, that she suffered from dementia in her later life: by 1956 she had grown increasingly confused and at times did not recognize one of her closest friends and companions, Gilda Péndola.

Mistral was very concerned about maintaining the privacy of the letters. Over and over the poet worried that some letters might have gotten lost. She noted that Latin American postal systems were notoriously inefficient and so this would not be surprising. But she also appeared to worry about someone actually intercepting the letters. She was cognizant of the fact that any revelation of her romantic relationship with Dana would be scandalous and would certainly lead to the loss of her only source of financial support, her diplomatic salary. So at times she warned Dana that a particular letter she had written was “diplomatic,” meaning toned down, and she also warned Dana to be careful in how she wrote her own letters. Mistral had reason to worry: in 1939 someone published a private letter she had written in Spain, and this incident forced her to leave the country.¹⁵ Furthermore, in Mexico Mistral actually caught her friends Palma Guillén and Eda Ramelli looking for her letters to Dana.

The correspondence includes many references to Mistral’s circle of female friends, former companions, and secretaries, including Palma Guillén, Consuelo (Coni) Saleva, and Gilda Péndola. These women were instrumental in helping Mistral with her literary and consular work, and they also helped her manage her everyday life.

Palma Guillén (1898–1975) was a Mexican intellectual, college professor, and diplomat. Guillén first met Mistral in 1922, when José Vasconcelos, the head of the Mexican Ministry of Education, assigned her to be the poet’s secretary. Initially Guillén had a negative impression of Mistral: she recalled that the Chilean was badly dressed, with unkempt hair. Nevertheless she became her closest friend for the remainder of her life.¹⁶ Guillén and

Mistral had a very close, possibly romantic, relationship for approximately fifteen years, and they adopted Juan Miguel together in Europe in 1926. Relatively little is known about the formal adoption, but Mistral was a diplomat and had connections with politicians who presumably helped with the bureaucratic procedures. Documents indicate that both Mistral and Guillén became the child's parents.¹⁷ Guillén helped Mistral with the organization of her papers and personal affairs, and Mistral, in turn, helped Guillén with her own career. In 1935, during the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas, Guillén became Mexico's first female ambassador, serving in Colombia for two years.¹⁸ Guillén eventually married the Spanish republican refugee Luis Nicolau d'Olwer and settled in Mexico City. The two women remained close friends, but Mistral had become wary of Guillén by the time she began her relationship with Dana in the late 1940s.

Although Gabriela Mistral was sharply critical of Guillén in her correspondence with Dana, she in fact relied heavily on her: Guillén was always in charge of the poet's bank accounts because Mistral herself realized that she was incapable of handling her own finances. In 1946 Guillén also traveled to Brazil and stayed there for two months to sell Mistral's properties in Petrópolis. Furthermore, their own correspondence shows that Mistral relied on Guillén emotionally throughout her adult life.¹⁹

Consuelo (Coni) Saleva (1905–1968) was from Puerto Rico and first met Mistral in the 1930s when she was an undergraduate at Middlebury College and Mistral was a visiting instructor. Saleva lived and traveled with the poet off and on between the 1930s and 1948. Saleva was bilingual in English and Spanish and helped Mistral to organize her papers, and she was also in charge of running their household. This correspondence reveals that Saleva and Mistral had once been very close but that their friendship came to an end in 1948 after Mistral accused Saleva of stealing \$15,000 from her as well as of taking some of her unpublished poems, including "La hierba" from her book *Poema de Chile*.²⁰

Finally, during the time Mistral lived in Italy and in Roslyn, Long Island, she was accompanied by Gilda Péndola (1930–), a young Italian Chilean woman who was bilingual in Spanish and Italian. In an interview I conducted in Chile in 2014, Péndola explained that as a young woman she had loved Mistral's poetry and had been in a position to travel and help Mistral. She wrote to Mistral while the poet was in Rapallo, Italy, and Mistral asked her to come for an interview. Péndola said that as soon as she walked

in the door she “felt a connection” with both Mistral and Dana. Pédola was accepted into the household, and like the other women just mentioned, she helped Mistral with her literary work and accompanied her on trips to Chile and to New Orleans. Mistral was utterly focused on her work and was often oblivious to her surroundings. One day, Pédola recalled, she and Mistral were walking in Rapallo when Pédola realized that the poet was wearing nonmatching shoes. “She knew how to do absolutely nothing except write!” Pédola exclaimed.²¹

Gabriela Mistral: Race and Gender

These letters reveal many aspects of the complicated relationship between Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana. Mistral wrote constantly about the problems in their relationship: not only were they divided by a thirty-one-year age difference, but they also came from vastly different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Mistral believed that many of their problems were rooted in their “racial” differences, but in these letters she did not employ one static, stable, meaning for the term *race*. She often referred to her own racial makeup: she was of Basque, indigenous, and Sephardic Jewish ancestry. Mistral often attributed their problems to Dana’s lack of understanding of “Latin” customs. They simply had different habits and a different understanding of the world and of social norms. At other times, however, Mistral denied being Latin, saying that Basques, Native Americans, and Jews were not Latin. On yet other occasions she referred to herself simply as “Indian.” However, no matter how Mistral identified herself, her racial status was always different from that of Dana (an Anglo-Saxon), and in her mind this difference often led to misunderstandings and problems.

Mistral similarly had an essentialist view of Dana’s Anglo-Saxon “race,” which she believed was characterized by efficiency, logic, and independence. Mistral noted repeatedly that “Latins” tend to be excessively close, even clingy, when they are in romantic relationships. In contrast, she believed that Anglo-Saxons guarded their independence jealously. Mistral maintained that Latins are willing “slaves” to their romantic partners, and she was often frustrated by Dana’s reserve and autonomy, especially her insistence on going back to New York periodically. These “racial,” ethnic, or cultural differences caused Mistral a great deal of emotional pain because she preferred to have Dana with her at all times.

Mistral therefore regarded racial differences as fixed and unchanging—even though her own racial identity shifted—and she blamed these differences for her relationship problems with Dana. When she became frustrated, Mistral also employed caustic racial discourse to provoke Dana into staying in contact while she was away. In a letter written on June 20, 1950, for example, she concluded that Dana’s silence meant that she had broken off their relationship; Mistral believed, moreover, that Dana had left because of racism. Mistral wrote, “At the present time I can’t imagine the reason for your break up with me. Perhaps it’s because I’m not North American and Caucasian and because of my identity as a mestiza, of ‘color people’ [*sic*]. Such racism leaves me stupefied. And I’m led to believe that you’re not behind this break up; maybe other people are influencing you.”

Mistral’s “playing the race card” was usually a strategy of last resort, when she had had no word from Dana for an extended period. This racial strategy was usually successful, since Dana often wrote back or called immediately to reassure Mistral that she had not left her.

Mistral clearly had a fluid sense of her own racial identity: at times she was a Basque, and Indian, and a Jew, whereas at other times she was Latin or simply indigenous. She used the concept of race in multiple ways in her letters to Dana: sometimes she referred to perceived actual racial differences, but on other occasions “race” was a convenient label for cultural norms.

These letters also reveal Mistral’s fluid gender identification. Spanish, like other Romance languages, is a gendered language, so an individual refers to his or her sex in speaking and writing. During the early years of their relationship, Mistral at times employed a male identity in her letters to Dana, yet during the last few years she reverted to purely female self-identification. At the beginning of their relationship, Mistral sometimes signed her letters “*tuyo* [yours], Gabriela”; a female would write *tuya*. And there are many other examples. Mistral referred to herself in the masculine form for the first time in her letter of April 14, 1949, when she wrote, “*Y yo no debí escribirte en tal estado de ánimo, pero soy arrebatado, recuérdalo, y colérico, Y TORPE, TORPE.*” A female would normally write *arrebatada* and *colérica*. I have translated this sentence as “I shouldn’t have written to you while I was in that mood, but I’m an impulsive man, remember that, and *quick to anger and STUPID, STUPID.*”

In his introduction to *Gabriela Mistral, Niña Errante*, Pedro Pablo Zegers suggested that this male identification was a manifestation of Mistral’s

protective feelings for Dana.²² I would argue that in addition, Mistral displayed signs of “female masculinity” and of a fluid sense of gender identification. In her book *Female Masculinity* Judith (a.k.a. Jack) Halberstam made a case for the existence of multiple masculinities, including masculinity “without men.”²³ Halberstam argued, for example, that female masculinity can be observed in young girls who are often admired as “tomboys,” whereas society is less tolerant of masculine traits in adult females. Dana alluded to Mistral’s female masculinity in her letter of April 22, 1949, when she referred to Mistral as her “husband” in quotation marks.

Mistral wrote extensively about her problems with Dana, but she also expressed her love for Dana—despite their many differences and despite her periods of anger. On November 28, 1949, she wrote, “Unfortunately, we’re from opposite races, from very different backgrounds and opposing world-views and sentiments. But despite all that I love you, just like that, though I’m not hopeful. This doesn’t prevent me from loving you.” She was supportive of Dana’s incipient writing career, even apologizing for the hours Dana had to spend running their household. Mistral also often gave Dana writing tips, such as about setting aside a few hours each day to write and not allowing anything to distract her. At the beginning of the correspondence Mistral was anxiety-ridden over Dana’s illness, and she wrote that Dana was her only love. Although Mistral acknowledged their problems, she nevertheless often wrote of her love for Dana and encouraged her to return from her trips to New York and elsewhere.

Mistral’s letters to Dana tend to be filled with anguish and longing, since she was writing when Dana was not with her. However, it is important to remember that the new legado also includes approximately fifty hours of audio recordings of their everyday life, as well as a small spiral notebook in which the two left notes for each other when they were living together. In these recordings, Dana was at home with the poet, and Mistral was a different person: laughing, singing, and telling jokes. These recordings were made from 1953 to 1956, the years immediately before the poet’s death. The recordings include conversations about reading and writing poetry, about religion, and about various periods of Mistral’s life. Overall they reveal a joyful and harmonious household, which is evident in my translation of a conversation between Mistral and Dana recorded in 1955. At the beginning of the recording Mistral was expressing jealousy, but Dana was able to defuse the situation, and by the end of their exchange both were laughing.

UNTITLED RECORDING

(At their home in Roslyn, Long Island, 1955)

GM: I'm not letting you go out with anyone.

DD: Not even with the cats, right?

DD (*kisses GM*): I love you very much. And you?

GM: I don't know how you'll behave later on; I still don't believe in you.

DD: Seven years and you still don't believe in me . . .

GM: Seven?

DD: We've been together for seven years.

GM: What a lie. (*She begins to chuckle.*)

DD: It's not a lie, Chiquita, since 1948. This is very beautiful, isn't it?

GM: Yes, but you want to ruin everything.

DD: Huh?

GM: You want to ruin everything.

DD: I do? I love you. I love you more and more and more! Even your butt! Even your farts! (*They both laugh.*)

Gabriela Mistral also left an undated note for Doris Dana in a spiral notebook, which is now in the National Library of Chile. Doris Atkinson says that her aunt treasured the handwritten note and kept it with her throughout her life. Here is my translation:

I know very well that, except for us, no one, no person in this world can possibly understand the essence of our life together.

Our beautiful life is so imperceptible, so delicate, because it's filled with imponderables, that it's almost invisible. But all we can do is live our life together, thanks to God.

I live in a kind of dream, remembering all the blessings you've brought me.

And I now have a new life, one I'd always searched for but had never found. It's sacred and rich.

Life without you is meaningless, absolutely pointless. You're "my house," my home, you yourself. My center is within you.

(And simply loving you purifies me). We live our life with abandon, in complete trust. I know you're unwaveringly faithful.

My memory is now a world, a vast and complete universe. Yet this world is incomplete since it continues to grow, though it would seem impossible.

Oh, a love deep and so sweet, and so light. My joy!

This story has a somewhat happy ending. Dana always eventually returned from her trips to New York and elsewhere. In 1953 the couple decided to buy a house in Roslyn, Long Island, and this proved to be a good compromise: Dana could now live and work near New York City, and Mistral, who hated New York, would live in a small town on Long Island, near the ocean, which she had always loved. The two women remained a couple until Mistral's death from pancreatic cancer in January 1957.

Clearly, Doris Dana played a crucial role in Gabriela Mistral's life from 1948 until 1957. In the mid-1940s Mistral had been grieving the death of her son, Juan Miguel, as well as the earlier deaths of her mother and her older sister. Mistral's relationship with the young and beautiful Dana thus renewed her desire to live, yet each time Dana returned to New York to visit her family, Mistral worried she would never return. Mistral often reminded Dana that "I have only you in this world."

Comments on the Letters and Translation

Readers will notice that Gabriela Mistral is the author of most of the letters in this collection. The book includes only a handful of letters and a few telegrams written by Doris Dana. It appears that Mistral destroyed most of Dana's letters. In her letter of April 14, 1949, Mistral wrote, "I've received only one letter from you—one. But it's so beautiful, so nicely written, that for the last three or four days I've had it with me, and I won't tear it up without copying the sentences that have comforted me the most, those that have moved me. Every time I take the letter out of my pocket I kiss it, as if it were a matter of life and death."

Apparently Mistral forgot or decided not to destroy it, and this is one of the few surviving letters written by Dana to Mistral. Dana, meanwhile, carefully preserved all of Mistral's letters. Doris Atkinson recalled that in 2006 she witnessed her aunt, then in her eighties, carefully packing up the letters in her house in Bridgehampton, New York, and mailing them to herself at her other home in Naples, Florida.²⁴

These letters present challenges for scholars and translators. First, all but a

few of Mistral's letters were written in pencil, which has faded over time, and her handwriting is also often difficult to decipher. Mistral also rarely dated her letters, often simply noting the day of the week and perhaps the month; many letters are completely undated. Hence the transcription was challenging, and it was also difficult to arrange the letters in the correct chronological order. As I translated, I referred to Zegers's collection of letters in *Gabriela Mistral, Niña Errante* for help with the transcription, but I also consulted Mistral's original letters in the digital collection of the National Library of Chile. My translation of this correspondence is not identical to Zegers's; I have arranged some letters in different chronological order, and I have also included a few letters and notes that do not appear in Zegers's book.

As I have discussed above, at times Mistral used male self-referential language in her letters to Dana. I have used the term *man* to indicate her use of the masculine. For example, I translated the word *cansado* (*cansada* for a female) as "tired man." In addition, I have left some salutations and other words in Spanish to remind the reader of the letters' original language.

Finally, Mistral had the habit of underlining particular phrases for emphasis. I have used italics for these phrases and have retained her use of capital letters.

CHAPTER 1
1948–1950
California and Mexico

Doris Dana
New York, NY
February 9, 1948

Gabriela Mistral
1305 Buena Vista Street
Monrovia, California

My dear teacher:

I've taken the liberty of sending you, in the name of New Directions Press, your copy of *The Stature of Thomas Mann*.

If it had been possible I would have preferred, of course, to enjoy the privilege of personally putting this book in your hands. In our age besieged by commercialism, a volume such as this one is worthy of much grace and dignity. I'm writing to express to you, as much as I can in a letter, the profound gratitude I feel for the great privilege of translating your persuasive and powerful essay, "The Other German Disaster," into English.

Your name and your work represent all that is strong and significant, beautiful, and truly eternal. The world now has an educator of great feeling and a bright flame of the purest art, thanks to your deep contemplative tenderness and the power of your work.

I can never express, and much less repay, all that I personally owe you.

This is a debt that the entire world owes you—the great artist who has revealed such excellent beauty and profound visions.

Cordially,
Doris Dana



Gabriela Mistral
Santa Barbara, California
March 1948¹

Miss Doris Dana
435 West 119th Street
New York 27, New York

Dear Señorita,

Your beautiful and cordial letter has moved me. I don't deserve that affection, not to mention your admiration; but we old teachers like to be loved by the young, whether or not we deserve it.

Consider me your friend. We've come together in a very noble world: in the work of our venerated Thomas Mann.

I'm a shy woman, despite the strength of my verses. And I greatly respect hard-working writers, because of the quality of their work and because of their connection with people. I haven't gone to see the Maestro. And now I've decided to go on a trip to Mexico and Venezuela. I might return, but I also might stay there. But I won't give up on the idea of seeing him.

If possible ask him if he can see me for just fifteen minutes. I'm going to Los Angeles at the end of March (I go out very little because of my poor health).

Thank you so much for the book. It was time that Thomas Mann's readers let him know of their devotion. I feel very honored to be present at that testimony of "thanksgiving"; he has given us so much.

Accept my affectionate regards.
Gabriela Mistral

[P.S.] I live in Santa Barbara, 729 Anapamu St.



Doris Dana
New York
March 19, 1948

My dear teacher:

Thank you so much for your warm and beautiful letter. Your words made me so happy!

I'm writing this letter quickly so that you won't wonder about your possible visit with Thomas Mann. Yesterday I sent him an airmail letter asking him to answer me by telegram or to write to you directly. Since you're thinking of traveling soon I don't want to run the risk that you won't receive my letter as well as Dr. M's.

That's why I'm urging you to send me your new address so that I can contact you if I need to send you a message.

T. M. spoke warmly and enthusiastically about your essay "The Other Disaster" when I saw him. I'm sure the professor will be happy and moved to see you and to greet you personally.

It's impossible for me to express what your visit with Mann would mean to me. It'll be a joy for both of you to meet, and I've dreamed about this for a long time; you two are my best and dearest teachers.

I'm planning a trip to Mexico, too; I'm taking my car. I'd love it if our trips coincided! If that were the case, would you give me the joy of accepting my offer of taking you in my car? I've never been to Mexico, but I know the changes in altitude can be very drastic there. If we were to go in my car we could stop when and where you'd like so that you could adjust to any change in altitude. The car is quite roomy, and I think you'd travel comfortably, and you could even take another person if you wish. We could meet in California or anywhere else.

I'd be so happy to go with you on your trip. If you accept we could make the arrangements over the phone. Send me your phone number if you like the idea.

Two years ago I had the pleasure of seeing you in person at a speech you gave at Barnard College, here in New York. At the time my shyness, together with my deficient knowledge of Spanish, as well as the fear of joining those who were crowding around you, prevented me from approaching you to say hello and to say a few words. I still vividly

remember how upset I was when I saw the suffering reflected in your eyes during those trying moments.

When you see Dr. M., please convey my warm greetings to him and his wife K.

With my affectionate regards and with gratitude
once more for your treasured letter,
Your friend,
D. D.

P.S. I know Dr. Mann speaks a little French, and his wife speaks it very well.



Doris Dana
New York
April 1, 1948

My dear teacher:

A few days ago I received a letter from Thomas Mann in which he refers to the letter he wrote you, and he expresses his joy about the possibility of meeting you. I hope the Maestro's invitation has arrived safely in your hands.

I'd like to hear from you.

With affection from your friend,
[Doris]



Gabriela Mistral
Santa Barbara
April 6, 1948

Doris Dana
435 West 119th Street
New York 27, N.Y.

Dear Doris Dana:

Yes, thanks to your graciousness I'll have the joy of finally seeing Thomas Mann's face and of meeting his companion. I owe you very much, dear.

That trip of ours to Mexico will be a fiesta. But my itinerary has gotten a bit complicated. It looks as if—it still isn't clear—I'd go by train from Los Angeles to Alabama, to board a ship there bound for San Juan. I don't know when you're coming, dear, and I'm almost sure you wouldn't be interested in driving to New Orleans from Los Angeles. (Air travel raises my blood pressure and makes me dizzy.)

I'd really love to meet you in person. At my age faces blend together a bit.

Perhaps I'll stay in Puerto Rico for a while. If that were the case, you might want to come to that lovely island, which American tourists seem to have forgotten.

Your book is beautiful. Thank you so much!! I'd have been so sorry to see no South American representation in it, because the essays truly contribute to the understanding of Thomas Mann, I have to say.

Let's meet then, wherever it's most convenient.

With affection and gratitude from your old friend,
Gabriela Mistral



Doris Dana
New York
August 1, 1948

My dear teacher—

Forgive me for not having answered your beautiful and moving letter. I think about you often—about how wonderful and dear you are.

I want to know if you've already visited our admired Thomas Mann and if you've left for Puerto Rico—or if you're still in Santa Barbara.

My beloved and venerated teacher—I hope it won't seem presumptuous of me to ask if it would be possible to meet you this fall. I can't express to you what this would mean to me. I owe you so much, my teacher. You have given infinitely of your wisdom and love in your poetry. If you wish, tell me where you'll be in September, and we could meet wherever you like.

I'll be visiting Thomas Mann in September, so if you were to be in California then, perhaps it would be possible for us to go see him together. I hope to receive your dear words soon.

With affection, your friend
[Doris]



Gabriela Mistral
Santa Barbara
August 12, 1948

Doris Dana
435 West 119th Street
New York 27, N. Y.

Dear Doris Dana:

Forgive the tardiness of this letter, dear one. During the last few days I've been very weak.

I've postponed the trip to Mexico until the end of October. And I didn't go to Puerto Rico because of a small student rebellion there . . .

I can't go out except at sunset or at night during the summer months, dear one. The heat gives me heart trouble. That's why I think it's prudent, especially because of the desert, to delay the trip to Mexico.

I haven't been to Los Angeles, Doris. But I would love to go with you to visit Thomas Mann, if he's able to meet with us.

Send me your itinerary. This is my intended trip: Los Angeles–San Diego, San Diego–Tijuana–Ensenada. Ensenada–Guaymas. Mazatlán–Acapulco. Acapulco–Guadalajara. (I'd stay in Acapulco for a while.)

It's unlikely that I'll be able to go to all those points, dear.

It seems to me that the most difficult problem will be coordinating our dates. I see that you have different plans.

In any case, your old friend proposes that you stay at my house, all the days you wish. This city is refined and gentle, and the house has silence and trees.

I need to travel with my secretary, my ex–Middlebury College student, Consuelo Saleva, who's Puerto Rican.

I'm going to Mexico as a guest of the president, but I can't go up to Mexico City—because my high blood pressure can't take the altitude.

Send me your news, my good friend, and receive my sincere affection and also my gratitude.

Gabriela Mistral



Doris Dana

New York

August 22, 1948

My dear Gabriela Mistral—

Thank you so much for the joy your news gave me. I'm so excited to think it'll be possible for me to be with you—and thinking about our trip to Mexico fills me with pleasure.

My dear teacher—I can go on any of those trips you're planning. Coordinating our dates isn't a problem because I'll be free to join you in my car whenever and wherever you wish.

I'll leave New York around the fifteenth of September, and I'll spend two or three days in Missouri—and later I'll be in the beautiful and vast regions of Nevada. I hope to arrive in California during the first week of October. Above all I hope to plan our itinerary as soon as I arrive in California. After that I'll go to Los Angeles to tend to some personal matters—and later I'll return to Santa Barbara whenever you wish.

In the meantime I'll write to Thomas Mann to arrange our visit with him.

Thank you so much, dear Gabriela, for your invitation to stay at your house.

I hope to hear from you soon and, reiterating my gratitude, I'm counting the days until I see you.

With affection, your friend

Doris Dana



Doris Dana
Salt Lake City
September 20, 1948

My dear teacher—

Forgive me for writing in such a hurry. I'm now in Salt Lake City and tomorrow I'll continue to Sutel, Nevada—a small town near Reno, where the Indians live. I expect to stay here for four or five days.

If you wish, dear Gabriela, I could arrive in Santa Barbara on October 15, in the morning. If this date isn't convenient for you, tell me when you'd like me to arrive. My address is "Case 1 General Delivery, Reno, Nevada."

Once again, dear friend, I want to tell you that I'm very grateful and excited about seeing you soon.

During the summer I worked hard on my Spanish—it's very limited, teacher, but I'm very motivated.

I'll be so happy to finally meet you!

With affection, your friend,
D. D.



Gabriela Mistral
Santa Barbara
September 24, 1948

Dear Doris:

Many thanks for your news. And you hadn't even heard from me!

Perhaps I didn't explain this clearly in my previous letter: we'll leave from here around the end of October or the beginning of November. It's possible, dear, that you won't want to stay here at my house for that long. But the city is refined and this house is sweet, with its pines and its silence.

I can't leave earlier, Doris, because I'll be gone for so long and I'll be so far away—I might not even return, and my secretary has many things to arrange, and she also has to rent out the house.

But if you want, you can go on all by yourself; you also can rest here after your trip across your continent—not a country; the trip is so tiring!

I don't remember if I told you that my travel habits are very tedious because I have to avoid both heat and high altitude, and I have to travel for short stretches to avoid getting tired. But we'll travel together as best we can, dear.

That's it for now. Get here any time you wish, just let me know in advance by telegram.

Receive a hug from your friend whose face you haven't seen and who
already loves you,
Gabriela Mistral

[P.S.] September 24: If war breaks out we'd leave sooner.



Gabriela Mistral
Santa Barbara
September 27, 1948

General Delivery
Reno, Nevada

I WOULD LIKE TO LEAVE FOR MEXICO SOON BUT I'LL WAIT TO
HEAR YOUR PLANS

AFFECTIONATELY
GABRIELA MISTRAL

[Written on the telegram: "How lucky you went so soon. Tell me where to send mail, address. Love, Andrea." Andrea may have been someone working for Ella Dana, Doris's stepmother.]



Gabriela Mistral
 Santa Barbara
 October 1948²

I'm going to Mexico for 4 months. I won't go up to Mexico City. I've proposed the following to the Mexican government:

1. Flying from Los Angeles to New Orleans, from New Orleans to Veracruz, Veracruz–Orizaba, Orizaba–Yucatan.
2. Going through Ensenada, Ensenada–Guaymas, Guaymas–Mazatlán, Mazatlán–Acapulco.

I'm waiting for the Mexican government's answer.

You need to go to Mexico City. Afterward (if you wish) you could go to Orizaba or Ensenada or Mazatlán.

I'll never deprive you of your freedom. Keep it entirely for yourself. I won't ask you for anything, except for your company for a few months.

I'll pay your living expenses in Orizaba and Yucatan.

I'll protect (defend) you. I'll protect you from yourself, and also from me.

It'll be painful for me but I'll do it.

My wish is never to live or to be very far away from you.



Gabriela Mistral
 Veracruz
 November 19, 1948

Doris Dana
 Doce Cerrada Mazatlan³
 Mexico DF

MUCH BETTER COME ONLY FOR ARCHAEOLOGY I'LL LEAVE
 VERACRUZ APPROXIMATELY 27TH THINKING OF YOU BOTH

GABRIELA



Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana, Santa Barbara, October 1948. Courtesy Archivo del Escritor, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile.



Gabriela Mistral
Yucatan, Mexico
November 19, 1948

For Palmita and Doris:

What news! It took you so long to hear about the incident! If I had “left,” poor Coni would’ve had to go on without all of you. It was a complete disaster. I answered Doris telling her to come *only* because of her interest in the archaeology of Yucatan, not because of this patient, because I’m getting better. My pulse is still bad and I’m still a bit dizzy, but I’m in no immediate