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Special Issue: Fifty Shades of Latin American *Noir*: Alternative Models of Criminality and Detection

Guest Editor: Carolina Miranda



*Proceso de tejido en telar de cintura por Miguel Ángel Sosme**

* Miguel Ángel Sosme es tintorero, tejedor, poeta, antropólogo y promotor cultural veracruzano especializado en el estudio y la creación de textiles teñidos con añil y grana cochinilla. A lo largo de su trayectoria ha fundado y coordinado diversos proyectos especializados en la documentación, estudio, diseño y confección de textiles teñidos con tintes naturales. Asimismo, ha producido diversos materiales en los que se incluyen libros, cortometrajes, artículos periodísticos y poesía. Sus obras más conocidas son el libro *Tejedoras de esperanza: Empoderamiento en los grupos artesanales de la Sierra de Zongolica, Veracruz* y el documental en lengua náhuatl *Tlakimilolli: Voces del telar*. Las imágenes que se presentan a continuación han ganado el premio de creación artística de Feministas Unidas, 2024.

Editorial

The present collection combines some of the salient issues resulting from two international conferences I attended in 2022. The first was on committed literature by contemporary Latin American women writers, which I co-organized with my colleague, but mainly friend, Victoria Ríos Castaño (Ca' Foscari). Our conference (this year in its fourth iteration) gathered speakers from several European and Latin American institutions (Argentina, France, Italy, Mexico, Spain, and the UK), and addressed contemporary female writers' denunciation of daily discrimination, violence, prostitution, sexual abuse, and femicide in Latin America. The second was the Captivating Criminality network conference held by a well-established international and interdisciplinary network of scholars exploring crime fiction, its surrounding issues, and its social, cultural, and historical development. In both instances, one key issue coming to the fore was the increasing interest in the examination of the many shades *noir* crime writing has taken when written by women in the Americas.

Indeed, *noir* aesthetics have become very popular in contemporary world literary production, let alone in the Latin American context. As a genre in constant evolution, the *novela negra* or *literatura policial* takes many forms from detective to hard-boiled, including crime, mystery, police procedurals. It is also one prone to hybridity providing the perfect platform for engaging on cultural, historical, and political debates. A case in point is that of Argentina where the literary phenomenon of the so-called "ola negra" (Noir Wave) comprises many women writers whose works are receiving major attention after being awarded international literary prizes (Selva Almada, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, Mariana Enríquez, Samanta Schweblin, Dolores Reyes, to name but a few). This brought an unprecedented boom in local authors to enter the English-speaking and other international markets. But the so-called *noir* wave is by no means restricted to Argentina. Critics agree that crime fiction written by women in Latin America and Spain has proliferated at such a rate that it is very difficult to keep up with.

Building on earlier critical studies, the present collection offers a distinctive approach. The result of a series of engaging and productive fora, it first provides an up-to-date, and reasonably comprehensive sample of both novel and established writers from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay, some of whose works have not yet been addressed by academia. Second, it offers a range of diverse theoretical approaches adopted by the contributing authors. Third, in selecting contributions I made a conscious effort to include both established academics as well as new and emerging colleagues. Most

importantly, this compilation responds to current trends showcasing the academic value of the genre as a phenomenon in itself, including its scope as a literary “trend,” which in many Latin American literary systems is synonymous with realism.

Overall, I hope this special issue highlights the gendered transformation of the genre. Read together, these studies invite to open up textual and cultural phenomena reminding readers of the challenges and complexities the genre poses. In doing so, I also hope that, collectively, we contribute to providing Latin American authors the literary visibility and transnational circulation in academic circles they deserve.

Introduction: Fifty Shades of Latin American Noir: Alternative Models of Criminality and Detection

Carolina Miranda*

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Introduction

Noir aesthetics have become very popular in contemporary world literary production. Indeed, it constitutes a model that, for Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, is “well suited for capturing societies undergoing dramatic change, for representing and responding directly to an age of social conflicts, risks and inequalities” (5). As Nancy Vosburg points out, crime fiction written by women in Latin America “has proliferated at such a rate that it is almost impossible to keep up with the latest publications” (ix). In countries such as Argentina the literary phenomenon of the so-called *ola negra* (*Noir* wave), commencing in the late 2010s, comprises many women writers whose works are receiving major attention after being awarded international literary prizes. This brought an unprecedented boom in local authors to enter the English-speaking and other international markets. Looking further afield, podcasts and online presence of successful platforms such as “Hablemos, escritoras” (“Let’s Talk, Women Writers” <https://www.hablemosescritoras.com/>), and seminars like “Vindictas Mujeres de Negro: Narrativa policiaca y criminal escrita por mujeres” (“Vindictas: Women in Noir: Crime Narratives Written by Women) (UNAM, 1-23 September, 2021) highlight that the burgeoning interest in crime fiction written by contemporary Latin American women extends far and wide to other countries in the subcontinent. Used as a vehicle mediating between reality and fiction in many Latin American literary traditions, as Mexican writer José Salvador Ruiz points out (in Gómez 2019), the *noir* model has proved particularly fitting. In the case of Argentina, it has been adopted as “the ‘go-to genre’ for political and social critique” (Schmidt-Cruz x); other Latin American traditions also favoring it to undermine hegemonic discourses, to criticize the omnipresent corruption, and for revisiting historical debates (Schuchardt 309).

In *Detective Fiction from Latin America*, one of the first comprehensive studies published in English following the historical development of crime fiction in the subcontinent, Amelia Simpson tackled crime and mystery narratives from the River Plate, Brazil, Mexico, and Cuba “from its origins in the late nineteenth century to the present day” (1). That present

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day was 1990. Perhaps unfairly reviewed by David Haberly as “slightly less all-encompassing than the title indicates” (383), Simpson’s critical survey shone an important light on a genre that has only continued to evolve. The discussion of Latin American detective fiction presents daunting problems both from the critical and organizational perspectives. This is not only due to the sheer quantity (there are hundreds of novels and stories being published yearly), but also because of its variety. Commonly referred to as *novela policial* or *novela negra* in Hispanic countries, and *literatura policial* in Brazil (Reimão 14), in its many shades (detective, hard-boiled, crime, mystery, police procedurals, etc.), Latin American *noir* fictions have often been adopted to undermine hegemonic discourses, to criticize the omnipresent corruption, and for revisiting historical and political debates (Miranda 65).

In her study, Simpson pondered on whether the “genre is considered high or low literature,” something readers and critics no longer (or almost no longer) have to contend. She also reflects on the ways in which the different approaches to the model “reflect authors and publishers’ concepts about what” crime fiction represents (9), an argument still relevant today. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, local crime narratives have indeed come a long way developing traits, consolidating and establishing their own traditions. There are two issues that Simpson considered, however, that remain at the heart of the various Latin American crime fiction productions, which this collection of studies also addresses. The first is the range of views about the genre’s role, and the many ways the various traditions have used it: “as an innocuous form of entertainment, an instrument of ideological persuasion, or a framework within which to debate social, ethical, or literary problems” (Simpson 9-10). The second is the use of humor and satire to undermine ideological discourses. What the present volume delves into is some of the key element observed in contemporary Latin American *noir* narratives in general, and those written by women authors in particular: first, the innovative turns crime fiction takes within the context of Latin American realities; second, the ways in which the *policial* or *novela negra* has been adopted as the preferred model for political and social critique (Close 143); and third, how the genre is exploited as a means of denouncing fundamental issues at the heart of society, approaching crimes through a gender lens exposing prejudices, discrimination and domestic violence.

Building on earlier critical studies,¹ this collection of essays contributes to the conversations around the uses of *noir* fiction in Latin American literature. Including novel and established authors from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay, read together, the studies offer a representative selection of some of the newer trends revealing the many ways in which contemporary Latin American women writers propose alternative

models of criminality and its detection. Challenging dominant discourses, the authors examined here address gender issues exposing prejudices, discrimination, and domestic violence. In doing so, they reflect upon current issues not only at a socio-political level but also at the level of crime writing. Together, they typify some of the mutations and innovations observed in Latin American *noir*.

Many Shades of Latin American *Noir*

Starting in Mexico, in “Who Killed the Writer? Intratextual and Intertextual Clues in Cristina Rivera Garza’s “El perfil de él,” Victoria Ríos Castaño offers an in-depth analysis of a myriad of inter- and intra-textual games the Mexican author displays in her short story. Offering a context to read her short story within Mexican crime fiction, the study explores “El perfil de él” (“His Profile,” 2008) and establishes intratextual connections with Rivera Garza’s essays (*Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desapropiación; The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation*, 2013), her crime fiction series (*La muerte me da; Death Takes Me*, 2007), and other intertextual references (such as to French film *Hiroshima, mon amour; Hiroshima, My Love*, 1959). Ríos Castaño interrogates the Pulitzer Prize winner (2024; awarded for *El invencible verano de Liliana; Liliana’s Invincible Summer*, 2021) shedding light on the interactions between reality and fiction Rivera Garza is so prone to. This study also securitizes the ways in which Rivera Garza incorporates her own narrative techniques, such as the introduction of an antedetective, and the weaving of reality and fiction to resolve the fictional mystery and to rethink the solution to a real one.

Diana Aramburu also reads a series of short stories, this time chronicling Puerto Rico’s gender-based violence epidemic. “Rewriting Childhood Trauma: Healing in Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro’s Crime Fiction” analyzes Arroyo Pizarro’s tales, which for Aramburu give a voice to those who often remain invisible in the media’s coverage of the epidemic, such as LGBTQIA+ and the Afro-Puerto Rican community. The study shows how Puerto Rican *noir* constitutes a vehicle to expose the violent (often femicidal) foundations of the myth of the *gran familia*, the great family representing Puerto Rican heteropatriarchal, nuclear family structure. The study offers a close-reading of “Después de martillar” (“After Hammering”) and “La santiguadora” (“The Healer”), featuring girl victims of sexual abuse who reemerge as avengers and justice-makers. Thus, Aramburu dissects the ways in which author and activist Arroyo Pizarro’s employs the figure of the child witness not only to condemn sexual abuse (for example by eliminating victimizers), but also to examine both healing spaces and care communities that are being created by survivors. Accordingly, Aramburu highlights, Arroyo Pizarro retackles Puerto Rican history from an antipatriarchal and antinormative point of view.

In “From Another World?: The Police Woman in the Novels of Melina Torres” Mariana Oggioni and Carolina Miranda look at Melina Torres’ work, an upcoming exponent of the *ola negra argentina*, “the literary phenomenon of women writing noir,” which reflects “significant social changes that took place at the turn of the twenty-first century:” the fact that today it is women authors who dominate the crime fiction scene in Argentina (Miranda and Ríos Castaño 8). Here they scrutinize Torres’ peculiar duo featured in the short stories collected in *Ninfas de otro mundo* (*Nymphs from Another World*, 2016), and the novels *Pobres corazones* (*Poor Hearts*, 2021), and *Zona liberada* (*Liberated Zone*, 2003). Torres’ detectives constitute a peculiar duo for various reasons: they represent the police, they are both gay, they avoid abusing their position of power, and they are overall, honest and relatable *canas* (cops). For Oggioni and Miranda, Torres epitomizes some of the main concerns observed by the Argentinean *ola negra* trend: the introduction of new issues related to women, their bodies, and their roles as citizens. Focusing on the main character, Head of Major Crimes Silvana Aguirre, the article examines the spheres in which Aguirre operates: her public, professional role as a police officer, and the portrayal of her private, personal life. In doing so, the study reads Torres’ work as part of the *ola negra*, one challenging conventions by portraying the problematic relationships between women’s voices, power, and the public sphere.

Carlos Uxo tackles Cuban crime fiction exploring feminism, domestic violence, and postmodernism in “Ena Lucía Portela’s *Cien botellas en una pared* [*One Hundred Bottles on a Wall*], Beyond End-oriented Readings.” Portela’s third novel revolves around the turbulent relationship between Moisés, an ex-magistrate of the Cuban High Court, and Zeta, the woman/narrator he recurrently abuses. On the whole it could be read as a conventional feminist narrative (Moisés dies mysteriously after many episodes of domestic violence) in which a male antagonist faces consequences for his violence against a woman. However, following Jasper Guldall’s, Stephen King’s and Alistair Rolls’ *Criminal Moves. Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction* (2019), Uxo claims that end-oriented interpretations may be one-dimensional thus proving deceptive; as a result, they may overlook other nuance textual meanings. Thus, his study goes beyond the bias toward end-oriented readings, demonstrating that *Cien botellas en una pared* is a highly nuanced novel, one subverting traditional takes of the genre, one directing the reader’s attention to elements that go past the resolution of the crimes committed by Moisés.

Moving South, in “More than a Pile of Bodies: Women as Investigators, Victims, and Witnesses in the Novels of Patrícia Melo and Eliana Alves Cruz” Katherine Ostrom looks into writers who put women detectives at the forefront. The study analyzes four novels: *Fogo-Fátuo* (*Will-o’-the-Wisp*, 2014) and *Mulheres empilhadas* (*Piled Up Women*, 2019; translated in 2023

by Sophie Lewis as *The Simple Art of Killing a Woman*) by Melo, and *O crime do cais do Valongo* (*The Crime at Valongo Wharf*, 2018) and *Solitária* (*Solitary*, 2022) by Cruz. In the context of Brazilian literature becoming more diverse, Melo and Cruz epitomize a wider current trend in Brazilian publishing which aims at broadening audiences' expectations of genre fiction, showing the roles that may be played by women (including non-urban, white-elite women). Ostrom's analysis shows that on the one hand, Melo denounces femicides and condemns impunity for crimes against Indigenous women in the Amazon region; on the other, Cruz celebrates the resilience of Afro-Brazilian women in the face of historical crimes as well as present-day racism and sexism. Through Melo's complex and imperfect female investigators, or by giving a voice to survivors and witnesses as in the case of Cruz, the article demonstrates how these authors re-draw traditional Brazilian typecast characters thus challenging social expectations for Black, white, and Indigenous women in Brazil. Ultimately, Ostrom warns against rearing Melo and Cruz "only" as crime fiction novelists, but as authors whose contributions to the genre are innovative and impactful beyond *noir* narratives.

Kate Quinn's "New Women's Voices in Chilean Detective Fiction: Paula Ilabaca, Valeria Vargas and Julia Guzmán" questions the reasons why the genre remains so male dominated until recently. While in Chile, compared to neighboring Argentina or to Mexico, as Quinn points out, local crime fiction was sparsely produced in the twentieth century, national production remaining a predominantly male territory until very recently in the twenty-first century. The study offers a rich, panoramic view of current women's crime writing in Chile in the last decade. The contemporary upsurge of women writing *noir* fiction in recent years is closely linked to political activism, the Colectivo Señoritas Imposibles (The Impossible Ladies Collective) being the most notable example. The Collective aims to increase the participation and visibility of women within the crime genre (through online publications, special issues and anthologies), something that aligns with broader feminist goals, including shining a light on gender violence. Particular attention is paid to the works of leading writers who have embraced the series format, and whose work explores the connections between political and cultural authoritarianism: Paula Ilabaca (b. 1979), Valeria Vargas (b. 1969), and Julia Guzmán (b. 1975). For Quinn, their engagement with feminist issues including gender violence, sexual abuse of women and children, and femicide epitomize the innovations achieved in Chilean crime writing.

Last, in "Ladies in *Noir*: Amateur Investigators, Unprofessional Criminals, and Police Detectives in Contemporary Crime Narratives from the River Plate" Karina Lemes and Carolina Miranda look at crime narratives from Argentina and Uruguay in the context of what

Gabriela Saidón called the *ola negra* phenomenon (2019). Starting with Argentine Claudia Piñeiro (b. 1960), perhaps the most internationally visible exponent of the *ola negra*, the study analyzes *Las viudas de los jueves*, *Tuya* (*Thursday Night Widows; All Yours*, both 2005), and *El tiempo de las moscas* (*Time of the Flies*, 2022). Also from Argentina, they examine the “Kohser trilogy” by María Inés Krimer (b. 1951). Comprising *Sangre Kosher* (*Kosher Blood*, 2009), *Siliconas express* (*Silicones Express*, 2013), and *Sangre Fashion* (*Fashion Blood*, 2015), the novels feature Ruth Epelbaum, the first woman private eye in the country’s tradition. Last, they travel to the other side of the River Plate and investigate Mercedes Rosende (b. 1958), the first Uruguayan crime novelist to appear in English. Introducing amateur criminal Úrsula López, and Leónida Lima, a persistent, undervalued cop, Rosende’s caper series includes *Mujer equivocada* (*Mistaken Woman*, 2011), *El miserere de los cocodrilos* (*Crocodile Tears*, 2017), *Qué ganas de no verte nunca más* (*The Hand that Feeds You*, 2019), and *Nunca saldrás de aquí* (*You Will Never Leave*, 2023). Set in contemporary locales these authors combine humor with elements of the classic and thriller novels channeling themes such as corruption, social divides, gender prejudices, and state-sanctioned crimes. As such, they portray some key preoccupations of many of the writers associated with the *ola negra* that are addressed in this special issue: interrogation of history, cynicism and disillusionment with the State, while they also engage with sensitive issues current to women’s public agenda.

Closing Observations

In the recently published *A Companion to Latin American Crime Fiction*, editor and contributor Philip Swanson points out that “[w]hile crime fiction is big business and sells very well, it still carries a whiff of the stigma of a lower-brow, non-serious genre” (14). The studies collected here align with current debates such as Swanson’s. First because they demonstrate that crime fiction production in the subcontinent has evolved in many directions and forms to become a sophisticated genre. Second, Latin American *noir* narratives show significant degrees of psychological depth, and are utilized to denounce social, political, industrial and financial corruption, as well as to provide insights into current anxieties of the societies that produce them. Furthermore, they highlight the ways in which the writers examined here drove the gendered transformation the genre went through in the last decades.

In short, and rather as a springboard for further investigations than a concluding note: looking at the ways in which the writers analyzed here exploit the genre to reflect on the ways in which modern societies are changing, their work invites readers to review what constitutes a crime and what shapes punishment may take. Well suited for reflecting societal change and

conflict, perhaps it is no wonder that the *novela negra* has become a fundamental vehicle to problematize issues at the heart of many of the societies under scrutiny.

Notes

1.- See for example *Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Detective Fiction. Essays on the Género Negro Tradition* edited by Renée W. Craig-Odders, Jacky Collins and Glen S. Close (2006), *Narrativas del crimen en América Latina. Transformaciones y transculturaciones del policial* edited by Brigitte Adriaensen and Valeria Grinberg Pla (2012), *Spanish and Latin American Women's Crime Fiction in the New Millennium: From Noir to Gris* edited by Nancy Vosburg and Nina L. Molinaro (2017), and *A Companion to Latin American Crime Fiction* edited by Philip Swanson (2024).

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**Who Killed the Writer?
Intertextual Clues in Cristina Rivera Garza's 'El perfil de él'**

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Abstract: This article analyzes Cristina Rivera Garza's short story "El perfil de él" ("His Profile") in *La frontera más distante* (*The Farthest Frontier*, 2008) by contextualizing it in the realm of Mexican crime fiction and identifying intertextual connections, with her essays (e.g., *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desappropriación*) (*The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation*) (2013) and her crime fiction series (e.g., *La muerte me da*; *Death Takes Me*, (2007), and with other productions (e.g., French film *Hiroshima, mon amour*; *Hiroshima, My Love*, 1959). This analysis allows us to argue that "El perfil de él" exemplifies Rivera Garza's metaphysical, anti detective and metanarrative approach to the crime genre. For the resolution of the crime, the study suggests reading into a continuum of life and fiction: Rosario Castellanos's political role as ambassador in Tel Aviv during the early 1970s Israeli-Palestinian conflict and María Elvira Bermúdez's detective writing techniques of mistaken identities.

Keywords: María Elvira Bermúdez, Rosario Castellanos, Cristina Rivera Garza, intertextuality, Mexican crime fiction.

Resumen: El presente estudio analiza "El perfil de él" de Cristina Rivera Garza; contextualiza el cuento en el campo del género policial mexicano e identifica conexiones intertextuales con sus ensayos (p.ej. *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desappropriación*, 2013) y su producción policial (p. ej. *La muerte me da*, 2007), así como con otras obras artísticas (p. ej. la película francesa *Hiroshima, mon amour*, 1959). Nuestro análisis nos permite argumentar que con "El perfil de él" Rivera Garza apuesta por un policial de naturaleza metafísica, anti-policial y meta-narrativa. Para la resolución del crimen, el estudio sugiere la lectura del cuento como una continuidad entre vida y ficción: pensar en el papel político de Castellanos como embajadora en Tel Aviv durante el conflicto palestino-israelí de principios de los setenta y la técnica de identidades equivocadas de María Elvira Bermúdez.

Palabras clave: María Elvira Bermúdez, Rosario Castellanos, Cristina Rivera Garza, intertextualidad, policial mexicano.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of her experiences in male-dominated professional and cultural circles and publishing markets, the first Mexican woman writer of crime fiction María Elvira Bermúdez (1916-1988) was requested to name the best ten Mexican authors of short stories.¹

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She reserved her best two for the end: Amparo Dávila, whom she describes as “unparalleled in many compositions” and, above all, “Chayo [Rosario] Castellanos” as “perhaps the best writer this century so far” (Guzmán Burgos and Bermúdez 9).² Bermúdez might have called to mind Dávila’s mastery of the uncanny and the fantastic genre and, touching home, Castellanos’s nouvelle or short story “El viudo Román” (“Román, the Widower,” 1964), the first crime story written by a Mexican woman, which revolves around misogynistic prejudices behind a young woman’s death. These days, both Bermúdez and Dávila are recovering from an era of silence as their works are reconsidered more often by publishing houses, writers and literary critics.³ A most internationally acclaimed one, Mexican Cristina Rivera Garza, has similarly expressed an admiration for the same compatriots.

In an interview, given shortly after her publication of *El invencible verano de Liliana* (*Liliana’s Invincible Summer*, 2021), with which she seeks justice and renders homage to her younger sister, victim of femicide, Rivera Garza acknowledges that, in her literary genealogy, she holds “a very special place for Rosario Castellanos, to whom we must continually return, as well as to... Amparo Dávila” (Calvo n.p.).⁴ Her recognition of both goes beyond public declaration for she has worked actively on the legitimization of their work. In her novel *La cresta de Ilión* (*The Illiac Crest*, 2002), Rivera Garza endeavors to reproduce Dávila’s atmospheres and bring to light Dávila’s oblivion in the cultural circuits. As for Castellanos, Rivera Garza positions her in two prominent passages of *El invencible*. Castellanos opens the first chapter with some verses that Rivera Garza extracts from “Límite” (“Limit”) in *Lívida luz* (*Livid Light*, 1960), and Castellanos was in Liliana’s mind the night she was murdered. One of the poems that she was copying in one her notebooks was José Emilio Pacheco’s “‘Presencia’ Homenaje a Rosario Castellanos” (“‘Presence’ Homage to Rosario Castellanos”) in *Los elementos de la noche* (*The Elements of the Night*, 1963). This was not the only time Pacheco paid tribute to her friend for immediately after her death, officially declared an accidental electrocution on 7th August 1974,⁵ he gathered a collection of opinion articles –*El uso de la palabra* (*The Use of the Word*, 1974)–, which Castellanos had published in the Mexican newspaper *Excélsior* for around a decade.⁶ Here is where an interesting intertextual reference, to which Rivera Garza is so prone, occurs.⁷

In 1972, when Castellanos was performing functions as Mexican Ambassador in Israel (1971-1974), she wrote an article centering on the life of Esther Levi, concentration camp survivor and secretary of the Mexican Embassy in Tel Aviv, entitled “Perfil de Esther: el dolor y la esperanza” (“Esther’s Profile: Pain and Hope,” 1972). Less than two years after its publication, Castellanos began to circulate in the public imaginary as the poet who committed

suicide or not, as Rivera Garza states in *El invencible*: “the poet who died, accidentally, electrocuted whilst trying to switch on a lamp in Jerusalem” (237).⁸ This is not the first time that Rivera Garza has placed Castellanos’s death into her writing scene. It is the “enigma” upon which Rivera Garza constructs a crime short story, entitled “El perfil de él” (“His Profile”) *La frontera más distante* (*The Farthest Frontier*, 2008), revolving around the mystery of who murdered Castellanos and why. What is more, the detective solving the crime is the same who left unresolved the murder of four men in Rivera Garza’s first crime novel *La muerte me da* (*Death Takes Me*, 2007), in which the Argentinean poet Alejandra Pizarnik, known infamously for her suicide rather than for her work, features strongly.

The intention of this article is to grasp a brief understanding of this continuum of intertextuality and interaction between reality and fiction, oblivion and recuperation, that Rivera Garza echoes in her work: women writers who disappear from the public eye, who committed suicide, who died in unfortunate circumstances or were murdered. This exploration, nevertheless, is partial and will only focus on “El perfil de él.” Thus, fitting within the general intention of this collection of essays, the first two sections of this article will contextualize Rivera Garza’s short story in the realm of Mexican crime fiction. These sections endeavor, on the one hand, to offer an overview of the formulaic standard of the genre alongside the Mexican literary twists on its conventions and, on the other, to help establish connections between “El perfil de él” and another short story revolving around the murder of a women writer and politician: Bermúdez’s first short story “Detente, sombra” (“Stop, Shadow,” 1961).⁹ The final section will offer an analysis of “El perfil de él,” looking into how Rivera Garza incorporates her own narrative techniques in the anti detective crime genre, and reconsidering how the resolution of the mystery pictures a new portrait of Castellanos in her political capacities as an ambassador during the early 1970s Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Mexican Crime Fiction and its Women Writers

Since the publication of its first crime novel –*El crimen de la obsidiana* (*The Obsidian Crime*, 1942) by Spanish exile Enrique Fernández Gual– Mexican crime fiction has been compartmentalized in two main categories: critical realism, influenced by the hard-boiled *noir*, and metaphysical crime narratives, which follow Jorge Luis Borges’s belief in the superiority of the enigma above its resolution (Noguerol Jiménez 34 and 43; Close, “The Latin” 5). The former developed to become what Cuban Leonardo Padura and Mexican Paco Ignacio Taibo II term as “neopolicial,” which weaves crime fiction with other genres, such as the political novel, to narrate and condemn contemporary societal ills (Taibo 38; Noguerol Jiménez 35). In Mexico, the genre is particularly associated with the *Nota roja* (*Red note*), sensationalist

journalism for the masses, indulging in human tragedy, natural disasters and violent crimes and accidents (Braham 68). By way of example, Taibo II conceives the emergence of the genre as an expression of concern with late twentieth-century violence in megacities, denunciation of social injustice and State criminality in the form of impunity and corruption. In *Días de combate* (*Days of Combat*, 1976), his first of the ten-novel series featuring private detective Héctor Belascoarán Shayne, Taibo II paints a portrait of Mexico City as the predatory environment out of which a serial killer of women is born. Intertextuality, in the form of references to *noir* written fiction and movies, abounds; Belascoarán models his mannerisms on detective on screen Humphrey Bogart and the killer's motivations strike a chord with Bermúdez's novel *Diferentes razones tiene la muerte* (*Different Reasons Death Has*, 1953). What is more, Taibo II puts in his killer's mouth the same quote, by Friedrich Nietzsche, as Bermúdez's, to justify his actions, which can be interpreted as a writing technique to also blur reality and fiction, in the understanding that Taibo II's killer is himself a reader of Bermúdez's 1953 novel (Close, "The Latin" 10).

The vicious circle of stagnation in State's inaction and deterioration of public security, which makes Latin America the world's most violent region in this third decade of the century, is likewise the background upon which the current "Post-neopolicial" builds in Mexico. Prominent novels revolve around organized crime and international drug trafficking, are assigned to overlapping subgenres, including the *narconovela* (*narco* or drug novel) and the sicario or hitman novels, but they also narrate the progressive violence of everyday life, the absence of an uncorrupted, efficient authority to battle neither petty offenses nor femicides. In this respect, internationally acclaimed Fernanda Melchor's *Temporada de huracanes* (*Hurricane Season*, 2017) stands out. In telling the murder of an abortionist in rural Mexico, her novel unveils toxic machismo and a breakdown of the rule of law, with drug traffickers who sexually enslave women and rapists and killers who walk free from justice (Close, "The Latin" 14-15; Perucho 202-203). Melchor's work embeds in a current exponential increase of crime fiction women writers, who are overcoming the imponderable male-dominated cultural circles and markets, faced by their pioneer Bermúdez, and taking to pen to denounce societal ills in contemporary Mexico. For example, whilst in a period of twenty years (1950-1970) only around three crime fiction novels were produced by a woman writer –Bermúdez's *Diferentes razones* (1953), Margos de Villanueva's *22 horas* (*22 Hours*, 1955) and Ana Mairena's *Los extraordinarios* (*The Extraordinaries*, 1961)–, over twenty novels were written in the 2010s, and at least twenty three since 2020, including Gabriela Jáuregui, *Feral* (2022), which earned

her the Bellas Artes de Narrativa Colima Prize, and Mónica Rojas, *Lobo* (Wolf, 2022), which was shortlisted for the IV Auguste Dupin Prize (Perucho 198-202).¹⁰

As for the metaphysical genre, which prioritizes the intellectual dimension, its development in Mexico takes us again to Bermúdez and her first collection of short stories, *Los mejores cuentos policíacos mexicanos* (*The Best Mexican Crime Fiction Stories*, 1955). As a staunchest promoter of crime fiction, Bermúdez's selected texts adhered strictly to the internal rules (Herrera 71). Preponderance was given to "mystery, investigation and the idea of justice," alongside the writer's obligation to "confuse and convince its readers at the same time, without violating the rules of logic in the least," as written by Bermúdez in her prologue (Herrera 72).¹¹ These characteristics govern Bermúdez's first short story, featuring the debut of her female detective María Elena Morán, "Detente, sombra" (1961) and the story written by one her favorite writers, Castellanos's "El viudo Román" (1964).¹² In the latter, revolving around the enigma of who provoked the illness causing the death of Romelia Orantes, a young, recently married woman, Castellanos partly applies the grammar of traditional crime fiction (Paredes Crespo 44 and 51). Romelia's wealthy, widely respected husband, Don Carlos Román, is a retired physician who shuns Romelia immediately after the wedding, imprisoning her in the quandary of social stigma by questioning her virginity and claiming that she is in love with another man, whom he blames for her death. To defend his honor and what he believes is justice, Don Carlos turns into a detective who collects evidence and examines his results analytically. Castellanos offers a twist on the detective figure, for Don Carlos is eventually uncovered to have been discrediting his young wife. Romelia is an honor killing victim, as Don Carlos had married her to exact vengeance against her brother, who had an affair with Don Carlos's first wife.

Mistaking the identity of the killer and highlighting the injustices of an only male-dominated world also constitute the two pillars upon which Bermúdez builds the mystery of "Detente, sombra," on the murder of politician and writer América Fernández.¹³ Subverting the crime fiction trend to represent women as only victims and criminals (Herrera 27), Bermúdez's woman detective, María Elena Morán, investigates different motifs, rivals and nemesis. Eventually, Morán unravels that Fernández was wrongly murdered by another female politician, who had originally intended to kill the literary critic and lawyer, Georgina Banuet, and that Banuet had been accused, also wrongly, of the crime. The all-female setting of the story, populated by university-educated, professional woman like Bermúdez, including attorneys, judges, government officials, police officers, journalists, writers and literary critics, some of whom belong to the political party Unión de Mujeres and admire "self-made widows,"

women who murder their husbands, is testament to Bermúdez's desire to make this short story "carr[y] weight when it comes to women's issues in the second half of the twentieth century" (Ruiz 65).¹⁴ Offering the other side of the coin, Bermúdez disapproves of women's invisibility and the anomaly of an only-men world performing in the public sphere. Another remarkable characteristic of this short story is Bermúdez's penchant for intertextuality.¹⁵ In this case, her title rephrases Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's famous sonnet "Detente, sombra de mi bien esquivo" ("Stop, Shadow of My Elusive Goodness"), for the motif of the shadows appears throughout the story –as the evil, the feeling of guilt, the reminiscence of the real killer (Cázares 122-23)–, and Bermúdez also toys with Elvis Presley's "It's Now or Never" (Bermúdez, "Detente, sombra" 54), as it is the song broadcast on TV whilst the murder occurs.

The metaphysical crime represented by Bermúdez eventually evolved to contemporary anti detective fiction, defined by William Spanos as a postmodern disintegration of the traditional conventions. A prime one is the no-resolution of the mystery, unleashing a taste of restlessness in readers and, in turn, operating as an indicative of an existential chaos (Spanos 154-55). In contemporary Mexican antidetective fiction, nevertheless, Francisca Noguerol Jiménez argues for the existence of three other main "treasons" against the formulae of the mystery novel:¹⁶ innovation or parody of the classic whodunit, represented by Luis Felipe Hernández's *Derrumbe* (*Collapse*, 2005); deconstruction, by Jorge Volpi's *En busca de Klingsor* (*In Search of Klingsor*, 1999), in which readers are exposed to the detective's ambiguous perception of reality; and metafiction, which combines the investigation of a crime with literary reflection. This last category constitutes a remarkable phenomenon in Mexican anti detective fiction and can be traced back to Pacheco's crime-fantastic short story "Tenga para que se entretenga" ("Take It to Enjoy It") in *El principio del placer* (*The Beginning of Pleasure*, 1972). In other examples, the resolution of the crime is of less importance than an understanding of the meaning of real literature, like in David Toscana's *El último lector* (*The Last Reader*, 2004), and the main storyline gravitates around a search for a writer, as illustrated by Chilean Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998). For Noguerol Jiménez, nevertheless, one of the most fascinating representatives of this metafictional subgenre is, indeed, Rivera Garza. Subverting the formulaic crime fiction that hews to convention, her crime fiction series reveals an intent on exploring unsuspected possibilities through the means of intertextuality and intermediality (Noguerol Jiménez 43-48).

Metaphysical, Anti Detective and Metanarrative Crime Fiction in Rivera Garza

"In writing and minutely narrating a violent act, do I become implicit?" is one of several questions that Rivera Garza poses herself upon reflection on the act of producing her *noir* (in

Close, *Contemporary* 55).¹⁷ When transferring the description of a murder and a corpse from fiction to reality and then reading it, authors and readers might be partaking in the murder, allowing room for the serial killer's obsession with looking from within.¹⁸ In an attempt to distance herself from reproducing the erotic glamour experienced by the killer, and mindful of how her appropriation of the genre should contain an ethical attitude towards the rewriting of pain and violence on the Other's body, Rivera Garza incorporates a two-layered reading in her work: textual and intertextual (Alicino 167). She reaches out to other works, authors and genres, including journalism –chronicles and the *Nota roja*–, the fantastic and the phantasmagorical genres, but also to photography, museum-like interactions, films and musical references (Alicino 159 and 161).

La muerte me da inaugurates the metanarrative, intertextual and literary intergeneric game of reality and fiction to which Rivera Garza is prone.¹⁹ Appearing for the first time, her female detective –an unnamed *Detective*, working in the Mexican Department of Homicide Investigations, with the help of her young male *Asistente*– investigates the castration and murder of four men. By them, a killer leaves a significant clue: notes with verses extracted from Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik's *Árbol de Diana* (*Diana's Tree*, 1962). The title of the novel is a cryptic message written by Pizarnik in a diary entry of January 1963, addressing her suicidal thoughts: “your constant games with suicide imply nothing more than a very high sexual vocation. It is true, death takes me right in the middle of sex” (553).²⁰ The textual link between reality and fiction is latent from the very onset, when Rivera Garza makes her entrance as an alter ego, a diegetic witness who finds the first victim. She does not only become the detective's *Informante* (informer) but also, like in real life, Rivera Garza acts as an academic on comparative literature and expert on Pizarnik's poetry. The fourth chapter of her novel even comprises the academic essay “El anhelo de la prosa” (“The Longing for Prose”) in which Rivera Garza's analysis of Pizarnik's diaries exposes her conflictive attitude towards prose and poetry writing (Alicino 82).²¹ There is another remarkable instance of how Rivera Garza intertwines genres, life and fiction, engaging readers with a ludic detective game. Simultaneously to the publication of the novel, Rivera Garza worked on the printing of a homonymous collection of poems, under the pseudonym of Ana-Marie Blanco, whom she presents as a reader obsessed with Pizarnik's poetry, and the alleged murderer of the crimes investigated in the novel (Rosado Marrero 80 and 86).²²

Both the continuum between real life and fiction and the intertwining of writer, murderer and detective equally transpire in her highly-experimental novel *Los males de la taiga* (*The Taiga Syndrome*, 2012), where her detective has become a crime fiction writer.²³ Pausing

her activity, she undertakes a new case to locate the whereabouts of a woman who has gone missing with a man in the Eurasian Taiga, and whom she eventually finds with the help of an unusual sidekick, a translator who helps her understand the language of the forest. His presence is indicative of both Rivera Garza and her detective's inquisitiveness about the language, which, in turn, manifests the liminal and fragmentary nature of the novel and its two main recurrent topics. Firstly, the story is constructed upon metaphorical arguments and metanarrative discourses on to what extent reality and imagination of said reality can be reconciled. Secondly, there exists a reflection on the relationship and comprehension of the traditional writing techniques and those of the digital era (Castro Ricalde 52-60; Alicino 183-85). Intertextuality occupies a relevant space because of the reinterpretation of traditional fables, like Hansel and Gretel, Red Riding Hood, and Tom Thumb, and the addition of fantastic elements, which leads to a feeling of subversion and instability (Alicino 190). In addition, intertextuality gives way to intermediality, with the novel re-elaborating the crime genre as a simulacrum of itself, enriched by the Spanish artist Carlos Maiques's illustrations and a playlist, all of which convokes the simultaneous presence of text, image and audio (Castro Ricalde 54, Alicino 183 and 187).

Several intertextual references –allusions to her own work and to others– are likewise retrieved in four crime short stories of her collection *La frontera más distante*, with which Rivera Garza makes readers reflect on the violence against the human body: “Simple placer. Puro placer” (“Simple Pleasure. Pure Pleasure”), “Estar a mano” (“To Be at Hand”), “El perfil de él” and “El último signo” (“Last Sign”).²⁴ A strong intertextual, cross-reference to let readers establish connections between her works is the presence of her detective, a literary strategy that Cécile Quintana terms as “el-lector-de-Rivera-Garza” (“the-Rivera-Garza’s-reader;” Quintana 139). In addition, the narrator of these short stories reiterates full sentences of *La muerte me da* and, anticipating *El mal de la taiga*, conjures up a realm of imagination and undefined settings in distant exotic places, which are interspaced, alongside inclusion of whispers, secrets, echoes, with reality –for instance, in “Simple placer. Puro placer,” there are allusions to narcotraffic violence in the Mexican border and impunity. Rivera Garza also problematizes pain appropriation, writing about tortured and mutilated bodies, as highlighted in *La muerte me da* and nonfictional texts like *Dolerse: Textos desde un país herido* (*Grieving: Dispatches from a Wounded Country*, 2011). The four short stories abound in more textual and intermedial references beyond her own work. For instance, in “Estar a mano,” Rivera Garza alludes to famine and cannibalism in Joseph Conrad's denunciation of barbaric colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and to the poems by Paul Celan in *Death Fugue* (1948), considered by critics

as a master in the representation of tragedy and pain in Nazi concentration camps, but she also brings to presence the picture of a mutilated hand by American journalist John Kenneth Turner, likewise condemning atrocities committed during the *Porfiriato* and the Revolution (Alicino 169-172).

Intertwining Real Life and Fiction in “El perfil de él”²⁵

Following “Estar a mano”, the third short story of *La frontera más distante*, “El perfil de él,” returns readers to war and regional conflict. Rivera Garza’s detective finds herself in the “Ciudad-Más-Antigua” (Most-Ancient-City), endeavoring to resolve who had murdered an unnamed female poet, the “Poeta,” whose fictionalized life snippets point to Castellanos, Mexican ambassador in Israel from 1971 to 1974. The instigator to reopen the case is the poet’s sister, who is adamant that “the perfect crime had occurred seventeen years earlier” (González Arias 10; Rivera Garza, “El perfil” 142).²⁶ As Castellanos’s death occurred on 7th August 1974, this places the Detective in Tel Aviv in the summer of 1991.²⁷ Both the poet, Castellanos’s alter ego, and the detective live in tumultuous times. The former was murdered in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur or Forth Arab-Israeli war (6th-25th October 1973), and in those months leading to her death, two massacres had been committed by Palestinian and Pro-Palestinian militias, such as the Kiryat Shmona massacre (April 11th 1974), during which eighteen people, half of them children, were killed, and the Ma’a lot massacre, during which 25 were killed, 22 of them children. The detective would have arrived in the last months of the *First Intifada* (1987-1991), when riots and attacks by Palestinians against Israel for its occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, were coming to an end. It is estimated that more than 1,000 Palestinians were killed by the armed forces or in internal conflict between Palestinian factions; in 1991 alone, nearly 100 were killed by the army (Caplan 150-162).²⁸ In Israel, Castellanos was a prolific writer of opinion articles to *Excélsior*, engaging with current affairs—for instance, with the 1972 kidnapping and murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic games and the 1973 Yom Kippur War—and described some of her daily activities. In her analysis of her Israeli journalism, Nancy J. Ross notices that Castellanos’s narrative voice becomes much stronger in her last year. For instance, in “De cómo hacerse famosa: a pesar de proponérselo” (“On How to Become Famous: Despite Intending to Do So;” June 10, 1974), she reflects on her malleability when moving in and out of the domestic sphere and international politics, as she is preparing to attend a diplomatic dinner offered by the Israeli government to President Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was negotiating with Arab leaders (Ross 80 and 103-104)

Settled in a hotel room from which she can see the one in which the Poet suffered from an accidental death, an alleged electrocution, the detective lives a three-day countdown to unravel the mystery. Her first clue, as facilitated some months before by one of the poet's friends, a printer, constitutes "the personal correspondence of a hired assassin" (González Arias 17; Rivera Garza, "El perfil de él" 150),²⁹ which puts the enquiry upon the possibility that the poet had been murdered by a hired killer with whom she had maintained a love affair. Other clues are provided throughout the narration by means of allusions to *La muerte me da* and to other intertextual references, including also photographic and filmic productions. To begin with, the title reminisces of Castellanos's "Perfil de Esther: el dolor y la esperanza" (1972), on the Jewish concentration camp survivor Esther Levi, a story that makes readers establish a connection with "Estar a mano." In this short story, the narrator also quotes Celan's poetry on dehumanized death, which he experienced as a Holocaust survivor. These textual references contextualize "El perfil de él" in warfare. Additionally, the short story is built upon another "profile," that of a man in a photograph belonging to the poet, an image whom the detective and her assistant believe to be the poet's murderer. Initially, following the printer's clue, the detective identifies him as a waiter and bellboy in the hotel where she is staying. The narrator names him the "Hombre Oscuro" (Dark Man), due to his skin color, "the tawny cast of somebody who has spent many hours under the desert sun" and above all, "because of the lack of clarity of his language" (González Arias 20, Rivera Garza, "El perfil de él" 153).³⁰

The insertion of this picture as fundamental for the resolution of the case also resonates with that of "Estar a mano" and is only one of several instances of Rivera Garza's recurring writing techniques and penchant for intertextuality. Thus, the "Rivera-Garza-reader" is made to feel the anti-detective strategy of repetitive inaccuracies. Like in her other short stories, locations and characters receive generalized names: "la Detective" (the Detective) and her "Asistente" (Assistant) but also the "Poeta" (Poet) to refer to Castellanos's fictional alter ego; the "Hermana" (Sister) to her sister, the "Hombre Oscuro" (Dark Man) to her lover, the "Impresor" (Printer) to her printer and killer's commissioner, all of whom the detective encounters in the Most-Ancient-City, in allusion to the possibly the old town of Jerusalem. As for intertextuality, the narrator connects the two unresolved mysteries involving two poets: Pizarnik, "on that occasion in clues to serial homicides and not as a profession of any of the victims" of *La muerte me da* (González Arias 11, Rivera Garza, "El perfil de él" 142) and the "Poeta" (Poet), Castellano's alter ego, now a victim herself.³¹ This coincidence in professions provokes a reluctant smile in the detective and her immediate desire to start writing, perhaps as a resource to reflect on the unresolved case but, no doubt, as a narrator's technique to paint

a picture of the setting. This metaphysical, metanarrative element, highlighted by Noguero Jiméneez as defining of Rivera Garza's fiction, makes a strong entrance in the story. The detective appears to be training herself to become a fiction writer and, in this sense, "El perfil de él" is the prelude to *El mal de la taiga*, in which she has already established herself as a writer and takes a break to investigate a case under private commission.

Interestingly, the first passage that the detective sits to write is the first image that she had conjured up upon entering the old city, and it echoes Rivera Garza's discourses in *Dolerse*. (2011), on authors' responsibility to take social action and narrate, ethically, what is difficult to be written, and in *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desappropriación (The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation)* (2013). Adopting philosopher Achille Mbembe's argument that modern States exert "necropolitical" power to determine who lives and dies, Rivera Garza identifies Mexican "necroescenarios" –kidnappings, femicides, unpunished massacres–, and wonders on the challenges and the aesthetic and ethical dialogues that writers can entertain surrounded by death (Rivera Garza, *Los muertos indóciles* 19; Alicino 17-18). In "El perfil de él" Rivera Garza centers on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and creates a "necroescenario" of violence and pain in the oldest city, the "Ciudad-Más-Antigua," representative at the same time of any other city (Alicino 178). Thus, in the first passage that the detective writes, she paints the gory portrait of a pile of dead lambs, castrated, beheaded, forming a pool of blood and smelling of rot and acid. This extreme violence against bodies is equated to "human beings. Dead. Many dead" (Rivera Garza, "El perfil de él" 143).³²

In her conveyance of the pain caused by the conflict, Rivera Garza also makes her detective experience and relive the same feelings as the poet. She puts to practice another characteristic of her crime fiction series: the ethical reappropriation and fictionalization of someone else's murder. Thus, upon reading the love letters facilitated by the printer, the detective is described as highly empathetic for she had ached and trembled.³³ This personal identification with the victim emerges in other passages; for instance, when imagining how the electrocuted poet would have laid on the floor, the detective observes "her own body on the tiles, splayed in impossible angles" (González Arias 14; Rivera Garza, "El perfil de él" 147).³⁴ Likewise, upon attendance of a dinner with an Israeli official, where the "Hombre Oscuro" is serving, the detective speculates that the poet first met him at an official dinner—similar, perhaps, to one of those Castellanos describes in her opinion article "De cómo hacerse famosa: a pesar de proponérselo" (June 10, 1974). The detective exchanges glances with the "Hombre Oscuro", feels the same as the poet would have, and interprets that he would have seen the poet

as he is seeing her “with desire, with complicity, and with some fear” (González Arias 24, Rivera Garza, “El perfil de él” 158).³⁵

As for intertextual references, the most significant resurfaces in an intricate scene intertwining the flashbacks of the French film *Hiroshima, mon amour* (*Hiroshima, My Love*; 1959) and a blurry conversation entertained between the “Hombre Oscuro” and the detective, whom he kidnapped momentarily to try and explain what happened to the poet.³⁶ Rivera Garza interspaces several clues to help readers identify the film; the quote “*You kill me: you do me good*” (González Arias 20; Rivera Garza, “El perfil de él” 154),³⁷ chosen to qualify their tortuous relationship, alongside snippets of scenes portraying their romance: “She thinks of the scene of the embrace, in another city also in ruins within a future that is an eternity. Hiroshima. She is reminded of the position of the two bodies, more protective than sexual. Skin on skin. Bones. She remembers the few minutes of absolute happiness” (González Arias 21; Rivera Garza, “El perfil de él” 155).³⁸ The daily presence of destruction and impossibility to forget in the couple’s postwar romance finds resonance with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during which the poet and the “Hombre Oscuro” had developed their relationship. Although he confesses to have fallen in love with the poet, he still acknowledges that, in times of war: “In war we can’t say certain things. We cannot do them” (González Arias 21; Rivera Garza, “El perfil de él” 154).³⁹ What is more, rather than answers this encounter brings forward more questions, particularly after he pronounces a mysterious statement that will haunt the Detective until the very end of the story: “In a war it’s not possible not to kill” (Gonzalez Arias 21 and 27; Rivera Garza, “El perfil de él” 155 and 162).⁴⁰

From then on, the detective seeks to put together all the pieces of the puzzle. She doubts the possibility that the “Hombre Oscuro” had murdered the poet, but she cannot pinpoint his involvement. Perhaps he had spied on her, as the detective understands he had done with her, entering her hotel room and reading papers on her desk. At the end of the story, the detective’s assistant locates a minor, local newspaper piece of information that did not make it to the official report: in the morning of her death the poet and the printer had a final conversation, during which she had told him that she was happy and leaving the country. The detective pictures the immediate aftermath: “the alarm that went off in the Printer’s mind, [his] sudden clarification of [the] situation, and his idea to prevent it all” (González Arias 26; Rivera Garza, “El perfil de él” 161).⁴¹ The enigma “todo” (all) will remain unchallenged, however, the detective is certain that the printer had hired someone to cause the electrocution, presuming that “[i]t must also have been simple to get hold of that kind of help” (González Arias 16; Rivera Garza, “El perfil de él” 161).⁴² In such an antidetective end, the narrator leaves readers

with more questions than answers: whether the “Hombre Oscuro” had been commissioned or knew whom the printer had commissioned, whether the poet and the “Hombre Oscuro” were leaving together, whether the poet was leaving with specific information that could not be revealed, and why the printer, if working for the Israeli secret services, had to kill her and prevent her from leaving.

Conclusion

As epitome of a metaphysical crime short story, the mystery surpasses the experience of its resolution. It is the metanarrative, intertextual element of the short story, not only characteristic of Rivera Garza’s crime fiction series, but also of other Mexican crime fiction writers, that might hold the key to the enigma. In fact, pioneering Mexican woman writer, Bermúdez, and the first story featuring the first female detective in Mexican crime fiction might help us resolve the crime of “El perfil de él.” Just like Taibo II’s killer in *Días de combate* (1976) resorts to Bermúdez’s *Diferentes razones* (1953) to justify his murders, Rivera Garza could be reclaiming the technique of the mistaken identity and the murderer’s provision of false or disorienting clues to incriminate a victim as in Bermúdez’s “Detente, sombra.” Rivera Garza’s intertextual application of these two strategies to her short story would unravel the enigma as follows. Just like in “Detente, sombra” the politician and writer América Fernández had been the wrong target of the killer, the ambassador and poet of “El perfil de él” would have fallen victim to an electrocution that had not been planned for her. Similarly, while in “Detente, sombra” the real target of the killer was the literary critic and lawyer Georgina Banuet, who was accused of Fernández’s crime, in “El perfil de él,” the “Hombre Oscuro” is presented throughout the story as the main suspect of the poet’s death. The printer, possibly the instigator of the “Hombre Oscuro’s” murder in the first place, had provided the detective with misleading clues, including the love letters of a hired killer, so as to cover his tracks.

Notes

1.- The Mexican “Agatha Christie” pioneered several fronts. She was the first woman to earn a law degree, work as litigation attorney and practice law as an *actuaria* (administrative officer) at the Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación. Likewise, she was the first Mexican woman to write a crime fiction novel, *Diferentes razones tiene la muerte* (*Different Reasons Death Has*, 1953), and to create a female detective, who is believed to represent her *alter ego*: María Elena Morán (Orta Curti, Ruiz 47). Bermúdez did not only cultivate the crime genre as evidenced in other collections of short stories, such as *Cuentos herejes* (*Heretical Short Stories*, 1984). She also published the sociological work *La vida familiar del mexicano* (*The Mexicans’ Family Life*, 1955; Trejo Fuentes 3-4) and collaborated in journals and newspapers like *Revista Mujer* (*Woman Journal*), *Cuadernos Americanos* (*American Notebooks*) and *Excélsior* (Ruiz 47).

- 2.- “[I]nigualable en bastantes composiciones;” “Chayo [Rosario] Castellanos [...], quizá la mejor escritora en lo que va de siglo.” Translations are the author’s unless otherwise stated.
- 3.- Vindictas, the publishing project at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México that disseminates the work of Spanish-speaking women writers who were overshadowed by male cultural circuits, re edited *Diferentes razones* in 2021. Dávila’s short stories were compiled by Páginas de Espuma in 2022. This “Tsunami latinoamericano,” a phenomenon of visibilization of Latin American women writers and the unprecedented, continuous increase in the number of contemporary ones, has been reported by academics such as Pacheco Roldán and Lorena Amaro Castro (30-61).
- 4.- “[U]n lugar muy especial a Rosario Castellanos, a ella hay que volver continuamente, como también a [...] Amparo Dávila.”
- 5.- On speculation surrounding her death and the fictionalization of events, see Huntington.
- 6.- Parra Lazcano (783-800) and Ross attest to the increasing interest in Castellanos’s contributions to *Excelsior*.
- 7.- Rivera Garza’s intertextuality, in the form of allusions to other works and artistic productions as well as to her own texts, is widely acknowledged by academics. For a valuable introduction, see Alicino (2022).
- 8.- “[L]a poeta que murió electrocutada, accidentalmente, al tratar de encender una lámpara en Jerusalén.”
- 9.- First published in the *Anuario del Cuento Mexicano*, it eventually gave title to her collection of short stories *Detente, sombra* (1984).
- 10.- See Perucho’s (2024) invaluable bibliographical lists, organized into six categories (novel, short story, essay, theatre, anthologies and internet). Quantity also goes by the hand with quality when it comes to collections of crime fiction short stories. At least four have been shortlisted or awarded a prize, including Elpidia García Delgado’s *El hombre que mató a Dedos Fríos y otros relatos* (*The Man who Killed Cold Fingers and other Short Stories*, 2018, Bellas Artes de Cuento Amparo Dávila Prize), Laura Baeza’s *Época de cerezos* (*Time of Cherry Trees*, 2019, Nacional de Narrativa Gerardo Cornejo Prize) and *Una grieta en la noche* (*A Crack at Night*, 2022, shortlisted for VII Ribera del Duero Prize) and Dahlia de la Cerda’s *Perras de reserva* (*Reservoir Bitches*, 2022, Joven Comala Prize) (Perucho 195).
- 11.- “[E]l misterio, la investigación y la idea de justicia,” alongside the writer’s obligation to “confundir y a convencer a un tiempo a sus lectores sin vulnerar en lo mínimo las reglas de la lógica.” Bermúdez also problematized the genre in studies like “Ensayo sobre la literatura policiaca” (“Essay on Crime Literature,” 1948) and “¿Qué es lo policiaco en la narrativa?” (“What is the Detective Element in Narrative?,” 1987). For a brief analysis, see Herrera 74.
- 12.- Castellanos and Bermúdez’s emergence as women writers in Mexico in the mid-twentieth century, whilst struggling to carve for themselves a professional life that detached them from their expected domestic domain, is discussed by Ruiz (2014).
- 13.- Studies on Bermúdez’s short story include Cázares (1995), Holguín Pérez and Herrera (2020).
- 14.- Ruiz believes this setting constitutes a fictional parallel to Bermúdez’s biography, in particular, her own female version of the right-wing political party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* [Institutional Revolutionary Party]) Mexican intelligentsia, where she worked as Secretary of *Acción Social* (Social Action; Ruiz 47; Herrera 78).
- 15.- In her analysis of “Un cuarto en Ámsterdam” (“A Room in Amsterdam”) in *Detente, sombra* (1984), Rivera Ramírez (117-124) argues that Bermúdez also incorporates references to ghost stories, legends like “La mulata de Córdoba” (“The Mulatta from Cordoba”) and H. P. Lovecraft’s witch Keziah Mason in “The Dreams in the Witch House.”
- 16.- Noguero Jiméñez draws on Stefano Tani’s analysis of the genre in *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (1984).

17. - Rivera Garza's *noir* comprise *La muerte me da* (2007), four short stories of *La frontera más distante* (2008), including "El perfil de él," on which this study focuses, and *El mal de la taiga* (2012). For an introductory analysis of her crime fiction series, see Alicino's fourth and seventh chapters, 2022.
- 18.- This ethical reflection on the representation of violence surfaces in her nonfiction works *Dolerse: Textos desde un país herido* (2011) and *Los muertos indóciles: Necroescrituras y desapropiación* (2013) (Alicino 193-95, Close, "The Latin" 14).
- 19.- Studies on this text are numerous; for an exhaustive study of this novel and its contextualization, see Close (2014), Alicino (79-96) and Romano Hurtado (1-34).
- 20.- "[T]us juegos constantes con el suicidio no implican más que una muy alta vocación sexual. Es verdad, la muerte me da en pleno sexo."
- 21.- This essay provides clues on the meaning of the mutilated corpses, which would stand for a metaphor of Pizarnik's wish to write prose. Like short and broken sentences of poetic prose, these victims deconstruct and recreate a dismembered body of a man in a page (Alicino 163).
- 22.- The short collection was published as *La muerte me da por Anne-Marie Bianco (Death Takes Me by Anne-Marie Bianco)* (2007). Other collections by Rivera Garza include, among others, *Los textos del yo (The Texts of the Self)* (2005) and *Me llamo cuerpo que no está (My Name is Body that is Not Here, 2023)*.
- 23.- A comparative analysis between both novels is offered by Sánchez Becerril (79-109).
- 24.- For introductory analysis of these texts, see Cantú (349-367), Macía Rodríguez (61-81 and Alicino (168-182).
- 25.- Translated into English by Francisca González Arias, see Rivera Garza (2023).
- 26.- "[S]e había llevado a cabo un crimen perfecto diecisiete años atrás." Henceforth, translations of the short story belong to González Arias, see Rivera Garza (2023).
- 27.- Rivera Garza entangles reality with fiction as Castellanos did not have a sister. Interestingly, this story line is to be found in *El invencible*, in which Rivera Garza reopens her sister's case by requesting her lost police file and unveiling Liliana's "archive": her letters, notebooks and notes. Other coincidences in both texts can be pointed out. For instance, whilst the detective of "El perfil de él" becomes a writer, Rivera Garza turns into a detective, aiming to locate the runaway murderer. In addition, in both the short story and the memoir, Rivera Garza unearths evidence or early signs of the risks to which both Liliana and the fictional Castellanos were exposed before their femicide. In "El perfil de él," it could be argued that, in the performance of her role as an ambassador during the height of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she did not take enough precautions and fell victim to spies.
- 28.- Aside from her diplomatic duties, Castellanos taught Latin American literature at the Hebrew University. She also published *Poesía no eres tú (You are not Poetry, 1972)* and her collection of essays *Mujer que sabe latín... (Woman who knows Latin... 1973)*, in which she highlighted women's intellectual legacy, and wrote her famous play *El eterno femenino (The Eternal Feminine)* which was not produced until after her death (Clark 204; Ross 74).
- 29.- "[L]a correspondencia sentimental de un asesino a sueldo."
- 30.- "[E]sa pátina anaranjada de los que han pasado muchas horas en el Desierto," "por la oscuridad de su lenguaje."
- 31.- "[E]n las pistas de los homicidios seriales y no en la profesión de ninguna de las víctimas."
- 32.- "[S]eres humanos. Muertos. Muchos muertos."
- 33.- The original text reads: "Se había dolido. Había temblado" (Rivera Garza, "El perfil de él" 150).
- 34.- "[S]u propio cuerpo sobre las baldosas, repartido en ángulos imposibles."
- 35.- "[C]on deseo, con complicidad, con algo de temor."
- 36.- An outstanding film of the French New Wave, the playwright of this black and white romantic drama was written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais. For a

translation of the script into English, see Duras. Rivera Garza has acknowledged her penchant for Marguerite Duras's works as foundational readings whilst a university student in Mexico City and for her own training as a writer. Duras's perceptions and writing style in *No More (C'est tout)* is one of the few texts that brings her closest to feeling the act of dying (Price 55; Sutherland n.p.).

37.- "Tú me destruyes: tú me haces bien." In several passages of Duras's playwright, the French actress reiterates to her Japanese lover "You destroy me. You're so good for me" (Duras 25 and 77).

38.- "La escena del abrazo, en otra ciudad también derruida dentro de un futuro que es en realidad una eternidad. Hiroshima. Le recuerda la posición más protectora que sexual de los dos cuerpos. Piel sobre piel. Huesos. Recuerda los pocos minutos de absoluta Felicidad."

39.- "No podemos decir ciertas cosas. No podemos hacerlas."

40.- "En una guerra no es posible no matar."

41.- "[L]a alarma encendida dentro de la cabeza del Impresor, su súbito esclarecimiento de la situación, su idea de impedirlo todo."

42. "[D]ebió haber sido sencillo también hacerse de este tipo de ayuda."

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Rewriting Childhood Trauma: Healing in Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's Lesbian Crime Fiction

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Abstract: Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's crime fiction short stories chronicle the gender-based violence epidemic in Puerto Rico by giving protagonism to those who often remain invisible in the media's coverage of the epidemic, such as LGBTQIA+ and the Afro-Puerto Rican community. By bringing her activism to the written page and providing alternative solutions rooted in non-heteropatriarchal love and feminist justice, Arroyo Pizarro establishes alternative models to the nuclear heteropatriarchal family in her work. Using the lesbian crime fiction genre in "Después de martillar" ("After Hammering") and "La santiguadora" ("The Healer"), Arroyo Pizarro focuses on girl victims of sexual abuse who reemerge as avengers and justice makers. The author employs the figure of the child witness not only to condemn sexual abuse by eliminating victimizers, but also to examine the spaces of healing and the communities of care that are being created by survivors. These spaces replace traditional nuclear family models while also problematizing what sort of justice is an adequate response to the crisis of child sexual abuse in Puerto Rico.

Keywords: Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, Puerto Rican crime fiction, child abuse, child witness, healing narratives.

Resumen: Los cuentos de ficción criminal de Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro narran la epidemia de violencia de género en Puerto Rico dando protagonismo a aquellos que a menudo permanecen invisibles en la cobertura mediática de la epidemia, como la comunidad LGBTQIA+ y la comunidad afropuertorriqueña. Al llevar su activismo a la página escrita y ofrecer soluciones alternativas basadas en el amor no-heteropatriarcal y la justicia feminista, Arroyo Pizarro establece modelos alternativos a la familia nuclear heteropatriarcal en sus obras. Utilizando el género de la ficción criminal lesbiana en "Después de martillar" y "La santiguadora," Arroyo Pizarro se centra en las niñas que han sido víctimas de abuso sexual que resurgen como vengadoras y ajusticiadoras. La autora emplea la figura de las niñas testigos no sólo para condenar el abuso sexual al eliminar a lxs verdugxs, pero también para examinar los espacios de sanación y las comunidades de cuidado que están creando lxs sobrevivientxs. Estos espacios reemplazan los modelos tradicionales de familia nuclear y al mismo tiempo problematizan qué tipo de justicia es una respuesta adecuada a la crisis de abuso sexual infantil en Puerto Rico

Palabras clave: Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, policial/noir portorriqueño, abuso infantil, menores testigos, narrativas de sanación

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Introduction

In contemporary Puerto Rican crime fiction, especially in noir narratives published by women writers, the Puerto Rican heteropatriarchal, nuclear family structure has become a main target. The myth of *la gran familia*, a prevalent narrative that emerged to create a sense of Puerto Rican unity against the threat of the United States' influence, was founded upon the idea of "familial unity under the authority of a 'benevolent' father figure" (Moreno, *Family Matters* 67). This foundational narrative, which Moreno claims continues to inform Puerto Rican fiction to this day, was and continues to be "grounded on principles of exclusion. Women, blacks, and more recently, Puerto Rican migrants in the U.S., have all been marginalized and symbolically excluded from the national imaginary as a result of this myth" ("Family Matters" 76). Although the myth of *la gran familia* has come under scrutiny in Puerto Rican literature since the 1970s, twenty-first century Puerto Rican *noir* fiction or *noir boricua*, a term coined by Osvaldo Di Paolo Harrison, often combines with the horror or fantasy genre to unmask and denounce an idealized family structure riddled with *machismo* and gender-based violence.¹ Put simply, contemporary Puerto Rican *noir* fiction exposes the violent, often femicidal, foundations of *la gran familia*. As Persephone Braham suggests in her study of Ana Lydia Vega's neo gothic crime fiction, "Puerto Rico's national vice is silence about certain aspects of its history and identity" ("Ana Lydia Vega" 444) like the exclusionary nature of the cult of *la gran familia*.² This silencing has long extended to violence against women and children, especially in the heteropatriarchal nuclear family structure. For this very reason, crime fiction, due to its investigative and revelatory nature, has been used to examine "what power wants to keep hidden: the unofficial fact, the surveillance network as well as the hierarchical structure implicit in the social body,"³ according to José Ángel Rosado (361).⁴

Thanks to the work of feminist organizations, the gender violence crisis and the femicide epidemic is finally receiving governmental attention as well as exposure in the national media, which led to Governor Pedro Pierluisi Urrutia's declaration of a State of Emergency against gender-based violence in Puerto Rico on January 24, 2021.⁵ Still in effect today, the Puerto Rican State of Emergency has been criticized for being a performative measure that does not address the systemic and intersectional nature of this violence.⁶ In response to the government's inaction and negligence and the State of Emergency's insufficiency against the gender violence and femicide crises, feminist organizations like the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción (La Cole) have called for a return to the streets. Most recently, La Cole organized the March 8th protest of "Nosotras por nuestras vidas" (Us for Our Lives) because as one of the organization's spokespersons, Zoan Dávila Roldán, explains,

despite the existence of the State of Emergency, and “in the face of the State’s continuous and sustained negligence and indifference, we have been living by protecting and caring for each other. In that sense, it has been us for our lives” (See Torres Nieves).⁷ This idea of establishing communities of care and solidarity to denounce and combat both the gender-based violence crisis and its silencing has made its way into the contemporary Puerto Rican literary sphere, where authors such as Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, Ana María Fuster Lavín, Mayra Santos-Febres, Ana Teresa Toro, and Vanessa Vilches Norat, among others, are representing the necessity to reimagine spaces of resistance and healing.

An author and activist known for denouncing systems of social and literary erasure in Puerto Rico, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro’s work, as both an author and an activist, reengages Puerto Rican history from an anti patriarchal and antinormative point of view. Arroyo Pizarro’s literary corpus combats the invisibility of certain marginalized groups, most notably the particular erasure and invisibility of the LGBTQIA+ and the Afro-Puerto Rican community.⁸ Stemming from this space of insurgency and resistance, Arroyo Pizarro utilizes the crime genre to write against the gender-based violence and femicide crises in Puerto Rico, specifically employing lesbian crime fiction to disrupt the traditional male-centered genre.⁹ Sally Munt proposes that “[l]esbian crime fiction provides a site of struggle over definitions of justice, social status, and sexual identity, positing the lesbian at the centre of meaning dissemination” (140). The lesbian body, whether victim, criminal, or detective, takes centerstage in these representations because lesbian crime fiction “confers a degree of agency upon the outsider, who challenges the status quo through a variety of erotic, didactic and parodic interventions” (Plain 217). For Gill Plain, lesbian crime fiction “represents the highest or furthest point of the genre’s possibility. More than any other appropriation or development of the formula, it has followed narrative possibilities to their extreme” (217), for it undermines the male-centered characteristics of the genre like its “masculine hegemony” or its “compulsory heterosexuality” (218). I argue that Arroyo Pizarro provides alternative solutions to the gender-based violence and femicide crises by giving visibility to communities of care and solidarity that are founded upon non-heteropatriarchal love and individual forms of feminist justice. In “Después de martillar” (“After Hammering”) (2012) and “La santiguadora” (“The Healer”) (2020), Arroyo Pizarro focuses on the child victim of sexual abuse, who reemerges as a woman seeking justice and revenge. The author employs the figure of the girl witness not only to condemn sexual abuse by eliminating victimizers, but also to examine the spaces of lesbian healing and justice that are being created by survivors. “Después de martillar” and “La santiguadora” investigate the rise in violence against children, specifically child sexual abuse within the nuclear family

unit. As I demonstrate, Arroyo Pizarro's lesbian crime fiction employs characters that double as both victims (girls) and criminals (women), in this way problematizing what sort of justice is an adequate response to the crisis of child sexual abuse in Puerto Rico while exploring the undoing of traditional nuclear family models and the male-centered crime fiction genre.

According to Braham's study of crime fiction, "The traditional function of the genre is palliative: to expose, explain and remedy (through punishment) the social injuries caused by evil and injustice" ("Problemas de género," "Gender Problems" 34).¹⁰ In the case of Arroyo Pizarro's "Después de martillar" and "La santiguadora" studied here, however, while crimes against children are exposed and explicated, there is no punishment within the legal system. In fact, impunity for victimizers guarantees that justice for victims is not possible. It is only through acts of justice making, of avenging this violence, that abusers are punished and that some form of reparation takes place for the childhood trauma experienced.

In her study of the gender violence epidemic in the archipelago, Andrea González-Ramírez explains that "Puerto Rico is fundamentally a conservative, *machista* place. It's not rare to hear that a woman is at fault for being abused..." which extends to childhood sexual abuse as well. As González-Ramírez suggests, gender-based violence in Puerto Rico is routinely silenced first in the domestic space and then at the institutional or governmental level, so that it can continue to remain as an invisible problem. For this reason, it is significant that the child, specifically the girl witness, who endured the childhood trauma is central to these lesbian crime fiction stories. By child/girl witness, I am employing Elizabeth Marshall and Leigh Gilmore's term referring to "examples of life writing [that] present the child as a testimonial figure and childhood trauma as a central site through which authors seek to represent violence and elicit ethical witness from diverse publics" (4). As Marshall and Gilmore ask, "when justice from authorities and institutions is denied, and when the impossibility and necessity of bearing witness coincide, how do women use the figure of the child in life writing, or other allied testimonial performances, to seek justice?" (2). Although Marshall and Gilmore employ the term for autobiographical accounts of childhood trauma, I am proposing that their definition can extend to fictional accounts where the child functions as the active testimonial site they describe to force audiences to witness both the abuse endured as well as the lasting aftereffects of childhood trauma. In Arroyo Pizarro's "Después de martillar" and "La santiguadora," the girl witness functions as a narrative site, as a "working through," to use Susan Brison's terminology, of past trauma to explore alternative forms of justice, care, and healing outside of the legal system (72).

A Return to Origins: Revisiting Childhood Trauma in Arroyo Pizarro’s “Después de martillar”

A combination of the crime and fantasy genre, “Después de martillar,” part of Arroyo Pizarro’s collection titled *Lesbianas en clave caribeña* (*Lesbians in a Caribbean Key* 2012), narrates the encounter between the adult protagonist and avenger, Diana Grande, Diana the adult, and Diana Pequeña, the girl victim and witness, who endured years of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather. In this story, Diana Grande goes back in time and protects her childhood (abused) self by murdering her stepfather, thus ending her rape and rewriting her childhood trauma. “Después de martillar” begins in the space of the lesbian bedroom, already defying the conventions of traditional male-centered crime fiction. As Diana Grande ignores the woman who sleeps beside her while hugging herself, a flashback episode ensues: “She places her palms on her shoulders, twists her legs to curl up, squeezes her thighs together with the fervor of a braid. She recognizes that moment” (13).¹¹ Diana Grande recognizes this moment because it is a promise that she made to herself that she would return in time to hug and protect this childhood version of herself against her rapist: “There is a man who uses a hammer. The girl extracts herself from the pain she feels and releases karma. Pain at the meeting point of each leg. Beating button” (13).¹² The narrative represents Diana Pequeña’s rape as her stepfather waits for her mother to leave for work, and “hammers [into her] as if Diana were made of wood” (14).¹³ Without needing to go into graphic details of the violation, the short story emphasizes the trauma of her rape, of the suffering inflicted.

In this moment of violation, the narrative illustrates how Diana Pequeña closes her eyes, and looks at spiders sliding down the wall while making a promise to herself:

She promises that when she grows up, she will go back in time. Diana Grande will arrive right at that point in the story. She will move closer to her ear. She will swear to protect the little girl, to rid her of this wicked man. Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from all evil. She will break the neck of the man with the hammer. She will enjoy his agonizing salivation. She will count every gland of his hanging, nauseating tongue as she witnesses his suffocation. (14)¹⁴

Quoting parts of the Our Father, found in Matthew 6:13, Diana Grande will return in this precise moment to end Diana Pequeña’s suffering, to rid her of all evil, and to put an end to the cruelty of her rape and rapist. Different from the Lord’s prayer, which asks God to lead one away from temptation and sin, Diana’s promise to herself drives her to sin, to murder her victimizer. Moreover, the spiders that Diana Pequeña watches glide down the wall also

underscore this idea of metamorphosis. The spiders foreshadow her transformation from victim to survivor and justice maker as Diana Grande. This episode not only details the murder of Diana's victimizer, but also the pleasure in witnessing his painful struggle as the narrative communicates that she delights in her stepfather's agony as he suffocates.

Bethania Guerra de Lemos claims that "the protagonist does not expect a savior to free her from a past-present marked by violence and pain, since patriarchy has taught her that there is no possible salvation outside of the resistance forged by oneself" ("Extraño, familiar y violento," "Strange, Familiar, and Violent" 59).¹⁵ As we learn in this flashback sequence, Diana's childhood trauma galvanized her as she takes self-defense classes, learns how to fight, and inflict harm first as an adolescent and later as a young adult, which allows her to become her own protector in this flashback episode. A counternarrative to conventional narratives of child sexual abuse that focus on the figure of the vulnerable girl, "Después de martillar" represents Diana Pequeña's moment of activation, this moment of promising to punish her abuser without the need for a patriarchal savior.

In fact, the narrative clarifies that Diana Grande returns not simply as an avenger to this childhood abuse, but as her personal bushido, her own personal samurai (14-15). This emphasis on the bushido code is particularly important as she offers unwavering loyalty to Diana Pequeña, the one she vows to protect above all else. This is clear when Diana Grande offers a protection prayer to Diana Pequeña and repeats the final verse of the Our Father, acknowledging that Diana Pequeña is her master above all else and that she is duty-bound to her as her warrior (15). According to Inazo Nitobé's *Bushido* (Teibi Publishing Company, 1908), samurai warriors' lives were dominated by principles called bushido: justice, courage, compassion, respect, integrity, honor, loyalty, and self-control. Diana Grande's duty, following the moral code of the bushido, is to seek justice for Diana Pequeña, even if this requires taking a life.

Diana Grande's return as her own protector signifies both putting an end to Diana Pequeña's current victimization but also punishing her stepfather for the trauma caused as she will develop "phobias, behavioral traumas, excessive distrust with each and every one of her partners. No one will ever be able to penetrate her, treat her with seductive longing" (14).¹⁶ As Diana's transformation from victim to avenger-warrior is complete, the narrative specifies how a rageful Diana Grande continues strangling her stepfather even as he lies lifeless before her. The investigation into her stepfather's murder leads to no results, and Diana Pequeña is not considered a suspect because she does not have the strength to have caused his death by strangulation. Countering narratives of sexual abuse that guarantee impunity for the abuser

(Segato 28), Arroyo Pizarro's "Después de martillar" rewrites this narrative by combining crime with fantasy literature, allowing for the childhood victim to reemerge as both a survivor and a justice maker.

The murder of the protagonist's stepfather leads to happier memories, to a "rebirth," a "nuevo reinicio" (15). What this means for Diana is the ability to reimagine a childhood that is not dominated by victimization, pain, and trauma. Diana Grande rescues her own childhood from a victimizer that robbed her of it, showcasing the power of a victim/survivor/justice maker both to repair and to reinvent the self. From the horror of her trauma, where the nuclear family home is associated with violence, rape, and pain, a division or a splitting of the self occurs according to Guerra de Lemos. For Guerra de Lemos, "the figure of the double... will be a central mechanism in the process of recovering the power taken away by sexual violence and the rebirth of the protagonist, who constructs her journey in search of justice in a symbolic and physical way" ("Resurgir entre lagartos," Reappearing among Lizards 69).¹⁷ While Guerra de Lemos analyzes the division or splitting of Diana into Diana Grande and Diana Pequeña, my focus is on the coexistence of both Diana Grande and Diana Pequeña, as both criminal and victim. Put differently, I argue that this story narrates the reencounter with the childhood self and the return to origins that takes place to pave the way for the protagonist's rebirth, signalling the ability to rewrite childhood trauma when one has been the victim of sexual abuse. The short story is a narrative "working through," to quote Brison, of Diana's abuse and trauma through this flashback sequence (72). As readers, we witness Diana "work through" her childhood sexual abuse and resulting trauma by being able to demonstrate self-compassion to herself (to both her childhood and adult self). This act of self-love and compassion frames the narrative as the story begins and the flashback ends with the use of the same phrase: "[she] looks at the sky in her room. She decides to hug herself" (13, 15).¹⁸

According to Adrienne Maree Brown, "We need to learn how to practice love, such that care—for ourselves and others—is understood as political resistance and cultivating resilience" (59). Diana Grande's return to her childhood abused self is a story of resistance and resilience because it is a return to origins. For this reason, the narrative compares this process both to sea turtles and to lizards who can find their way home even after traveling for miles away from where they were born.¹⁹ In "Después de martillar," Diana's return "home" signifies reencountering and reengaging with her childhood self, being able to mourn a childhood filled with victimization and trauma so as to repair and heal herself. The lesbian crime story ends, however, with Diana getting close to the female body that she previously ignored during the beginning of this narrative. After her return "home", now to the present, she can, as the

narrative tells us, “[d]isembark, finally, in an orgasm that does not strangle itself” (15).²⁰ Plain argues that “[t]o insert the erotic lesbian body into the appropriated space of the crime narrative in consequence becomes a political statement, both in terms of the ‘external’ discourse of crime and the ‘internal’ discourse of feminism” (207). The lesbian bedroom in this crime fiction short story becomes a space of healing and sexual rebirth, a form of erotic justice.

For Arroyo Pizarro, indignation and rage provides a way forward, a charting out of a space of resistance and more significantly, afro-healing (*Afrohistoria* 83-84). Arguably, “Después de martillar” is an exercise in the sort of afro-healing that Arroyo Pizarro defines in “Decalogue of Radical Afrofeminist Writing,” where she contends that eroticism is also a form of political activation because the erotic can be connected to a healing of the self.²¹ For this reason, Arroyo Pizarro explains that she makes use of intentional eroticism, of writing from the clitoris, of writing from a space of masturbation to care for the self and protect its subjectivity and agency (233-34). Using the lesbian crime fiction model, Arroyo Pizarro’s “Después de martillar” employs the girl witness that doubles as justice maker and avenger to reject what Gilmore and Marshall call the “politics of rescue and its grounding in the insufficiencies and incapacities of vulnerable girls who never quite become women” (15). Instead, “Después de martillar” represents a fictional and therapeutic self-rescuing that depicts Diana Pequeña/Diana Grande as an agential subject that resists and rebels against childhood victimization and its resulting trauma. By ending her short story with a lesbian orgasm that celebrates the lesbian erotic body, Arroyo Pizarro both disrupts and destabilizes the heteropatriarchal nuclear family model and the conventions of the male-centered crime genre.

Reimagining the Puerto Rican Family Within Prison Walls: Arroyo Pizarro’s “La santiguadora”

Divided into twelve chapters, Arroyo Pizarro’s “La santiguadora,” part of her 2020 short story collection, *Calle de la Resistencia (Street of the Resistance)*, focuses on the women’s prison in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico, and the community they have created under the guidance of Olodumare, who functions as their Yoruba leader and priestess. The title, which refers to the protagonist, is a woman who has the special ability to *curar*, to cure and heal physical ailments using her hands as well as prayers. The protagonist explains that she was renamed Olodumare in the Vega Alta women’s prison because “[f]or many of the prisoners, I am, in effect, the Supreme Creator” (18).²² As women enter the prison as abused and disposable bodies, they are renamed and baptized by Olodumare and their new prison family. Instead of the suffering that is described outside of the prison walls, inside the prison, “full lives are enjoyed and entire universes are managed” (32).²³ Though criminalized by the Puerto Rican

justice system, these women have found a haven and a feminist lesbian utopia in the Vega Alta prison. As they are initiated into Olodumare's family, they also accept that justice does not exist and that they are the justice makers (32).

Although the protagonist of "La santiguadora" is Olodumare, her story is intertwined with that of Malena Pérez, renamed by her prison family Oshosi Pérez, the next inmate to be released from the Vega Alta prison.²⁴ Oshosi's mission is to kill Bruno Quiñones for the rape of his stepdaughter, Mirka, the niece of the red-headed prison guard, Ramírez. Although Olodumare emphasizes that she does not help the police, she accepts Ramírez's petition because "Mirka is eleven years old. She has been raped and sodomized by her stepfather since she was six" (38).²⁵ Since Oshosi is waiting to be released and Olodumare knows that she wants to return to her girlfriend and prison family, she asks Oshosi to carry out this mission on her behalf (22). Like Olodumare in the Yoruba religion who uses other orishas or deities as emissaries, the protagonist in "La santiguadora" has other inmates, specifically those being released, carry out the missions outside of the Vega Alta prison for her.²⁶

Upon accepting Olodumare's mission to murder Bruno Quiñones, Olodumare kisses Oshosi's hands "as a sign of veneration for her missing index finger" (39).²⁷ We first learn about Oshosi's missing index finger in chapter one since the story opens with a description of how Oshosi uses her left hand for cooking or writing. Despite the absence of her index finger, the narrative recounts how Oshosi has been able to shoot any gun using her middle finger, her favorite being the Smith & Wesson 952, which is the gun she uses to murder Bruno Quiñones (16). As Olodumare kisses Oshosi's hands, the narrative pauses to recount the significance behind the loss of Oshosi's index finger:

Oshosi was born with that finger. The day she turned thirteen she raised the voice of alarm at home, that her grandfather had gotten her pregnant, but no one believed her. Not only did they not believe her, but her grandfather gave her such a beating that she lost the baby. The afternoon that she returned from the hospital, her grandfather chopped off her finger with an electric saw that he used to cut wood. "So that you don't dare signal me out for anything again," he told her. (39)²⁸

The absence of Oshosi's index finger is tied to her current mission of bringing a child's rapist to justice. Like Mirka, whose rapist is her stepfather, Oshosi also suffered a violation at the hands of one of her family members. Just two years older than the eleven-year-old Mirka, Oshosi's rape resulted in a pregnancy that forced her to testify against her grandfather, her rapist, who both caused her miscarriage and then cut off her index finger for signalling him as

her abuser. Reminiscent of “Después de martillar,” the figure of the child as a site of trauma becomes central to the story and now activates a new form of justice that rebels against a current system that guarantees impunity for abusers. Unable to bring her own rapist to justice, Oshosi, on Olodumare’s orders, now carries out a personal form of justice outside of the law to protect and save Mirka, in this way rewriting her (both Mirka and Oshosi’s) narrative of sexual abuse.

After her release, Oshosi first interviews the child victim, Mirka, who at first hesitates before speaking to her. Oshosi explains to Mirka that she operates under a different system where justice, specifically that of the female deities, is indeed valued. Oshosi, therefore, takes on the role of the lesbian investigator in this short story. According to Barbara Wilson, “[t]o take the role of investigator means to open the doors upon silence, to name the crimes, to force the confessions, to call for justice and see justice done. And even, sometimes, to take justice into one’s own hands” (222). For this reason, Oshosi offers Mirka not only the space to testify and denounce her abuse, but also to tell the whole truth, to tell her truth: “The problem is that Mirka tells the whole truth. All of it. Even the times when at seven, eight, and nine years old she alerted her mother to what was happening and she ignored her story” (41).²⁹ We learn that Mirka had previously denounced her abuser over the years to her mother, Selena, but as the story emphasizes, her testimony was silenced and ignored. Promised this new testimonial space, Mirka as a girl witness once again tells her whole truth, but now to a woman who not only promises to end her abuse, but who has also been a victim of the same crime. As a girl witness who denounced her abuser but was punished for it, Oshosi, as the narrative stresses, “wished she hadn’t found out about that” (41).³⁰ The narrative underscores that Selena, by denying her daughter’s testimony, allowed Mirka’s abuse to continue unimpeded for over four years. Like Mirka, Oshosi’s voicing of her truth only led to further violence and trauma due to her family’s complicity. “La santiguadora” stresses that there is more than one victimizer in Mirka’s story—the first being her stepfather and the second being her mother. Arroyo Pizarro’s lesbian crime fiction accentuates the effects that a family’s complicity can have in crimes of sexual abuse against children, especially when children have denounced their victimizers but have been subsequently ignored.

Following Mirka’s testimony, Oshosi waits for Bruno Quiñones outside of the mayor’s office, where he works, and as soon as he exits the building, she fires her gun using her *dedo corazón*, the middle finger of her right hand. Without concealing herself, Oshosi approaches Bruno, who she has shot in the leg, and fires again, hitting him in the chest and then in the throat, so he stops screaming. As he chokes on his own blood, Oshosi lifts her gun to shoot him in the head as Bruno gives up trying to resist. Instead, she “[l]owers her gun and smiles” (43),

since she prefers to see him die a slow and painful death. Reminiscent of “Después de martillar” where Diana Grande takes pleasure in watching her stepfather asphyxiate and continues strangling him for minutes after he has already died, for Oshosi it is not enough to simply bring Mirka’s rapist to justice (and symbolically her own rapist as well), but rather it is necessary to prolong his anguish.³¹

Whereas Oshosi’s missing index finger signified her inability to condemn her own rapist and marked her as a victim, her use of her middle finger, of her *dedo corazón*, brings an end to Mirka’s rape and rapist, Bruno Quiñones. Moreover, the use of her *dedo corazón* in the murder of Bruno Quiñones now transforms Oshosi into one of Olodumare’s avengers or justice makers. And yet, as we learn upon her return to prison, Oshosi has not only punished Mirka’s rapist, but also Mirka’s mother for her silencing of her daughter as a girl witness (45). She condemns Mirka’s mother as an accomplice to her daughter’s rape, mutilating Selena so that her part in this crime is made visible.

Oshosi’s heroic return to the prison is celebrated by what Olodumare calls, “her real family. We are the ones who truly love and care for her” (44).³² For Oshosi, freedom is found inside the prison walls, in the male-free utopia overseen by Olodumare, where these women are protected and become protectors of each other, and where they are also able to love one another freely. In part, this is why Oshosi accepts the mission to murder Bruno Quiñones because this prison is her home, and these women are her family: “This hell is all I have... I’ve had a better time here than outside.... I don’t have a roof to return to” (39-40).³³ Olodumare’s army of justice makers punish abusers and their accomplices and then return to an alternative family model within the Vega Alta prison. Olodumare describes the creation of a new family model within the prison as follows:

Family translates into the humans that surround you, those who hug you in the middle of a night of thunder and lightning, those who let you kiss them, those who grab your breasts in some foreplay of caresses, those who create with you a comfortable and subtle, artisanal and consistent, erected artifact that is the perfect size and the right thickness so that you can both share each other's spaces. (31)³⁴

The nuclear family structure is redefined and eroticized, so that the family unit is a lesbian erotic family. Replacing the home as the site for the nuclear family, prison is now equated with freedom, protection, family, and healing.

While in “Después de martillar” the space for healing from abuse is the lesbian bedroom, in “La santiguadora” the women’s prison becomes this lesbian utopia for healing

from trauma. For Wilson, lesbian crime fiction “overturns convention, and it has the power to ask questions about the nature of society and to explore what justice means in an unjust world” (223). It is in the space of the prison where these women, only seen by the justice system as criminals, are renamed and transformed into Olodumare’s orishas to carry out justice. It is for this reason that Olodumare compares these women criminals to matryoshkas or mamushkas: “Inside each of us there is another, and another and another. We are like the Mamushkas” (37).³⁵ Known as both matryoshkas or mamushkas, these Russian dolls are nesting dolls because each doll contains another doll within her. As matryoshka stems from the Latin word “mater” which signifies “mother,” these dolls are said to represent motherhood and fertility as well as a matrifocal genealogy or a chain of mothers (See “The Russian Treasures”). Also understood as a visual representation of a person’s inner world, the doll within a doll can represent the doubles or the others that are contained within us, the doubling that needs to occur, as is the case in “La santiguadora,” to heal. For Oshosi, the last doll to be contained in the mamushka is the girl victim, now represented by Mirka, whom she returns to so as to complete her transformation and healing process. Similar to Diana Grande, Oshosi’s journey is also a return “home,” a return to the original victimized self. In both lesbian crime stories healing from trauma occurs first through this doubling of the woman avenger and girl victim and then through the lesbian erotic body as seen at the conclusion of both “Después de martillar” and “La santiguadora” when Diana Grande and Oshosi delight in the bodies of their female lovers.

Conclusion

In her analysis of “Después de martillar,” Guerra de Lemos proposes that the short story is a “deconstruction of conservative religious discourse, which, far from protecting, often legitimizes abusive family relationships” (69).³⁶ Although I agree with Guerra de Lemos that Arroyo Pizarro deconstructs the conservative religious discourse regarding the nuclear family unit in both “Después de martillar” and “La santiguadora,” I would add that Arroyo Pizarro also problematizes the notion of the family structure or unit itself. She unmask its silences, especially when it has to do with gender-based violence like child sexual abuse, and questions its legitimacy. In fact, the idea of the nuclear home just like the nuclear family is also challenged and reimagined in these short stories.

Arroyo Pizarro’s lesbian crime stories use of the girl witness offer what Marshall and Gilmore call “a gateway for new relations to emerge between authors and audiences through which previously silenced histories of personal and collective trauma might be revealed and addressed” (5). It is this silencing that Arroyo Pizarro’s lesbian crime fiction not only

denounces, but also overturns through the girl witness as a site of activation and justice making by creating new spaces for testimony. Furthermore, Arroyo Pizarro's stories offer a counternarrative to writings on child sexual abuse that focus on the figure of the vulnerable girl or a politics of rescue. Instead, "Después de martillar" and "La santiguadora" portray agential, justice-seeking and justice-making women subjects. Ultimately, Arroyo Pizarro's lesbian crime stories represent women as agents not only in punishing abusers as part of a personal form of justice, but also in healing from abuse by finding pleasure in the lesbian erotic body, allowing for a politics of erotic justice to prevail at the end.

Notes

- 1.- According to Di Paolo Harrison, *noir boricua*, Puerto Rican *noir* fiction, is not only characterized by its literary value, but also by how it combines with other genres to represent important social issues plaguing contemporary Puerto Rican society (15). For an analysis on the development of the crime fiction genre in Puerto Rico, see Di Paolo Harrison.
- 2.- "el vicio nacional de Puerto Rico es el silencio sobre ciertos aspectos de su historia e identidad." All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.
- 3.- "lo que el poder desea mantener oculto: el hecho no oficial, la red de vigilancia así como la estructura jerárquica implícita en el cuerpo social."
- 4.- In his analysis of Puerto Rican crime fiction and its relationship with journalism, Rosado signals that crime literature "posibilita el encuentro y la problematización de diversos saberes: el discurso histórico, el sociológico, el cultural, el periodístico y el literario" ("enables the encounter and the problematization of diverse knowledge: historical, sociological, cultural, journalistic and literary discourses") while helping to recover and retain historical memory (361).
- 5.- For more information on the femicide crisis and the gender violence epidemic in Puerto Rico, see the 2023 special issue of *CENTRO Journal*, *¡Vivas nos queremos!: The Femicide and Gender Violence Epidemic in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora*, edited by Diana Aramburu and Tania Carrasquillo Hernández.
- 6.- When this article was written, the State of Emergency had been most recently extended until December 31, 2024. The increase in violence against children has also received recent governmental attention, with some legislators arguing that it necessitates its own declaration of a State of Emergency. This led to the *Proyecto de la Cámara* (House Bill) 1333 to declare a state of emergency for violence against children for a period of three years. This legislative measure was unanimously approved by the Puerto Rican House of Representatives in November 2023. According to the Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics), which gathered its information from the Departamento de la Familia de Puerto Rico (Department of the Family of Puerto Rico), 5,239 children were victims of child abuse during 2023, an increase from 4,636 in 2022. During the fiscal year of 2022-2023, there were 9,561 active child abuse cases, of which 383 (4.0%) were sexual abuse cases.
- 7.- "ante la continua y sostenida negligencia e indiferencia del Estado, hemos estado viviendo protegiéndonos y cuidándonos entre nosotras. En ese sentido, hemos estado nosotras por nuestras vidas."
- 8.- Arroyo Pizarro's centers a lot of her work on *las mujeres negras*, especially those she labels as *las Ancestras*. As the author explains in her 2018 essay collection titled *Afrohistoria*, her

decision to write about *las Ancestras* led to the publication of her short story collection *Las negras* (2012), where she challenged “‘the glory of the hunter’ to talk about the *Ancestras*, from a new insurgent literature of African descent. And I say new, because in Puerto Rico we have very little or almost no literature that describes our women ancestors” (81). “‘la gloria del cazador’ a hablar de las Ancestras, desde una nueva literatura insurgente de Afrodescendencia. Y digo nueva, porque en Puerto Rico tenemos muy poco o casi nada de literatura que describa a nuestras antepasadas”. In fact, the dedication to *Las negras* reads: “A los historiadores, por habernos dejado fuera. Aquí estamos de nuevo... cuerpo presente, color vigente, declinándose a ser invisibles... rehusándonos a ser borradas” (“To the historians, for leaving us out. Here we are again... bodies present, in full force, defying invisibility; refusing to be erased”).

9.- Known for her use of varying genres to combat historical and literary erasure, Arroyo Pizarro has dedicated significant attention to chronicling violence against women in Puerto Rico. Mónica C. Lladó Ortega clarifies that even though her work focuses on women, especially abused and silenced women, Arroyo Pizarro “también defiende otros cuerpos, otredades marginadas como niños y niñas, hombres gay y personas trans” (“[she] also defends other bodies, marginalized others such as boys and girls, gay men and trans people”) (274).

10.- “La función tradicional del género es paliativa: exponer, explicar y remediar (mediante el castigo) las lesiones sociales causadas por el mal y la injusticia.”

11.- “Coloca las palmas de las manos sobre sus hombros, tuerce las piernas para enroscarse, oprime los muslos con el fervor de una trenza. Reconoce ese momento.”

12.- “Hay un hombre que usa un martillo. La niña se extrae del dolor que siente y libera el karma. Dolor en el punto de encuentro de cada pierna. Botón que late.”

13.- “martilla como si Diana fuera de madera.”

14 “Se promete que, cuando sea grande, retrocederá en el tiempo. Diana Grande llegará justo en ese punto de la historia. Se acercará a su oído. Jurará proteger a la pequeña, cuidarla del inicio. No nos dejes caer en la tentación, más líbranos de todo mal. Quebrará el cuello del hombre del martillo. Disfrutará su agonizante salivar. Contará cada glándula de su lengua colgada y asqueante mientras atestigua su asfixia.”

15.- “la protagonista no espera un salvador que la libere de un pasado-presente marcado por la violencia y el dolor, ya que el patriarcado le ha enseñado que no existe salvación posible fuera de la resistencia forjada por una misma.”

16.- “desarrollará fobias, traumas de conducta, desconfianza excesiva con todas y cada una de sus parejas. Nadie podrá jamás penetrarla, tratarla con seductor anhelo.”

17.- “la figura del doble... será central como mecanismo del proceso de recuperación del poder arrebatado por la violencia sexual y del renacer de la protagonista, que construye su camino en búsqueda de la justicia de forma simbólica y física.”

18.- “mira el cielo de su habitación. Decide abrazarse.”

19.- Sea turtles, for example, return to the same beach where they were born to lay their eggs even though they have been away for years and have travelled thousands of miles since then. Additionally, studies have found that lizards, specifically the anole lizards of Puerto Rico, are able to find their way home even when placed in a different environment.

20.- “[d]esembarcar, por fin, en un orgasmo que no se estrangula.”

21.- This idea of the erotic as politicizing is reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” where the author argues that women’s erotic lives are empowering, and they should be celebrated because it makes us aware of the fullness we are capable of and can experience: “[t]he erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.”

- 22.- “[p]ara muchas de las confinadas soy, en efecto, el Supremo Creador” (18). According to Benson O. Igboin, Olodumare is understood as the Supreme Creator in the Yoruba religion, the omnipotent creator of heaven and earth (191). Arroyo Pizarro, therefore, intentionally feminizes Olodumare in her short story and converts her into a mother, in this way privileging female authority and power.
- 23.- “se disfrutaban vidas plenas y se manejan universos enteros.”
- 24.- In the Yoruba religion, Oshoshi is an orisha known for his skill as a hunter and as a marksman with a bow and arrow. He is the deity or spirit associated with the hunt as well as an orisha that represents justice.
- 25.- “Mirka tiene once años. Ha sido violada y sodomizada por su padrastro desde que tiene seis” (38). It is also worth noting that Olodumare and Ramírez are from the same neighbourhood. In fact, Ramírez reminds her of this as she begs her to take on this mission (38). Thus, it is worth highlighting the respect and power that Olodumare maintains in the prison even with the guards, who not only ask her for favors, but also recognize her as a leader of the prison family she has created. Moreover, Olodumare eventually accepts Ramírez’s request because, as the guard reminds her, she too is a mother: “Piensa en tus gemelas; no querías que algo así les pasara a ellas. Sé que tienes buen corazón” (“Think about your twins. You wouldn’t want something like that to happen to them. I know you have a good heart” 39).
- 26.- Different from the God in the Christian tradition and despite Olodumare’s omnipotence according to the Yoruba religion, “he has a retinue of responsible ministers, called the divinities that are saddled with almost absolute powers with which to carry out their respective assignments” (Igboin 191-92). As E. Bolaji Idowu specifies, however, these other divinities “are ‘almighty’ within their limits.... their ‘almightiness’ is limited and entirely subject to the absolute authority of the creator Himself” 45).
- 27.- “en señal de veneración de su dedo índice ausente.”
- 28.- “Oshosi nació con ese dedo. El día que dio la voz de alerta en su casa, cuando cumplió los trece, de que su abuelo la había dejado embarazada, nadie le creyó. No solo no le creyeron, sino que su abuelo le dio una tunda tal, que perdió la criatura. La tarde en que regresó del hospital, el abuelo le picó el dedo con una sierra eléctrica que usaba para cortar madera. ‘Para que no te vuelvas a atrever a señalarme por nada’, le dijo.”
- 29.- “El problema es que Mirka cuenta toda la verdad. Toda. Incluso las veces en que a los siete, ocho y nueve años dio la voz de alerta a su mamá y esta ignoró su relato.”
- 30.- “hubiera querido no haberse enterado de eso.”
- 31.- “Baja el arma y sonríe.”
- 32.- “su verdadera familia. Somos quienes de verdad la quieren y cuidan.”
- 33 “Este infierno es todo lo que tengo... Aquí la he pasado mejor que afuera.... No tengo un techo a dónde regresar.”
- 34.- “La familia se traduce en las humanas que te rodean, las que se abrazan contigo en mitad de una noche de truenos y relámpagos, aquellas que te dejan besarlas, quienes te agarran los pechos en algún fogueo de caricias, quienes construyen contigo un artefacto cómodo y sutil, artesanal y consistente, erigido con el tamaño perfecto y el grosor adecuado para que ambas puedan compartir los huecos de cada una.”
- 35.- “Dentro de cada una de nosotras hay otra, y otra y otra. Somos como las Mamushkas” (37). For more information on the symbolism behind these dolls, see *The Russian Treasures’ “The Meaning of the Matryoshka Nesting Dolls.”*
- 36.- “desconstrucción del discurso religioso conservador, que, lejos de proteger, legitima a menudo las relaciones familiares abusivas.”

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**From Another World?
The Policewoman in the Works of Melina Torres¹**

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Abstract: In recent years, we have witnessed a burgeoning in crime fiction narratives in the Argentine literary system which has mainly been driven by women writers seeking to introduce new issues and concerns related to women, their bodies, and their roles as citizens. One of the most notable recent examples is the work of Melina Torres (1976): the short story collections *Ninfas de otro mundo* (*Nymphs from Another World*, 2016), and *Pobres corazones* (*Poor Hearts*, 2021), and her latest novel, *Zona liberada* (*Liberated Zone*, 2023). These narratives feature a peculiar duo: chief of section Silvana Aguirre, and her assistant, Ulises Herrera. Both represent the police, both are gay. This article examines short stories from *Ninfas de otro mundo* and the novel *Pobres corazones* focusing on the driving character, Aguirre. It scrutinizes the spheres in which Aguirre operates—namely, her public and professional role as a police officer, and the portrayal of her personal life, which is relegated to the private sphere. In doing so, we read Torres' work as part of a wave of criminal narratives recently observed in Argentina featuring stories led by women within a genre historically dominated by canonical male authors.

Keywords: Melina Torres, Argentinian crime fiction novel, public/private, feminism.

Resumen: En los últimos años asistimos a la apertura y crecimiento del sistema literario criminal argentino impulsado –principalmente– por autoras que buscan instalar nuevas problemáticas e inquietudes que conciernen a la mujer, a su cuerpo y a su rol como ciudadanas. Uno de los casos más resonantes y recientes se revela en la obra de Melina Torres (1976), compuesta por la compilación de cuentos *Ninfas de otro mundo* (2016), *Pobres corazones* (2021) y su última novela, *Zona liberada* (2023). Estas presentan una dupla peculiar: la jefa, Silvana Aguirre, y su ayudante, Ulises Herrera. Ambos son policías, ambos son gay. En este artículo, tomamos los cuentos de *Ninfa de otro mundo* y la novela *Pobres corazones* para analizar la figura de su protagonista femenina, Aguirre, a través de los ámbitos en los que este personaje se desenvuelve, es decir, su rol público y laboral de policía y en el delineamiento de su intimidad que relega al ámbito “privado”. El objetivo es leer la obra de Torres como parte

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integrante de las nuevas narrativas criminales que proponen historias protagonizadas por mujeres dentro de un género históricamente dominado por autores canónicos.

Palabras clave: Melina Torres, novela criminal argentina, público/privado, feminismo.

Introduction

The fact women write criminal novels in Argentina is nothing new.² While for the first few decades of the twentieth century the genre was dominated by renowned male authors—such as Jorge L. Borges (1899-1986)³—it was María Angélica Bosco (1917-2006) who managed to break the male monopoly with *La muerte baja en ascensor* (*Death Takes the Elevator*) in 1955, a legacy followed by Syria Poletti (1945) whose crime stories, collected in *Historias en rojo* (*Short Stories in Red*, 1969) also paved the development of the genre.⁴ According to Gianna Martella, Angélica Bosco and Sylvia Poletti distanced themselves from their contemporary counterparts and aligned more closely with the writings of Second Wave feminist Anglophone authors, like Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Marcia Muller (32-33).⁵ Such writers, Martella points out, often gives “more prominence to female characters, to children, to family and personal relationships, and to the role played by emotion and intuition”; likewise, “[t]hey tend to focus also on how these relationships among the characters affect the crime and its solution” (2002, 32).

Following in the footsteps of Bosco and Poletti, other Argentine writers such as Angélica Gorodischer (1928-2022) emerged. Nevertheless, not only did they not achieve such an impact on the literary scene as other canonical authors of the 1980s like Mempo Giardinelli (b. 1947) or Ricardo Piglia (1941-2017), or those of the so-called post-dictatorship authors, such as Eduardo Sacheri (b. 1967) or José Pablo Feinmann (1943-2021), but many also sunk into oblivion (Oggioni 354). Apart from Luisa Valenzuela’s *Novela negra con argentinos* (*Noir Novel with Argentines*, 1990),⁶ it was not until the international success of Claudia Piñeiro’s work at the beginning of the new millennium that crime novels written by Argentinian women authors began to dominate the local literary scene, both among the reading public and in academic circles. In short, it took almost fifty long years for the gap between crime literature written by men and that written by women to begin to narrow.

Fortunately, that gap is nowadays well and truly closed. Apart from the internationally renowned Claudia Piñeiro, there are many authors who have come to the fore in the last few decades: Selva Almada (b. 1973), Eugenia Almeida (b. 1972), Gabriela Cabezón Cámara (b. 1968), Florencia Etcheves (b. 1971), Betina González (b. 1972), María Inés Krimer (b. 1951), Alicia Plante (b. 1939), to name but a few. Indeed, according to Carolina Miranda and Victoria Ríos Castaño the *ola negra argentina*, “the literary phenomenon of women writing noir,”

reflects “significant social changes that took place at the turn of the twenty-first century;” today it is women authors who dominate the crime fiction scene in Argentina (8). In most cases these writers channel hybridization as they combine crime narratives with fictional genres such as gothic, fantasy, erotica, as well as with non-fictional ones like investigative journalism and historical accounts. The outcome is realistic accounts anchoring narratives in a contemporary setting, thus contributing to their work being verisimilar and relevant. Although each of these writers has a distinct style, they also share some common traits and preoccupations. For example, some covertly or overtly expose coercion and exploitation of workers, more often than not women. Such is the case of Cabezón Cámara’s graphic novel *Bella* (*Beautiful*, 2011), which denounces the lack of engagement of an absent State when dealing with issues of human trafficking, a recurrent offense that is often hushed up, particularly in the South of Argentina (Di Paolo Harrison and Mossello, 167-170). Another example engaging with cases of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and similar forms of modern slavery is that of María Inés Krimer’s “Kosher trilogy,” which according to Aguirre, revisits and rewrites contemporary Jewish culture in Argentina (315).⁷ Krimer’s trilogy is significant because on the one hand it “problematise[s] the social, political and cultural anxieties of the modern Buenos Aires” (Miranda, “Temporal, (Trans)National and Human Mobility in María Inés Krimer’s *Kosher* Trilogy,” 64); on the other, it does so from the perspective of Ruth Epelbaum, the first woman private detective in the Argentine tradition.

Another common focus among the *ola negra* writers is that they go beyond crime narratives to convey a critical and social message by addressing themes such as misogynistic violence, femicides, and the fight for the decriminalization of abortion. One of the most salient examples is that of Selva Alamada’s novels *Ladrilleros* (*Brickmakers*, 2013) and *Chicas muertas* (*Dead Girls*, 2004), which combine crime fiction, chronicle and investigative journalism to lay bare the terrible reality of femicides in Argentina. In a similar vein is Dolores Reyes’ *Cometierra* (*Eartheater*, 2019), a novel that uses elements of both crime fiction and *lo fantástico* to bring to the fore the repercussions of femicides: “the lack of police interest in the dead women, the sadness generated [...], and the anguish that disappearances and death cause in loved ones” (Saidón).⁸ Similarly, and of particular interest for our argument, is that all these writers put forward women characters who play main, active roles either as detectives, private investigators, journalists or as officers representing the police, where they hold high positions traditionally assigned to male characters, thus breaking with archetypal roles such as victims, killers or *femmes fatales*. A further trait these writers weave into their narratives is an underlying critique of the patriarchy which, as Worthington suggests, is “apparent in the claim

to female autonomy and the implicit demands for parity with men in all spheres of life” (168). Certainly, according to critic Osvaldo Aguirre, recently women have claimed “un lugar que parecía inimaginable” (that once seemed unimaginable) in local crime fiction: that of women as detectives, investigators, and, at last, protagonists of their own stories (309).

This article looks at one of the writers epitomizing the *ola negra*: Melina Torres (b. 1976). With her collection of crime short stories *Ninfas de otro mundo* (*Nymphs from Another World*, 2016) and the novels *Pobres corazones* (*Poor Hearts*, 2021) and *Zona liberada* (*Liberated Zone*, 2023), Torres contributes to the new roles’ women writers have taken within local crime literature. Her narratives featuring a peculiar duo, the chief, Silvana Aguirre, and her assistant Ulises Herrera, are unique in that both Aguirre and Herrera represent the police, and they are both are gay. Here we investigate short stories from *Ninfas de otro mundo* and the novel *Pobres corazones* focusing on the main character, Silvina Aguirre. In particular, we look at the spheres in which Aguirre operates—namely, her public and professional role as a police officer, and the portrayal of her personal life, which is relegated to the private sphere. In this manner, we read Torres’ work as part of the *ola negra* as it presents a challenge to generic conventions, and it narrates the problematic relationships between women’s voices, power, and the public sphere.

From Another World? Woman, Gay, and Head of Major Crimes

Set in contemporary Rosario (province of Santa Fe), a city known as the Medellín of Argentina having become a breeding ground for drug lords and violent crime, Torres’ narratives feature convoluted plots and verisimilar backdrops. Driving the investigations are Silvana Aguirre, Head of Major Crimes at Rosario Police Department, and her second in command, Ulises Herrera, the first police duo of gay, police detectives in the Argentinean tradition. This constitutes a unique outfit for many reasons. According to Julio Torales, in Latin America in general, referring to the police tends to be associated with “corruption, favoring, ‘happy-trigger,’ impunity, mistreatment, extrajudicial executions and terror” (Osse 5).⁹ Thus, the ambivalent role of journalist/investigator is recurrent in local crime fiction as it is a much more credible and realistic character who is portrayed as a guarantor of truth in a context in which justice cannot be taken for granted. Likewise, Argentina is a country where public trust in institutions such as the military and the police forces hangs by a thread given the repeated economic and political crises the nation has endured, particularly since the start of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process), the longest and bloodiest military dictatorship in the country’s history (1976-1983).¹⁰ Such distrust in the police as an institution is reflected in literature as there are very few policemen or indeed women as leading

characters. Due to the numerous *coups d'état* (six in the twentieth century), the various official institutions policing the National Territory, such as the National Police, “are often unpopular, untrustworthy organizations, evoking repression, corruption and abuse of authority and power”; therefore, “police detectives are not as highly regarded, or indeed respected, as in the Anglo-Saxon tradition” (Miranda, “Ruth Epelbaum” 118).

Indeed, for Argentinean critic and writer José Pablo Feinmann, local crime fiction tends not to feature policemen, because a good policeman is, from a narrative point of view, implausible: “the police are strongly tied to the idea of repression, and for now,... are irredeemable from that dark and violent zone” (156).¹¹ Following this idea, and rewriting Raymond Chandler’s commandments,¹² Carlos Gamerro formulates a “counter-decalogue” explaining some of the most recurrent elements present in crime fiction from the Southern Cone such as: crimes are committed by the police, a private security agent or a common criminal under orders of, or with permission from, the police; the aim of all police investigation is to hide the truth; clues or physical evidence are never reliable because the police always arrive first to the scene of the crime; the main suspect is (almost always) the victim of the crime (Gamerro n.p.). While Gamerro’s decalogue should be read with a pinch of irony, it reveals how local literature reflects the overall popular distrust in institutions that are supposed to protect individuals. In an interview with *La izquierda* newspaper discussing the creative process of writing crime fiction in Argentina, Torres comments on her own reservations when first, trying to empathize with a *cana* (cop), and then trying to get her readership to sympathize with coppers as leading characters. Nevertheless, as we argue later, we will see the ways in which Torres remains critical of aspects of the police as an institution, and how she manages to turn her officers into relatable, credible and likeable cops.

The second reason why this duo is unconventional is because Silvana Aguirre and Ulises Herrera are both gay, thus Torres’ being the first local series (comprising short stories and novels) featuring police detectives that operate outside the heteronormative setting. If we take as a reference the Anglo-American narratives of the 1980s and 1990s, that is, the pioneers in addressing homosexuality in crime fiction—such as Barbara Wilson, Mary Wings, Val McDermid, and Stella Duffy—for the most part, and according to Munt, they tended to be the “outsider or outlaw figure” (205). As such, homosexual characters either operated outside official institutions, as private agents for instance, or were relegated to secondary characters. While sexual politics have come a long way and gay investigators (private or not) are no longer reduced to mere parodic, one-dimensional roles, they do embody an interesting paradox: they represent society but also critique it (Munt 120). That is a trait Aguirre and Herrera share with

those outsider investigators. As we argue later, in Torres' work both Aguirre and Herrera are active protagonists who drive the narrative forward; most importantly, they operate and work within the law. As such, they challenge heteronormativity while representing the "mal del amo" (master's evil; Valcárcel 165), precisely because they are functional cogs in the punitive and patriarchal system or, in simpler terms, because they are police officers.

Silvana Aguirre: An Incorruptible Cop

Silvana Aguirre's first appearance is in "El alma va a venir" ("The Soul Will Come"), the short story opening *Ninfas de otro mundo* (7-68). It begins with the discovery of the body of Margarita Ramírez, who is found in her own home in a small town in the Argentine province of Chaco. Although Chaco is outside their jurisdiction, Aguirre and Herrera are seconded by the Rosario Police Chief to investigate the woman's suspicious death. After gathering testimonies at the town bar, a farmhouse, and the pharmacy where Margarita worked, they not only identify the killer but also uncover a ring exploiting Paraguayan farmworkers; the gang is eventually charged with the crime of "rural slavery." In the second story, which shares the title with the collection, they are back in Rosario. Aguirre and Herrera tackle the murder of La Loris, a transvestite whose corpse is abandoned on a waste ground. The investigation takes a wrong turn when they jail an innocent person; in later novels Aguirre's rivals in the force will use this to put her down. In "Secretos de cocina" ("Cooking Secrets," *Ninfas* 85-112) they look into the mysterious disappearance of Sara Almada, the wife of a renowned chef in Rosario, a case they bring to a close as they clear up the alleged kidnapping and put those responsible in jail. Overall, the stand-alone tales compiled in *Ninfas* present well-formed crime plots and offer glimpses into Aguirre's past.

From the outset Aguirre is introduced as a competent officer, Head of Major in the city of Rosario (province of Santa Fe), a position she achieved having passed an open call for Public Service with her thesis on "police intervention in human trafficking, which set a precedent within the Ministry of Security" (*Ninfas* 9-10).¹³ It is in the novel *Pobres corazones* where the full portrait of Aguirre and her work backdrop emerges. Through flashbacks the reader pieces together her friendship and working relationship with Herrera, and we are introduced to her circle of trusted colleagues. Among them are: Agudo, a forensic doctor and close friend of both detectives, a friendship consolidated in "El alma va a venir" (*Ninfas* 7-68); Laura Rípodas, a lawyer and Aguirre's ex-girlfriend; Müller, a young IT specialist who collaborates with the police and is particularly loyal to Aguirre. In *Pobres* Aguirre runs two parallel investigations involving both ends of the social spectrum: on one hand, she delves into the problematic divorce of an illustrious, wealthy couple in the city which, in the course of their investigations

turns out to be a case of domestic violence and drug smuggling. The second case is the macabre murder of Carlos Gauna, whose violent death shakes one of the shanty towns in the outskirts of the city as, at first, it has no apparent motive. In the end, both cases intertwine leading to a drug trafficking ring, a crime connecting the top end of the city where the wealthy live, with the shanty towns. Under Aguirre’s command, the team eventually manages to dismantle the gang, and in the process denounce issues of domestic violence often prevalent behind the façade of happy, privileged families.

Throughout the series, apart from being committed to her role as police chief, Aguirre is portrayed as a foul-mouthed, loud, stubborn, skeptical, unsympathetic, and very grumpy woman with a sharp sense of humor. Her great passion is food, especially anything beef. This inscribes Aguirre in a long tradition of detectives who utilize food not just for substance but also to lay bare complex issues. Indeed, according to Anderson et al, food constitutes more than a simple literary trope in crime fiction: from contributing to realistic settings to giving “a story a sense of place within a given culture,” convivial aspects of food and eating habits “reveal discourses about cultural belonging [... and] class” (4-5). Thus, Aguirre takes her food seriously, planning her days around bars, canteens and restaurants she likes where she meets up with witnesses, potential suspects, and colleagues alike. Her knowledge of both traditional popular gastronomy and fine cuisine is notorious. While Aguirre prefers simple, popular foods such as *choripanes*,¹⁴ her understanding of sophisticated cuisine frequently serves her to build trust and create bonds with people from various social stations. She is also an obsessive fan of the Argentine soccer team *River Plate*, and of Marcelo Bielsa, a coach she considers a mentor, often repeating his soccer teachings in failed attempts to apply them to her everyday life. This inscribes Aguirre in a long tradition of detectives who utilize food not just for substance but also to lay bare complex issues. Indeed, according to Anderson et al, food constitutes more than a simple literary trope in crime fiction: from contributing to realistic settings to giving “a story a sense of place within a given culture,” convivial aspects of food and eating habits “reveal discourses about cultural belonging [... and] class” (“Introduction” 4-5). Just like she exploits her understanding of gastronomic practices, she takes advantage of her profound knowledge of soccer to start conversations as well as to gain favors and privileges with colleagues, superiors, and witnesses. This makes Aguirre comfortable and skilled at connecting with people from different social backgrounds. For example, in “Ninfas de otro mundo” she spends time investigating the underworld of Rosario’s trans women scene, her empathetic nature is reflected in her ability to not talk down to them. Such capacity allows Aguirre to make

La Loro's colleagues and friends open up in a way they would not do with other members of the force.

Similarly, in "Secretos de cocina" (*Ninfas* 85-112) Aguirre has to navigate the world of millionaires; she manages to catch them off guard as she can understand their codes and does not let influential people intimidate her. In a way, her attitude is reminiscent of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: "to hell with the rich. They make me sick" (*The Big Sleep* 59). Her analogies combining food and soccer reflect this. They are also amusing and anticipated by her colleagues, particularly Herrera with whom she often shares her critical snapshots of pretentious food, people, and sports alike. Describing the preferences of a sector of the population who consider themselves "high society" looking down on the likes of her, Aguirre tells Herrera that she hates the Champions League more than she hates sushi and passion fruit ice cream (*Pobres* 156). For Aguirre, such choices epitomize those who have money and like to show it: Champions League games are only broadcast in paid networks, sushi is an expensive meal choice, and maracuyá is an ice-cream flavor that became fashionable recently, often labelled "gourmet" and served in stores catering for customers with more expensive tastes. In short, in her public role Aguirre is portrayed as a committed police woman with a social conscience, someone who knows how to navigate a man's world, who is "leal pero más desconfiada que la KGB" (loyal but more suspicious than the KGB; *Pobres* 14, 102).

In the comfort of her own apartment, however, Aguirre is sensitive, nostalgic and likes her own company. She has a romantic side that she would rather not reveal in public. For example, she owns CDs by Brazilian Roberto Carlos (associated with romantic and melodic ballads which were a hit with middle aged audiences in the 1970s and 1980s), Rosario's own pop-rock group Vilma Palma, and Spanish, smooth Latin-pop artist Rosana, none of which match the tough-cop persona she maintains in public. When at home, she often contemplates how much she misses her grandmother who brought her up. Her grandma is invoked every time Aguirre makes a pause for a *merienda* (afternoon tea), involving her apple and cinnamon cake and *mate* ritual.¹⁵ She is also nostalgic about her best friend, the late "La Turca" (the Turkish); Aguirre keeps her photo in a small shrine, as if it was a saint card, kissing it every time she needs luck to be on her side. Certainly, Aguirre did not believe in God, neither was she devout of Saints, "but she did believe in the Turca Rodríguez, and she called upon her when she needed favors" (*Pobres* 223).¹⁶ Although not one to come across as motherly in the public arena, Aguirre is maternal in other aspects. Motherhood itself is out of reach for Aguirre; she is perimenopausal, battling with symptoms such as hot flushes throughout *Pobres*. Yet, she is maternal at times. For example, she adopts the dog left behind after his owner's violent murder:

Aguirre feeds the dog, bathes him, takes him for walks, and has him seen by a vet, thus channeling her gentler side, and appreciating the companionship. She does all this in the quiet, apart from Herrera none of her colleagues know about her softer side. Such snapshots showing Aguirre lowering her guard constitute what Laura Scarano calls “rituals of intimacy,” as the main plot pauses to portray micro-stories of her daily, private life contrasting with her complex, often violent, and convoluted backdrop of her police work (207).

Romantically, Aguirre is lonesome, frequently telling herself “qué solas estás, Silvana” (how lonely you are, Silvana; *Pobres* 17), which reveals a vulnerability she shares with very few. Herrera is the one who points out she is running herself ragged, overcommitting, thinking she is an agent with the FBI, when “in reality, you’re in charge of people who only care about getting paid at the end of the month” (*Pobres* 87-88).¹⁷ Despite a solitude she seems to unconsciously seek, Aguirre has love interests, though her fantasies about the different women she falls for are platonic rather than sexual in nature. She tends to be attracted to the *femme fatale* stereotype: physically attractive and seductive, but also demonstrating intelligence and shrewdness. For example, in *Pobres*, the image of Angélica, whom Aguirre moves to a safe house to protect from her violent husband, “la persigue cada minuto” (haunts her every minute; 58) stirring “un leve cosquilleo en la boca del estómago” (a slight flutter in the pit of her stomach; 83). Fleeting and almost childlike infatuations such as this one reduces Aguirre to a woman unable to sustain a long-term romantic or sexual relationship, in contrast to what happened in the early manifestations of lesbian crime fiction. For instance, Canadian Katherine V Forrest’s detective Kate Delafield, lesbian and feminist LA Police detective, claims that sex was “too radical a distraction” (55); however, Forrest’s novels feature numerous “strong emotional exchanges between lovers rather than casual, violent, or exploitative sex” (Klein 78). For Klein, while erotic scenes in lesbian crime fiction of the 1980s and 1990s constituted a distraction from the investigation, they also provided a platform to showcase strong, supportive female models validating women’s choices (79).

If early detectives displayed both a considerable sexual appetite, their interest in sexual and romantic relationships gradually diminished to focus on what the genre demanded: solving cases and catching culprits (Losada Soler and Paszkiewicz 97). Accordingly, Aguirre’s series can be read as an example of “lesbian bed death,” an idea coined by sociologists Philip Peper Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz. in *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex* (Pocket Books, 1983), concluding that lesbians have less sex than straight or gay couples. As controversial and biased this concept is, it reflects the evolution of the genre. Instead, according to Sally Munt, erotic havoc tends to be achieved using humor: “interest and pleasure is generated within the

process of discovering identity (and reconstructing it), not in finding an essential state of being” (205). This is something reflected throughout the Aguirre’s series: scenes depicting her sexual fantasies are limited to the realm of her imagination, featuring corny daydream-like clips interrupting her thoughts as she sees the object of her desire dancing in the air, bathed in bright lights moving to some romantic song Aguirre may be playing. For the most part, they provide an almost comic diversion to the crimes she investigates.

Thinking about Aguirre’s public persona, she is not your typical cop. It might be expected that when Aguirre is in action, she makes full use of the force and weapons her profession sanctions. However, using violence constitutes her Achilles’ heel: she detests the idea of having to resort to physical violence, even when her job requires it. For example, in “El alma va a venir,” she confesses that whenever she is in a shootout, she always thinks “una está preparada pero nunca lista” (prepared but never truly ready; *Ninfas* 35). Most of the time, unlike some of her colleagues who are prone to throw their weight around, Aguirre resorts to using witty and irony to defuse a situation, often presenting her badge to “intimidate” suspects and making a tongue-in-cheek remark. For example, in *Pobres*, while arguing with a neighbor, showing him her police Id, she tells him she is a one of the good ones who “cuidamos que los Freddy Krueger no achuchen a nuestros ciudadanos” (make sure Freddy Kruegers are not butchering our citizens; *Pobres* 71). Such juxtaposition displaying authority alongside humorous comments reflect her own acknowledgment of the limited credibility the police as institution enjoys in Argentina. Aguirre is aware many people are more scared of the police than they are of criminals; as she tells Herrera, being a cop “asustaba a los que no debería asustar” (it only scared those who should not be scared; *Pobres* 72). Comments like these reinforce Aguirre’s and Herrera’s awareness of the contradictions they embody: they are supposed to look after a population who do not trust the institution they represent.

While the use of violence is closely linked to the power exerted by state forces, it is not something neither Aguirre nor Herrera identify with. According to Mariana Da Silva Lorenz and Mariana Galvani, state institutions such as the police try to create conditions of socialization restricted to the professional realm to establish an image that defines and distinguishes them from the rest (31); projecting authority and threat of force are also being key. However, beyond strictly professional matters, police officers are individuals who often do not join the force to become part of a punitive institution. This is the case of many of those within Aguirre’s closer circle. For instance, Aguirre and her friend, IT specialist Gabriel Müller recall how they ended up in the police. The flashback reveals that as soon as Aguirre learns that Müller wanted a stable job, rather than action and the power the badge may afford him,

she made it her mission to get him a position in the Intelligence Division (*Ninfas* 10) so that he would not have to handle a weapon but would still have job security. Aguirre herself had also joined because she was poor; she knew it would provide her with a steady salary. Similarly, Ulises Herrera confesses he only joined the police “para salir de pobre” (to escape poverty; *Pobres* 78), which reveals some of the socioeconomic challenges Argentinians face today.

In this way Aguirre and Herrera reflect an overall discontent with law-enforcement institutions as they are aware of the implications of accessing, using, and abusing power. This creates a paradox since, on one hand, they acknowledge that they work in law enforcement out of economic necessity, while on the other, they resist using violence, something that comes with their position. Writing about the ways in which Argentine narrative has employed crime fiction, Sonia Mattalia notes that local crime novels tend to exploit a combination of critical commentary and parody (23). Indeed, for Mattalia the genre has essentially been a medium through which the relationship between the literary and ideological apparatuses of the State has been exposed (29). By not aligning Aguirre, Herrera, and Müller with authority-driven, power-hungry typecasts, Torres critiques and invites readers to reflect upon the actions of the local forces.

Tensions Between Public and Private Spaces

Celia Amorós argues that while ideas about what constitutes “public” and what is “private” have changed across epochs and societies, they have consistently served as a yardstick shaping the place and role women occupy in a particular milieu (11). For the most part, the public sphere is assigned to men, working outside the home constitutes a masculine activity, while the private sphere is relegated to the space where women operate, therefore it is feminine. Although nowadays challenged, because the public sphere—what is external and shared—is driven by principles of power, responsibility, leadership, money, strength, peer and societal recognition, it has remained associated with masculine roles. Conversely, the private arena continues to be perceived as rooted in femininity, thus resting on patriarchal ideals of motherhood, love, silence, good manners, emotional dependency, and domesticity. That we have come a long way from those stereotypes is not in doubt. And yet, such typecast divisions tend to still be prevalent in the collective imagination.¹⁸

From our discussion in the previous section, Aguirre comes across a dual character having her policewoman side, which the public and her partners see when, figuratively, she wears her cop hat; and her Silvana-as-a-woman side, which only comes out in private, i.e., when she is not enforcing the law. Throughout the series we see that at work she is deliberately masculine, coarse, short-fused, tough, representations reinforced by the stereotype of the butch,

rough and foul-mouthed lesbian. It is only at home that she allows herself to be nostalgic, romantic, nurturing and melancholic, qualities that socially align with stereotypes of femininity. Aguirre nurtures such division and, while she conceals her private persona when she is policing, she is quick to point out that there is another side to her. For example, in *Pobres* Aguirre is looking after Angélica, the victim-cum-witness, also the object of her romantic daydreams. Angélica is grateful for Aguirre's protection and praises her for her braveness. Aguirre replies she should not be mistaken: "My job is one thing, and my private life is another... Because all the bravery you think you see in me doesn't apply when it comes to personal matters" (333).¹⁹

It is at work where Aguirre remains the most vigilant about how she comes across. According to Amorós, for women performing activities that unfold in the public arena peer recognition is still required for validation, a matter closely tied to the structuring of power and control (13). If we take into account that Aguirre holds a high rank in the force as the local Head of Major Crimes, she needs to be trusted by her peers and seen as conveying authority and leadership, not only for public perception but also for internal authority as she coordinates the division imparting orders and making decisions, she is directly accountable for and could affect both her and team's positions within the force. This is a responsibility Aguirre takes very seriously. Watching her every move is her antagonist and Chief, Miguel Jordán. Known in Aguirre's circle as "Bonito" ("the Handsome") for his fine clothes and polite manners, Jordán comes from a privileged social background and has gone further than her; yet, "they not only shared a dedication to their work but also an intelligence that set them apart from the roughness of that office" (*Pobres* 76).²⁰ Toward the end of the novel they are forced to work together in an operation that requires multiple raids to dismantle the drug ring they have been investigating. During the logistical preparation for the operation, Aguirre injures her foot and is prescribed resting and a moon boot if she needs to walk. Despite Herrera's protest for her to follow medical advice, she rejects sitting down and insists on not wearing the boot; she will stand the pain, in fact, she will do anything to avoid appearing frail before Jordán: "No quiero que el enano me vea así. No quiero mostrar debilidad", she confesses to Herrera (I do not want the little guy to see me like this. I do not want to show weakness; *Pobres* 338). Regardless of their public display of hostility, Aguirre and Jordán resembled one another as neither knows how to express gratitude or what to do when they are acknowledged (*Pobres* 271). Because they respect each other professionally, they are able to work together and succeed in apprehending the traffickers.

As Herrera often reminds Aguirre, her constant state of alert and nearly obsessive pursuit of keeping her name clean and remaining trustworthy in the eyes of peers and superiors has worked against her. This is why she was not made Chief of the Special Crimes Division, a position she could have taken all those years ago had she not been honest and a woman. Having found the body of one of the Quintana brothers, a most-wanted drug lord of Rosario, her investigations into his murder uncovered a tight-knitted web of police corruption implicating high-ranking officers and politicians tied to the Quintana gang (*Pobres* 106). At that time, Aguirre was one of the possible names considered for promotion to lead the Special Division. But the false perception that she was not “one of the boys,” not fully committed to the force, i.e., unwilling to look the other way in issues of corruption, eventually played against her (*Pobres* 108). While there is no doubt that Aguirre is very good at her job and overall respected by her colleagues, as Amorós puts it, peer legitimization (in this case lack of) is crucial for career advancement in the public arena (11).

Elena Losada Soler notes that the difference between crime novels featuring male detectives and those where the protagonists are female police officers lies in the fact that the latter have a story to tell beyond the criminal act itself (12). In crime narratives today, the development of women’s capacities, not only professionally but also through their personal struggles (such as motherhood or sexual freedom), is not viewed as incompatible with their role, but rather as enhancing it: the public and the private do coexist. And yet, in the case of Aguirre, such coexistence means that in the public sphere she must constantly prove she is capable of wielding power, feeling the need to conceal her feminine side. Thus, Aguirre is permanently in tension between public and private behaviors, which positions her in an in-between place. Despite all her achievements and demonstrable merits, despite being diligent and obsessive (*Pobres* 46), Aguirre and her “cuerpito tortillero” (little dyke body; *Ninfas* 75)—as she is disparagingly called at one point—are still unable to dismantle the stereotypes that persist around the image of a woman who, in the twentieth first century, must incessantly prove how prepared she is to take on certain jobs and responsibilities.

Conclusion

As pointed out at the beginning, women writing crime fiction is nothing new in Argentina. In recent decades, however, criminal novels written by women have grown in circulation; such growth has mainly been driven by authors seeking to introduce new issues and concerns related to women, their bodies, and their roles as citizens. In her *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, British historian Mary Beard reflects on the problematic relationship between women’s voices, power, and the public sphere. At the end of the study, she concludes

that if women are not fully perceived within the structures of power, it might be time to redefine power itself. Altogether, in challenging dominant discourses the *ola negra* literary phenomenon of women writing noir aligns with what Beard proposes as it reflects significant social changes taking place at the turn of the twenty first century. In doing so, crime narratives such as Torres' engage with current issues not only at a socio-political level but also at the level of crime writing. Indeed, if as Stewart King points out, crime fiction provides "a means of understanding the relationship between crime and community in the popular imagination" (King 14), Torres' series offers a space to rethink the fact that Aguirre may not be "from another world," as the title of the story where she debuts suggests.

Perhaps here lies the most interesting contribution of the series: through Aguirre's constant plights to comfortably occupy the place she deserves in the force Torres invites us to reflect on the connections between the literary systems and the worldview they uphold, a view that, while progressing toward women's protagonist and opening new, non-heteronormative patterns, reveals cracks that even today have yet to be fully mended. Beyond the double otherness that Aguirre represents within the Argentinean literary system, as a member of the force and the first lesbian police officer, her portrayal does not escape the challenges women face on a daily basis, whether they are Head of Major Crimes or not.

Notes

- 1.- This article is part of Oggioni's "Figuraciones de 'lo público' y 'lo privado.' Estudio de las protagonistas de la narrativa criminal escrita por mujeres en Argentina y España," a PhD thesis in Modern Language Cultures and Societies and Linguistics completed in 2023 at Università Ca'Foscari, Venice. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are Carolina Miranda's.
- 2.- Here we use "crime literature" or "crime fiction" to refer to a literary genre that encompasses other specific subgenres, such as mystery novels, detective novels, noir, hardboiled, neo-noir, among others, which includes any narrative centered around a crime. In doing so, we align with the use critics such as María Xesús Lama, Elena Losada, and Dolores Resano make in their *Papeles del crimen* (Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2019, pp. 10-12 and pp. 29-30).
- 3.- Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares played a key part in the promotion of the genre, not only through their own creations (such as the short stories in *Seis Problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (*Six Problems for Isidro Parodi*) featuring the arm-chair detective par excellence of the title), but also through the collection *Séptimo Círculo* (Emecé 366 novels published between 1945 and 1983). Although Borges and Bioy Casares only closely edited the first 121 issues "as editors-creators they transformed the genre in terms of literary esteem" (Miranda, "More than the Sum of its Parts" 38). The collection featured imports but also promoted local authors who were beginning to venture into crime fiction. Particularly at the beginning, titles promoted were exclusively whodunits and overall favored narratives exploiting pastiche, humor, and satire (Miranda, "More than the Sum of its Parts" 33). The success of that collection led to the emergence of others, such as *Evasión*, *Serie Naranja*, *Selecciones Escarlata*, *Pistas*,

Pandora, some aligning with the classic model, some leaning towards hard-boiled narratives. According to Jorge Lafforgue and Jorge Rivera, by the late 1950s, these “newsstand collections” would typically feature an assorted selection, invariably mixing hard-boiled authors with traditional practitioners of the puzzle and the suspense novels (19).

4.- Bosco was a prolific author and translator. Among her crime fiction pieces are *La muerte soborna a Pandora* (*Death Blackmails Pandora*, 1956), *El comedor de diario* (*The Informal Dining Room*, 1952), *Historia privada* (*Private Story*, 1972), *En la estela de un secuestro* (*In the Footsteps of a Kidnapping*, 1977), and *La muerte vino de afuera* (*Death Came from Outside*, 1982). Other titles by Poletti are *Gente conmigo* (*People with Me*, 1962), *El juguete misterioso* (*The Mysterious Toy*, 1977), and the short story “Rojo en la salina” (“Red in the Salt Mine”) included in the collection *Cuentos policiales* (*Crime Stories*, 1974).

5.- According to Worthington crime narratives have interesting and important discursive exchanges with feminism as “the genre developed over the same period as the movement and there are particular resonances between second-wave feminism and criminography from the 1970s and 80s” (167), particularly if we think about writers such as Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton in America and, Val McDermid, Liza Cody, Sarah Dunant and P. D. James in the United Kingdom. Their female detectives provide a space in which to express many of the political concerns of the feminist movement. They do so by appropriating the strongly masculine hard-boiled genre of crime fiction, demonstrating that female detectives could be effective, successful and operate in a man’s world. “At the same time,” Worthington continues, the way these women detectives behaved “suggested equality in other spheres, such as sexuality, with the various protagonists often enjoying an active, and not always heterosexual, sex life outside marriage” (167).

6.- While Valenzuela is not exclusively a crime fiction author, her *Novela negra con argentinos* contributed significantly to the development of the genre. It revisits the dark historical period in Argentinean history of the National Reorganization Process, the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1976 to 1983 (see also note 10). Crucially, it was published only 7 years after the end of the military rule.

7.- The trilogy consists of *Sangre Kosher* (*Kosher Blood*, 2009), *Siliconas express* (*Silicones Express*, 2013) and *Sangre Fashion* (*Fashion Blood*, 2015). It was published under the *Negro Absoluto* collection edited by Juan Sasturain.

8.- “la falta de interés policial por las mujeres muertas, la tristeza que generan [...], la angustia que las desapariciones y la muerte provocan en los afectos.”

9.- “corrupción, clientelismo, ‘gatillo fácil’ impunidad, malos tratos, ejecuciones extrajudiciales y terror.”

10.- The National Reorganization Process was the coup overthrowing Isabel Perón as President of Argentina on 24 March 1976. A military junta was installed headed by Lieutenant General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Brigadier-General Orlando Ramón Agosti. Constitutional rule was achieved on 30 October 1983 when a general election was held, Raúl Alfonsín becoming the first democratically elected president following the 1982 collapse of the ruling military junta.

11.- “la policía está vigorosamente unida a la idea de la represión, y por ahora,... es irrescatable de esa zona oscura y violenta.”

12.- “The Simple Act of Murder” is a seminal text on detective fiction originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1944). Overall, the essay argues for the virtues of the American noir or hard-boiled. Among the “commandments” Chandler puts forward are the fact that narratives have to be realistic in character, setting and atmosphere, it must be about real people in a real world, and at the end the criminal must be punished, even if not necessarily by law. Another crucial element is that narratives are set in peripheral or industrial backdrops where anonymous masses concentrate (López Martínez 12). These rules constitute an oblique

jab at the locked-room mysteries popular during the Golden Age of the detective novel during the 1920s and 1930s, mostly associated with the British whodunnit.

13.- “la intervención policial ante el delito de Trata de Personas, que sentó precedente dentro del Ministerio de Seguridad de la Provincia.”

14.- A combination of *chorizo* (sausage) and *pan* (bread), this is a staple appetizer in Argentina and neighboring countries. A *choripán* constitutes an affordable, popular meal commonly sold at sport venues, especially outside soccer stadiums, also popular with cab and bus drivers.

15.- *Mate* is a traditional South American caffeine-rich infused herbal drink made by infusing dried leaves from the yerba mate plant (*ilex paraguariensis*) in hot water. Yerba mate can also be served cold; the drink is especially popular in Argentina, South of Brazil, and Uruguay.

16.- “pero sí creía en la Turca Rodríguez y a ella se encomendaba cuando andaba necesitada de favores.”

17.- “en realidad tenés a cargo gente que lo único que quiere es cobrar a fin de mes.”

18.- According to Isabel Ola Julián, Antoni Adam Donat, and Isabel Bernabeu Díaz collective stereotyping is “el proceso de formación de un concepto o juicio acerca de una persona o situación de forma anticipada o preconcebida” (the process of forming a concept or judgment about a person or situation in an anticipated or preconceived), which involves developing ideas, beliefs, attitudes, judgments, or opinions before subjecting them to evidence (21-22).

19.- “Una cosa es mi trabajo y otra cosa es mi vida íntima [. . .] Porque toda la valentía que usted cree ver en mí no la asumo cuando se trata de cuestiones personales.”

20.- “ambos compartían no solo la tenacidad del trabajo sino –también– la inteligencia que los despejaba de tanta tosquedad en esa oficina.”

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**Ena Lucía Portela's *Cien botellas en una pared*,
Beyond End-Oriented Readings**

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Abstract: Ena Lucía Portela's *Cien botellas en una pared* (*One Hundred Bottles*) centers on the tumultuous romantic relationship between the narrator, a woman named Zeta, and Moisés, a former magistrate of the Cuban High Court who recurrently abuses Zeta. When, after many instances of domestic violence, Moisés dies under mysterious circumstances, readers may be tempted to interpret the novel as a conventional feminist narrative, wherein a male antagonist faces consequences for his violence against a woman. However, as elucidated by Gulddal, King, and Rolls in the introduction to their edited volume *Criminal Moves. Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction* (2019), end-oriented interpretations may prove misleading and overly simplistic, as they may overlook other nuance textual meanings. This article seeks to transcend the bias toward end-oriented readings, demonstrating that *Cien botellas en una pared* is a highly nuanced novel. Leveraging crime fiction conventions, it subverts traditional takes of the genre (from which it frequently departs) and directs attention to many elements beyond the resolution of the crimes committed by Moisés.

Keywords: Cuba, crime fiction, feminism, domestic violence, postmodernism.

Resumen: *Cien botellas en una pared*, de Ena Lucía Portela, se centra en la tumultuosa relación romántica entre la narradora, una mujer llamada Zeta, y Moisés, un antiguo magistrado del Tribunal Supremo de Cuba que maltrata a Zeta repetidamente. Cuando, tras muchos casos de violencia doméstica, Moisés muere en misteriosas circunstancias, los lectores pueden querer interpretar la novela como una narración feminista convencional, en la que un antagonista masculino se enfrenta a las consecuencias de su violencia contra una mujer. Sin embargo, como explican Gulddal, King y Rolls en la introducción de *Criminal Moves. Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction* (2019), las interpretaciones orientadas al final de un relato pueden resultar engañosas y excesivamente simplistas, ya que pueden pasar por alto otros matices y significados textuales. Este artículo pretende trascender el sesgo hacia ese tipo de lecturas, demostrando que *Cien botellas en una pared* rica en matices. Usando diversas convenciones de la novela policial, *Cien botellas* subvierte concepciones tradicionales del género (de las que se aparta con frecuencia) y dirige la atención hacia cuestiones que van más allá de la resolución de los crímenes cometidos por Moisés.

Palabras clave: Cuba, novela criminal, feminismo, violencia de género, postmodernismo.

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Introduction

Ena Lucía Portela's third novel, *Cien botellas en una pared* (*One Hundred Bottles on a Wall*), was first released in Spain in 2002 after receiving the mildly prestigious (But with the prize money for genres) Jaén award. The Cuban edition was published a year later, followed shortly after by its French translation, with which the novel won the *Deux Océans - Grinzane Cavour* award. Subsequently, the novel was translated into Portuguese (2004), Dutch (2005), Polish (2005), Italian (2006), Greek (2008), and Turkish (2009), with the English translation published by the University of Texas Press in 2010 with the title *One Hundred Bottles*, which I use henceforth to refer to the novel. Its international editorial success swiftly attracted the interest of literary critics, who to date have published more than fifty articles on the book.

Seemingly, *One Hundred Bottles* centers on the turbulent romantic relationship between the metadiegetic narrator, a young woman named Zeta, and Moisés, a former magistrate of the Cuban High Court who recurrently abuses Zeta. As Moisés meets his demise under mysterious circumstances in the final chapter, after numerous instances of domestic violence, readers might be tempted to interpret the novel as a conventional feminist narrative, wherein a male antagonist faces repercussions for his violence against a woman. However, Portela's body of work, which includes four novels, two collections of short stories, an essay collection, and numerous articles, consistently challenges oversimplified interpretations, and calls for a more nuanced examination. *One Hundred Bottles* is no exception.

In their introduction to the edited volume *Criminal Moves. Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction* (2019) – a genre Portela both avails of and deconstructs – Gulddal, King, and Rolls caution readers against end-oriented interpretations of crime narratives. Such readings, the authors argue, may prove misleading and overly simplistic, as other nuanced textual meanings may be overlooked (5). Similarly, this article aims to move beyond end-oriented and other simplistic approaches to the novel, demonstrating that *One Hundred Bottles* is a deeply intricate novel that avoids unambiguous articulations. My aim is to demonstrate that, while leveraging crime fiction conventions, the novel subverts traditional takes of the genre, a process that works in conjunction with and complements an unconventional approach to gender issues. Thus, the interplay between form and content continuously unsettles expectations and narrative forms, raising questions that often remain unanswered.

In his seminal work *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Stephen Knight outlines “the ideological nature and function of crime fiction” and establishes that “immanent social ideologies” present in crime narratives can be found “in form as well as content” (2). Plot or content alone, he contends, are not the sole — possibly not even the most important — elements

that produce ideology in literary works: form plays a pivotal role. As Knight explains, his approach to the analysis of crime fiction owes much to the works of literary critics Frank Raymond Leavis in the United Kingdom, the New Critics in the United States, and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, all of whom emphasize the symbiotic relationship between form and content in shaping ideology (2-4). Similarly, I argue that Portela's deliberate use of literary devices associated with crime fiction, a genre that simultaneously she constantly subverts, is integral to the ideological essence of the novel. Just as Knight demonstrates with the crime fiction examples, he analyzes, in *One Hundred Bottles* content and form work together, jointly articulating an iconoclast worldview that rejects definitive and rigid social and ideological norms. Before I analyze the novel, though, I provide two background notes, vital to understand the novel in its context.

Ena Lucía Portela, *Novísimos*, and *Neopolicial*

Born in Havana in 1972, Portela was a precocious writer who, by the time she was 18, had authored what is considered the first Cuban short story on female homosexuality, titled "Dos almas perdidas nadando en una pecera" (Two Lost Souls Swimming in a Fishbowl). Around that time, Portela befriended a group of like-minded and equally young aspiring writers who would come to be known as the *Novísimos*,¹ although she did not fully integrate into the group, which, at any rate, was never formalized. She met frequently with Ronaldo Menéndez, Yoss, or Karla Suárez, among others, who would also become successful writers in their own right. Importantly in the context of this article, the *Novísimos*, particularly the group known as *El Establo*, with whom Portela associated and exchanged readings of their works, shared common thematic interest in marginal characters. Similarly, they departed from conventional narrative structures, applied an iconoclastic perspective, showed an interested in metafiction, rejected a journalistic approach to literature, and favored literary texts that posed more questions than answers or even "questions with no answers" (Mateo 137; Uxo, "Los Novísimos cubanos" 187).

As Portela herself has noted (Camacho), the *Novísimos* were undoubtedly a heterogeneous group who, above all, valued individuality, including developing unique aesthetic approaches to literature, and distinct writing styles and literary projects. Therefore, it would make no sense to expect Portela's works to conform to a very detailed description of the group's collective output. Nonetheless, the desire to experiment, challenge traditional horizons of expectation, depart from archetypal Revolutionary literature, broaden the thematic scope of Cuban narrative, create polyphonic texts, and adopt an aggressively enquiring approach to

literature is shared by all of them, including, indeed, Ena Lucía Portela. *One Hundred Bottles*, as I show below, is a good example of that.

My second contextual note refers to the evolution of crime fiction in Cuba. Prior to the Revolution, the genre had reached a remarkable level of popularity, although primarily through translations, radio dramas, and noir films. Domestic crime fiction remained rare until the 1971 release of Ignacio Cárdenas' *Enigma para un domingo* (*Enigma for a Sunday*), which achieved an unexpected and quick success. This prompted the Ministry of Interior to establish the Anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution crime fiction award and led to the development of what came to be known as *policial revolucionario* (). Over the subsequent two decades, crime fiction enjoyed an unparalleled official support in Cuba, becoming one of the most important cultural manifestations of the time. Its primary role, however, was not literary, but to serve as a vehicle to educate readers about the Revolution's understanding of criminality, law enforcement, and legality. The constant setting of rigid rules by cultural officials, eager to instruct prospective authors on the precise manner in which *policial revolucionario* should be written, ultimately resulted in a formulaic approach and the subsequent decline of the genre.

Exactly twenty years after the publication of *Enigma para un domingo*, Leonardo Padura published *Pasado perfecto* (*Havana Blue*, 1991). The novel introduced *neopolicial* in Cuba, a fresh approach to crime fiction that would be embraced by most Latin American crime writers since the 1990s. As Padura himself has explained, he aimed to create novels with intrinsic literary value, beyond mere political commentary, and featuring complex and often contradictory characters embodying nuanced approaches to good and evil (Uxo, "Entrevista con Leonardo Padura" 28). In *neopolicial* novels the crime's resolution, or even the crime itself, become irrelevant as the main aim is to reflect on social issues, rather than solve an enigma. The publication of *Pasado perfecto*, thus, initiates the shift from "a crime fiction with no questions to a crime fiction with no answers", a transformation mirroring the evolution described above for the *Novísimos* (Uxo, *El género policial en Cuba* 1).

In the wake of what Díaz-Infante has labeled the "Padura phenomenon," authors such as Lorenzo Lunar and Amir Valle emerged, producing successful Cuban *neopolicial* narratives. Simultaneously, however, other writers began utilizing elements and conventions of crime fiction to produce texts that stretched the boundaries of the genre, incorporating a postmodern twist that some readers may consider does not necessarily fit within traditional crime narrative categorizations. Among those writers, perhaps the most prominent figures are Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Ronaldo Menéndez, Marcial Gala, Ahmel Echevarría and Ena Lucía Portela. Portela's novels *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* (*The Bird: Brush and Ink*, 1998); *La sombra*

del caminante (*The Shadow of the Walker*, 2001) and *One Hundred Bottles* are prime examples of this tendency, which I have tentatively termed *pseudopolicial* (Uxo, *El género policial en Cuba 2*).

***One Hundred Bottles*, a novel with multiple interpretations**

Summarizing *One Hundred Bottles* proves challenging due to its lack of a strictly linear plot. Rather than a chronological narrative, the narrator and protagonist, Zeta, presents a series of vignettes examining her unsettling relationship with Moisés and her friendship with upcoming writer Linda Roth. Often, though, the focus is elsewhere, delving into Zeta's upbringing and her bond with her gay father; her exploration of sexual pleasure and subsequent attraction to unconventional behaviors; her experiences residing in the Happy Hammer Corners (a converted mansion, turned *cuartería*); her aspirations to become a writer; her discovery of Havana's lesbian community; or the hardships endured during Cuba's Special Period. The novel introduces the themes of "violence" and "murder" in its second line (1), with the crime that may have been committed (a never-resolved ambiguity that persists after the novel's conclusion) also mentioned in the first chapter, in a characteristically postmodern manner. When Zeta attempts to placate an irritated Linda, the narrator praises her friends' novels:

I asked her about her latest novel – how was it doing? I lauded the previous two, which were absolutely majestic and had had great impact.... Her latest novel *One Hundred Bottles on the Wall*, was the story of a double homicide, but she still didn't know who to kill... The previous two had been bloody and truculent, but they'd be classics of the thriller genre, noir classics. (12)

In addition to Zeta, Linda, and Moisés, *One Hundred Bottles* features a diverse array of off-centre characters: Alix, Linda's lover and the primary suspect of the double homicide; Gofia and Mari la Roja, a gay couple; Yadelis, an Afro-Cuban prostitute who marries a Swedish tourist and leaves Cuba; Poliéster, a mulatto with no sense of rhythm; or JJ, a young man who escapes from Cuba during the 1994 *Maleconazo* aboard a hijacked ferry boat. Although not directly involved in the main events, Zeta also refers to her catholic confessor Father Ignacio Loyola — pun intended, not a Jesuit; and her psychiatrist Dr. Frumento, which may suggest that Zeta is undergoing mental health treatment as she writes the novel, a significant point to which I will return later. The depiction of this diverse group provides one of the novel's significant achievements; yet, it also presents one of its many contradictions and ambiguities. Is this a choral novel, where we hear the voices of various marginal characters, or is it more akin to a Bakhtinian monologic text, narrated from a specific viewpoint through which all other

voices are filtered? While Zeta functions as a metadiegetic narrator, she often assumes the role of an omniscient narrator — or even ultra-omniscient, as suggested by Romo-Cardona (145) — who appears to know and understand the emotions of other characters. I argue that we do not need to favor one possibility over the other and that, furthermore, the apparent contradiction is not a flaw, but an authorial decision consistent with the novel's multiple potential interpretations.

Scholars who have analyzed the novel, have concentrated on many different aspects, showcasing the multitude of readings the novel lends itself to. Among them, perhaps the most significant are societal taboos subverted in the novel (Yulzarí); interpretations and meanings ascribed to the body (Araújo "Escenarios del cuerpo"); La Gofia as a punk, black, and lesbian character (Smith 79-96); the role of music (Piazza 73-89) or gender (Christian 184-201; Goldman 132-150; María E. López); the portrayal of Havana's decay and its ruins (Casamayor Cisneros; Fuentes Leal y Brito Martínez 545-563; Lopez-Cabrales 179-196; Moulin Civil 187-197; Otero 143-163; Romo-Carmona 141-153); the use of metafiction, mentioned by most critics; or the presence of crime fiction features in the novel (Costanzo 71-84; López, "En torno a la novela negra"; Martínez 407-412). I contend that all these approaches are possible because the novel articulates a range of intricate and complex approaches to literature and reality, resisting a singular interpretation; even my own one is just one of the many possible efforts to illuminate parts of it. As Iraidia López notes, Zeta's world is distinguished by its "marked individuality, diversity of criteria and... heterogeneity" ("En torno a la novela negra" 23), a point furthered strengthened by Karen Christian, for whom the novel can be read as "an exploration of the intrinsic deceitfulness of fiction. Repeatedly underscoring the notion that all writing is to some extent a lie, the narrator intimates that virtually everything has multiple interpretations" (188). At least twice, Portela has made comments pertinent to my argument. In the first instance, when asked to clarify what Moisés represents in the novel, she responded: "I prefer to leave that... to each reader's interpretation. I have always tried not to be authoritative either as a storyteller or as a commentator on my own narrative texts" (De Armas). Likewise, when asked to specify the themes that interest her, she replied:

as far as fiction goes, I'm not too interested in general theses or ideas. I'm not trying to convince anybody of anything. My characters don't symbolize anything and they don't represent anything... except, perhaps, our species, which in the end is what I care most about, what most motivates me. Our desires, sadnesses, joys, conflicts, evasions, dreams... That's my theme: the human adventure. (López, "That's My Theme" 91)

This multiplicity of potential interpretations has been misinterpreted by critics like Antonio José Ponte, who has censured Portela for the absence of a “philosophy, or moral, or thesis that can provide a meaning” to her literature (32). Ponte seems to be missing in Portela the “obsessive univocity” that Yulzarí precisely commends the novel for lacking (256), and that Zeta herself refutes. Life, she asserts, is “complex and multicolored, and very rarely in black and white” (120).

In line with the postmodern rejection of grand narratives, *One Hundred Bottles* not only rebuffs them, but also refuses to become one. It does so by presenting simultaneously plausible options, and allowing the reader to assess them without any authoritative guidance. The disintegration of grand narratives is mirrored in the novel by the frequent references to ruins or derelict buildings on the verge of collapse. While critics have linked this prominent theme to the crisis of the Special Period, recurrent references to ruins are also a trope that should not be taken, or at least not exclusively, in a literal sense. Instead, they should be decoded as a visual representation of a world — outdated, modernist, decaying — that is sinking as the novel unfolds. Fuentes and Martínez suggest that behind Portela’s “poetics of ruins” other forms of ruins appear (560). They are the ruins of all monolithic truths, rejected by Postmodernism.

Portela’s dismissal of grand ideological systems is a quintessential feature of her works, well-known by

[its] boldness, irreverence, recklessness and transgression, as well as a sharp critical perspective that applies equally to any master narrative, whether it comes from nationalism, feminism or other isms. Ultimately, she goes beyond the critique of the Cuban political system to make a radical call for human autonomy and liberation by challenging the prejudices and epistemological systems she judges to be limiting. (López, “En torno a la novela negra” XX)

However, such a take on feminism is far from being a general anti-feminist stance. As Daniel Díaz Mantilla states in his introduction to Portela’s collection of essays *Con hambre y sin dinero*, in Portela’s works there is an apparent

sensitivity especially alert to anything that might suggest or mask the presence of arbitrary power, an obvious or veiled tyranny, domestic or public, the omnipotent exercise of an authority that subjugates those who suffer it, especially if the one who suffers it is a woman. (Díaz Mantilla 9)

Therefore, these comments should be interpreted within the iconoclastic framework that rejects unquestionable approaches to anything, including feminism, and continually seeks nuanced perspectives.

Gender and genre bending

Juan Francisco Gentile's reading of *One Hundred Bottles* is paradigmatic of a reductionist approach to the book. Adopting an oversimplified gender lens, Gentile argues that in the novel "masculinity appears linked... to the abuse of a self-proclaimed power... while femininity is rebelliousness, norm breaking, action and adrenaline... with a frontal criticism of... a sexist society" (n.p.). Thus, he overlooks important elements of the novel, reducing it to the kind of black and white document Portela carefully avoids creating.

The novel certainly problematizes sexism, but it goes much further than that in many ways. It also challenges the prevalent heteronormativity of Cuban society, as well as traditional understandings of gender roles. Furthermore, it repeatedly undermines "the assumption that a specific gendered performance can be associated exclusively with only one sex", and articulates "a de-essentialised view of gender and sexuality" (Christian 186 and 192).

Chapter 4, titled "Mangos and Guavas," is a good example of this. In it, Linda Roth confides to her friend Zeta that she is gay and has had a number of sexual encounters during her recent stay in New York. Linda's drawn-out and convoluted coming out is also a condemnation of imposed heteronormativity, explained through the metaphoric mention of mangos — signifying heterosexuality — and guavas — for homosexuality. However, a chapter that articulates such a clear denunciation of revolutionary Cuba's heteronormativity and homophobia, adopts a consistently tongue-in-cheek tone and includes comments on unrelated topics. That way, Portela avoids the manifesto-like mood that she consistently steers clear of.

The chapter opens with a paragraph in which Linda proclaims:

They teach us to eat mangos. [...] No, no, not like that. Maybe 'teach' isn't the right word [...] More precisely, they *program* us to eat mangos. It doesn't even matter if we eat them right or not, if we like them or not: the issue is to eat them. Mangos or nothing. They program us so that there won't be other options. (50, emphasis in original)

The choice of direct speech at this point in the narrative emphasizes the importance that Zeta attributes to it, further underlined by her marking it as Linda's "second big speech" in the novel and its placement as the opening of a chapter.¹⁰ However, the paragraphs that follow do not elaborate on this important issue, as most readers might have expected. Instead, they focus on various aspects of Zeta's life during the summer of 1996: her father's relocation to the US,

the sporadic money he sent, and how much of it went to Father Ignacio; the dire state of Cuba's economy, including Zeta's meagre meals of water with sugar and a bit of bread, her attempt to raise a pig at home, her and Linda's scheme to sell Cuban cigars in the US, and a blackout incident; Linda's progress as a writer, such as her participation in the First Hispanic Caribbean Women Writers Conference, and her first literary award for a noir short story; and even details of Zeta's culinary preferences.

Several pages later, as the chapter draws to a close, the narrative revisits the mango and guavas metaphor through another instance of direct speech: "...the thing is to eat them. Mangos or nothing. They program us so there won't be any other option.... Supposedly, mangos are the tastiest fruit in the world..." (62). The metaphor is then temporarily set aside again, as Zeta reminisces about an actual mango tree uprooted by a storm near her house. It is only reintroduced and fully explained in the final three pages of the chapter. During this conclusion, we hear Linda's voice one more time, affirming that despite her parents' contentment with eating mangos, the issue is that

there's TV, school, the movies, the telenovelas, even the cartoons. Everywhere you turn, the same message: we must eat mangos... The problem is that I've never felt attracted to mangos. Do you understand? I don't like them at all. Not even a little, nada. Mangos make me sick. Down with mangos. What I like are... guavas. (64)

Linda then explains how she "felt like a weirdo for so long because of that", and wasted her adolescence (64). Eventually she decided to have sex with a boy at school, in what ended up being quite a traumatic experience (65). Culminating in a positive note, though, Linda recalls enjoying her recent relationship with a Puerto Rican woman while in New York — but also how it ended in a serious altercation and a shooting. It was after that relationship that Linda decided that from then on, she was only going to eat guavas, for which she did not need to offer any justification: "eating guavas is a natural act.... It's not an illness nor an extravagance nor a crime" (65).¹¹

Considering the profound relevance of Linda's speech, it is interesting to observe that, scattered throughout the chapter are numerous comments that lighten the solemn tone it might otherwise have had. At the same time, they introduce significant — and not unproblematic — nuances to its gender perspective, and simultaneously engage in dialogue with some crime fiction conventions.

For instance, Zeta recalls her attempt to become a *jinetera*, the Cuban term used to refer to prostitutes. Zeta admits she failed because she knew "how to fuck but not how to get paid

for it. It's really hard for me to demand payment for doing what I most love to do" (54), a statement eerily (and provocatively?) reminiscent of Fidel Castro's 1992 remark suggesting that women who prostituted themselves in Cuba did so not out of necessity, but because they liked sex (Fusco 161).

Similarly, Zeta references Linda's participation in the First Hispanic Caribbean Women Writers Conference. Given Portela's esteemed status as a prominent Caribbean women author at the time of writing her novel, and within the context of a chapter where gender issues play a pivotal role, readers may have expected a celebratory tone for such an event, as well as the mutually supportive ambience they typically foster. However, that's not the case here. Linda describes the Conference as "incredibly boring, irritating, more social than literary and a little nutty [...] Was it possible to expect anything else from this kind of things?" (61). During the final session, when Linda reads one of her stories, the audience applauds enthusiastically. Linda, though, notes that they did that simply "because they applauded everything there. She could have winked, stuck her tongue out, stood on her head, or farted, they would have clapped just the same. That's what's called 'feminine solidarity'" (61).¹²

A third noteworthy comment is Linda's critical remark about Zeta's physical appearance. Throughout the novel, Zeta mentions several instances where she has to endure disparaging comments from Linda, what today would be labelled as fat-shaming. As a result of food scarcity during the Special Period, however, Zeta loses weight, although Linda's response is equally demeaning. For Linda, Zeta explains

with a wee bit less ass, slightly narrower hips, a belly a teeny bit firmer, my tits slightly less perky, and my cheeks a little less chubby, I'd be almost perfect. The "almost" was necessary because, above and beyond everything, I lacked height. Just a little bit of height. (56)

For once, Zeta states clearly what she thinks (although she does not dare to tell her friend): Linda's thinking was cruel and ruthless, as typical of her.

These three comments offer surprising observations made by female characters about sex workers, sorority, and body image — each addressing significant feminist issues. However, they are discussed here in a manner that diverges from the central focus of the chapter, Linda's coming out and the imposition of heteronormativity. These comments do not align with the overt overall feminist perspective that the chapter conveys; instead, they introduce controversial viewpoints that are distant from feminist frameworks. Consequently, the chapter

unsettles the readers' horizon of expectations, problematizes gender perspectives and avoids adopting a simplistic black and white approach.

Simultaneously, "Mangos and guavas" toys with a crime fiction convention, suspense. Thus, the novel's formal structure, with its deconstruction of a crime fiction literary device within a crime fiction narrative, replicates its core message — an absolute rejection of rigid approaches to social and ideological norms. Following Stephen Knight, it can be concluded that in *One Hundred Bottles* the formal elements support the narrative's immanent social ideology, offering an example of symbiotic relationship between form and content in shaping ideology (2-4).

As already noted, the chapter repeatedly delays a meaningful discussion of Linda's homosexuality, introducing lengthy narrations of unrelated events. Such constant postponement of the chapter's climax is intertwined with instances where future events are hinted at, but left unexplained. This narrative strategy, which is repeated throughout the novel, is used three times in the chapter I analyze. In the first one, Zeta mentions Alix for the first time in the novel, only to defer immediately any meaningful information about her: "Alix Oyster, the most notorious of Linda's girlfriends, as quiet as her nickname implies, who lived with us for a while, until... Well, it's not Alix's turn yet; I'll talk about her later" (55). The second one happens when Linda recounts to Zeta what occurred one night in New York:

And what had to happen happened. It started at an East Village disco, a very peculiar and crazy disco where there were only... But we have to go — she stood up — it was late, almost evening, and it didn't seem like good manners to spend the entire night at El Gringo Viejo. What she was going to tell me, the most important part — she smiled enigmatically — she'd tell me at home. (62)

Zeta remarks then: "Now I was dying to know the most important part. There's nobody like Linda when it comes to creating suspense" (62). The conversation never returns to the events of that night, and, while readers can guess what happened, it is never confirmed.

The final one is much subtler and concealed, and foretells one of the two deaths (or homicides?) in the novel. After Zeta and Linda go to the Happy Hammer Corners for a quite conversation after lunch

Poliéster's cornet sounded. It was a savage blare. Then there was another. There was a brief pause and then the first notes of a very innovative, exciting, and very off-key version of "The Peanut Vendor." Oh! I'd been wondering about the quiet.

“Shit!” cried Linda as she jumped up and down. “He's still alive? Isn't that sonovabitch ever going to die?” (66)

Poliéster does die in the final chapter of the novel, although early in the novel only seasoned crime fiction readers may have picked up that clue.

Creation of suspense is one of the fundamental conventions of crime fiction, relying on the manipulation of temporality to achieve effects like apprehension, anticipation, excitement, or ominous foreshadowing. In these three examples, suspense is generated through narrative prolepsis, an “anachrony going forward to the future with respect to the ‘present’ moment; an evocation of one or more events that will occur after the ‘present’ moment” (Prince 79). As a “present-future linking anachrony,” prolepses offer anticipatory cues that readers need to decode. It will be each reader’s narrative competence, “shaped by past and present experiences of processing anachronies in story form” what will enable them to identify them “and to feel suspense or relief according to the anticipatory cues provided by the text” (Liveley 906). However, as narratologist Gerard Genette points out, authors can fool readers by offering them “false advance mentions, or *snares*” or even “*false snares* (that are genuine advance mentions)” (77, emphasis in original). Prolepses, therefore, cannot be accepted at face value: they are literary devices that may (or may not) be used to unsettle expectations.

In the instances we have observed, Portela appears to be availing of a crime fiction convention, suspense, to advance her noir narrative. However, while she certainly achieves that, she simultaneously undermines any certainty derived from the prolepses, as the anticipation they create may never be fulfilled or confirmed. In the first example, Zeta does return to Alix later on, and Alix becomes one of the most important characters in the novel. The second example represents a false prolepsis, as the anticipated events are never narrated. The third example is a hidden prolepsis, since it is not immediately obvious that it anticipates an event that occurs at the end of the novel.

The suspense created through these three prolepses, as well as by the constant delaying of a meaningful discussion of Linda’s coming out, is in fact undermined when the anticipated climax fails to materialize. First, Zeta downplays Linda’s disclosure of her homosexuality: “Linda, calm down. [...] You are a lesbian, so what?” (66). Then, it’s Linda who minimizes the significance of the moment — a moment towards which the whole chapter was building. The conversation they just had, she says, is entirely inconsequential, merely a rehearsal for what she plans to tell her family. The climax, then, turns into an anticlimax, a non-event.

Through the use of a crime fiction convention, readers are led to anticipate a pivotal moment in the narrative, that ultimately never eventuated.

Or does it? In typical Portela's fashion, the last paragraph in the chapter adds, once more, uncertainty and ambivalence, opening the possibility that the conversation that both Zeta and Linda downplayed has, in fact, been crucial. Linda does eventually talk to her Jewish family, after which Zeta recalls:

I don't know exactly what happened, because Linda has never told me and I haven't dared to ask. All I know is that a few months later, her parents and her brother migrated to Israel. It's possible that she too will go one day. (66)¹³

The syntax used here is revealing. It contains three negatives ("I don't know," "Linda never told me," "I haven't dared") and two expressions of doubt ("All I know is that," "it's possible that"). This leaves the reader puzzled, with knowledge limited to what did not occur and what might have occurred, but not to what in fact happened. While readers, like María López does, may infer that the family migrated "to Israel because of the shame of having a lesbian family member" (70), the text does not offer any conclusive evidence. In the midst of this uncertainty, the chapter concludes, never returning to the central episode again.

Suspense, though, is not the only crime fiction convention subverted in a novel "set between the aesthetics of noir and postmodernism" (Otero 151). Zeta's narrative can hardly be considered an investigation, and the lackluster police inquiry occupies only a few lines and ends inconclusively. While she is the closest figure to a detective, her narration is constantly undermined by numerous suggestions that portray her as a very unreliable narrator, leading to an ambiguity that clouds the whole novel: Zeta is undergoing psychiatric treatment for delirium and depression, uses marijuana, frequently drinks in excess, and candidly acknowledges her ignorance of specific details. It also remains unclear whether the incident resulting in the deaths of Moisés and Poliéster was an accident or a double homicide, rendering the novel a potential crime narrative with no crime; and the traditional linear narrative leading to a resolution is replaced by a "circularity that imprisons the characters" and a zigzagging narrative structure (Torres 340; Araújo "Erizar y divertir" 22). In fact, in another postmodern twist, traditional noir appears to manifest in *One Hundred Bottles* only through metafiction (the novels written by Linda Roth) and intertextuality (the numerous references to noir writers and texts scattered throughout the novel).

Conclusion

Availing of the double meaning of the Spanish word “*género*” — gender, but also genre — María Virginia González analyses the “*torsiones de género*” — gender and genre distortions— in the novel, concluding that *One Hundred Bottles* undermines the certainties upon which classic crime fiction is built (n.p.). Similarly, I have argued that Portela undermines form and content simultaneously and complementarily, to jointly create a literary representation of her rejection of grand narratives and ideologies, which the author understands as “the various sets of pre-established ‘truths’ that are usually assumed by people who do not feel like thinking for themselves and who are afraid of freedom and the responsibility it entails, which, unfortunately, happens all too often” (Camacho).

One Hundred Bottles can be regarded as a crime narrative that deliberately subverts traditional conventions of the genre, eschewing formulaic structures and consistently challenging tropes and devices associated with conventional crime fiction. The classical three-step structure — crime, investigation, and restoration of order — is replaced by a crime that may never have occurred, an investigation that is barely recognizable as such, and an ending that resists the restoration of an order in which the narrator fundamentally disbelieves. Likewise, the novel rejects faith in human reasoning and the justice system; suspense repeatedly fails to culminate in meaningful climax; and the archetypal knowledgeable and authoritative investigator is supplanted by a highly unreliable narrator who is either unable or unwilling to resolve the numerous enigmas surrounding the events. Furthermore, the narrative frequently diverges into many parallel narrative lines, delaying, obstructing, or ultimately preventing the reader from reaching definitive conclusions.

That way, consistently disrupting genre expectations and challenging established paradigms of ‘truth’, *One Hundred Bottles* defies a simplistic reading as a clash between Good and Evil leading to a predictable resolution. Instead, it serves as a rejection of certainty and dogmatism, offering an inconclusive exploration that, once again, raises questions and provides no answers.

Notes

1.- In 2003, the prize money for the Jaén award amounted to €24,000 (approximately US\$26,000), a significant sum in Cuba, where the average salary was around US\$20 at the time.

2. - Throughout this article, all quotations from the novel are taken from the remarkable English translation by Cuban-American writer Achy Obejas.

3.- Zeta is the Spanish name for the last letter of the alphabet. In the English translation, her name appears simply as Z. In this article, I keep the original name, and only use Z in direct quotes.

4.- All four of Portela's novels were published within a span of nine years, between 1998 and 2007. For over a decade, she has been promising a fifth novel in progress titled *La última pasajera* (The Last Passenger), which remains unfinished. The lack of new major works may be attributed to her diagnosis with Parkinson's disease in 1993, when she was 21, on which she reflects in her poignant testimonial essay "Alas rotas." The essay was featured in her collection *Con hambre y sin dinero* (Hungry and without Money, 2017), which stands as Portela's most recent book to date.

5.- The title taken from Pink Floyd's song "Wish you were here". It was Portela's first published text, which she seems to consider a *péché de jeunesse* and has never included in any of her collections of short stories. In one of her rare interviews, she declared: "I found out through the Internet the legend that I was the first Cuban writer to deal with these issues, and it made me laugh. My God, I said to myself, what an uncivilized country..." (Camacho).

4.- *Novísimo* translates as "very new." Their name is in part reference to the *Nuevos* (the New ones), the literary generation that preceded them and to which Leonardo Padura belonged.

5.- Following the Revolution, the government reclaimed old mansions whose owners had left Cuba, dividing them into smaller units to accommodate multiple families at very low rents. Over the decades, these properties, now referred to as *cuarterías*, have fallen into severe disrepair and become overcrowded, with many housing one whole family per room. The term "Special Period" denotes a series of exceptional measures enacted by the Cuban government following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It also signifies the widespread hardships that most Cubans endured during the 1990s.

6.- While in the English translation the actual novel we are reading, and the novel Linda is writing simultaneously bear slightly different titles, the title of both in the original is *Cien botellas en una pared* (One Hundred Bottles on a Wall).

7.- The *Maleconazo* occurred in August 1994 in Havana, as thousands of Cubans protested against the government during the peak hardships endured in the Special Period. Some protesters attempted to hijack one of the small ferry boats that cross Havana Bay, aiming to escape to Florida aboard it, but were thwarted by Cuban Security Forces. In the novel, though, JJ fulfills the never-realized dream of many Havana dwellers.

8.- Linda delivers two more big speeches in the novel: in the first one, she announces her desire to become a writer (72); in the third one, she disserts about the unsettling relationship between fiction and reality (104).

9.- Considering the Cuban context and the year of the novel's publication, this chapter holds significant weight that merits highlighting. It is crucial to note that only a decade had passed since Portela wrote the previously mentioned "Two Lost Souls Swimming in a Fishbowl," and that female homosexuality had just begun to appear, albeit sporadically, in Cuban literature after that. Equally important is the remembrance within Cuba's gay community of the severe homophobic policies of the 1970s, when homosexuality was classified as an illness and criminalized in the Penal Code. Lastly, the chapter's title may well pay homage to the Cuban film *Strawberry and Chocolate*, where each ice cream flavor is associated with homosexuality and heterosexuality.

10.- Portela has expressed a similar point of view in one of her essays, where she uses an ironic tone to refer to the "'obligatory' gender perspective" or "the 'unavoidable' feminine point of view", and rebukes "authoritarian criticism, feminist or not" ("Bad painting o la 'inonencia' del sujeto" 29 and 31).

11.- This is the only instance when I have changed the published English translation, which wrongly uses the verb "immigrated" instead of "migrated."

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More than a Pile of Bodies: Women as Investigators, Victims, and Witnesses in the Novels of Patrícia Melo and Eliana Alves Cruz

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Abstract: If women have always been present in crime fiction as the bodies on which the story is written, it has been harder for them to write their own stories. Does putting a woman in the role of detective overturn the sexism of the genre, or does it merely place women in service of tired tropes and patriarchal institutions? Does writing about gender violence serve as a useful denunciation of real-life crimes, or does it reinforce the condition of women as victims? Brazilian writers Patrícia Melo and Eliana Alves Cruz put forward diverse answers to these questions. In the process, Melo denounces femicides and decries impunity for crimes against Indigenous women in the Amazon region, and Cruz celebrates the resilience of Afro-Brazilian women in the face of both historical crimes and the racism and sexism that continue in the present day. Whether by creating complex and imperfect female investigators, as in the case of Melo, or by lifting up the voices of survivors and witnesses, as in the case of Cruz, both writers rework the character types of traditional detective fiction to challenge social expectations for Black, white, and Indigenous women in Brazil.

Keywords: crime fiction, Brazilian fiction, neo-slave narrative, Patrícia Melo, Eliana Alves Cruz

Resumen: Si bien las mujeres siempre han estado presentes en la literatura policial como los cuerpos en los que se escribe la historia del crimen, ha sido más difícil que escriban sus propias historias. ¿Poner a una mujer en el papel de detective anula el machismo del género, o simplemente coloca a las mujeres al servicio de lugares comunes y de instituciones patriarcales? ¿Escribir sobre la violencia de género sirve como denuncia de crímenes en la vida real, o refuerza la condición de mujeres como víctimas? Las escritoras brasileñas Patrícia Melo y Eliana Alves Cruz acercan diversas respuestas a estas preguntas. Al hacerlo, Melo denuncia femicidios y critica la impunidad por los crímenes cometidos contra mujeres indígenas en la región del Amazonas, y Cruz celebra la resiliencia de mujeres afrobrasileñas frente a crímenes históricos, así como el racismo y el sexismo que siguen vigentes hasta el presente. Ya sea creando detectives complejas e imperfectas, como es el caso de Melo, o rescatando las voces de sobrevivientes y testigos, como lo hace Cruz, ambas re-escriben los arquetipos tradicionales del policial tradicional y desafían las expectativas sociales para mujeres negras, blancas e indígenas de Brasil.

Palabras clave: ficción policial, ficción brasileña, narrativa neo-esclavista, Patrícia Melo, Eliana Alves Cruz

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Introduction

Brazilian literature has become significantly more diverse in the past twenty years, both in terms of the people writing and the genres and styles in which they write. Popular genres like young adult fiction, fantasy, and mysteries are now prominently displayed in bookstores and available online, and they are no longer overwhelmingly composed of writing by men or by foreign writers translated into Portuguese. In a 2016 article, Luiza Lobo writes about a Patrícia Melo, who began publishing bestselling crime novels in the 1990s, as part of a new generation of Brazilian women writers who, freed from the burden of representation felt by their predecessors, do not feel limited to writing about “family and ‘feminine’ issues” (16), instead “shifting from female to male narrators and characters, from the home to the street, from subjection to violence, rebellion, and risk, from housewives to murderers” (17). This emphasis on action and crime can be seen in the works of even more recently published Brazilian women writers like Andrea Nunes, Larissa Brasil, Luciana de Gnone, Cláudia Lemes, Andrea Nunes, and Eliana Alves Cruz, all of whom began publishing since 2010 and have created their own versions thrillers and suspense, often incorporating other genre elements like paranormal and historical fiction. Cruz’s work holds particular interest for its focus on Afro-Brazilian characters, both in the fantastical historical mystery *O crime do cais do Valongo* (*The Crime at Valongo Wharf*, 2018) and in the contemporary realist *Solitária* (*Solitary*, 2022). Meanwhile, Melo herself has stepped out of her long trajectory of writing about men who kill. Instead, *Fogo-Fátuo* (*Will-o’-the-Wisp*, 2014) and *Mulheres empilhadas* (*Piled Up Women*, 2019; translated by Sophie Lewis as *The Simple Art of Killing a Woman*, 2023) center on women who investigate those killings. Exemplifying wider current trends in Brazilian publishing, these four novels broaden audiences’ expectations of genre fiction and of the roles that may be played by women — including women from outside Brazil’s white urban elite. While women have always been present as victims in crime stories, I will demonstrate that here they take on protagonists and agency as storytellers, investigators, and witnesses.

Critics approaching the work of Melo and Cruz have often done so tentatively, eager to comment on issues of representation and social problems while still reluctant to analyze crime novels *as* crime novels, as if the stigma of genre might take away from the seriousness of their study. This can be seen in the larger number of academic articles analyzing Melo’s *Mulheres empilhadas*, mostly in terms of its treatment of the topic of femicide, compared to the earlier, more detectivesque and less issue-driven *Fogo-Fátuo*. Meanwhile, critics such as Iasmin Rocha da Luz Araruna de Oliveira and José Luiz Matias explicitly warn against reading Cruz’s *O crime do cais do Valongo* as “mais um romance policial” (one more crime novel; Oliveira

163)¹ or as a historical or fantasy novel. Doing so, writes Matias, would cause the reader to miss Cruz's rich depictions of Black people's experiences throughout Brazil's history (47). It is certainly correct to read Cruz's work, as these critics do, in the tradition of literature by and about Afro-Brazilians, and specifically of Afro-Brazilian women, such as Ruth Guimarães, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Conceição Evaristo, and Ana Maria Gonçalves. And yet, it is also a reductionist view of crime fiction or historical fiction to assume that those genres are incompatible with complexity, feminism, or antiracism. As readers, we are also missing out if we neglect to read these works as purposeful variations on the *romance policial*, ones that use their difference from generic expectations to make space for women's voices and to denounce sexist and racist violence.

Melo and Cruz should not be read *only* as writers of crime novels, but their contributions to the genre are innovative and impactful, and approaching their work through the lens of crime fiction criticism helps us appreciate their depth. As Amelia Simpson wrote in her landmark 1990 study of *Crime Fiction from Latin America*, many Latin American authors intentionally draw attention to the differences between "the foreign, imported detective model" from Britain or the United States and their new texts, produced in the context of justified skepticism toward authorities and the state (23). Working specifically on Brazilian crime fiction, Sandra Reimão too speaks of works that highlight the "inadequação entre regras do gênero e a realidade brasileira" (inadequacy between rules of the genre and Brazilian reality; 17). We can observe that Melo and especially Cruz use the mismatch between the traditional detective plot and their stories to critique patriarchal structures and anti-Black racism. In this article I am especially concerned with the question of how gender roles in Melo's *Fogo-Fátuo* and *Mulheres empilhadas* and Cruz's *O crime do cais do Valongo* and *Solitária* overlap with the functions of character types in noir and detective traditions and, at the same time, with social expectations for Black, white, and Indigenous women in today's Brazil.

Stories featuring female investigators are not necessarily feminist. Many critics have noted the conservatism baked into the detective plot, which typically replaces confusion and disorder with a rational and orderly solution, often but not always delivered by a singularly brave and intelligent white man. As Maureen T. Reddy asserts, the structure that presents of a series of conflicting witness interviews followed by the detective's explanation inevitably reinforces hierarchy: "although we may at first think we are hearing many voices with varying perceptions of reality, one voice silences all the others, finally establishing a single version of reality" (6). Kathleen Gregory Klein contends that the hierarchies of detective over killer and killer over victim correspond to the age-old dominance of mind over body and male over

female; the characters cast as criminals and (unreliable) witnesses may have diverse genders, but “‘the body’ in the library... is, despite biology, always female,” says Klein, while “the detective is always male” because he is “always in the dominant position in the pairing” (173). As I will now discuss, this structure creates tension in *Mulheres empilhadas* and especially *Fogo-Fátuo*, where Melo’s female investigators align themselves with patriarchal and colonial institutions even as they attempt to fight violence against women. For her part, as I will show in the following section, Eliana Alves Cruz shows less interest in investigators and investigations than in elevating the position of Black women *as witnesses* to denounce crimes of racial and sexual exploitation.

Patrícia Melo: Women Who Investigate Men Who Kill

Since her literary debut in 1994, Patrícia Melo (Assis, Estado de São Paulo, 1962) has published twelve novels that vary considerably in tone, take place in various parts of Brazil, and feature complex male and female characters from all walks of life, including drug traffickers and hired killers, artists and intellectuals, salespeople and domestic workers. Many of her books have become bestsellers and have been translated to other languages; also, a successful writer for television and film, Melo creates vivid characters and intricate, suspenseful plots. A common thread in ten of the twelve novels is their exploration of contemporary violence through a focus on one male criminal, often a narrator who attempts to justify his own despicable actions to the reader.² The relatively recent *Fogo-Fátuo* and *Mulheres empilhadas* stand out, then, not only for featuring female protagonists but for making them good people. This major shift allows Melo to address gendered violence in a more direct way than she had previously: the police investigator in *Fogo-Fátuo* and the lawyer in *Mulheres* are harassed and undermined at work, mistreated by their male romantic partners, traumatized by the violence they witness, threatened and even assaulted themselves; and, as intelligent observers, they are able to see and explain how all these forms of violence are connected. At the same time, by using heroines that demand admiration (rather than, as in her previous work, antiheroes that engender readerly distrust), these novels reproduce detective fiction’s typical pattern of presenting a single character — in these two cases an educated metropolitan white woman — as the superior individual who is able to impose order and meaning in a troubled society.

Melo takes an ambivalent approach to biased institutions through the character of Azucena Gobbi, the female head of a technical division of the São Paulo police that investigates homicides in *Fogo-Fátuo*. Azucena is both highly skilled and ethically committed to her work, but her gender is held against her. She reflects that discrimination is more subtle now than

when she joined the force, “mas o mundo policial continua machista e mosógino” (but the world of the police is still sexist and misogynist; 70). For example, a new supervisor questions her leadership ability in front of her all-male team, thus undermining her authority. Even witnesses are more likely to see her as a helper or a shoulder to cry on, whereas Azucena would prefer to be treated as a professional.

Being a woman also changes how Azucena is affected by family problems and sexual violence, a situation that, as Raquel Souza de Moraes illustrates in her perceptive article on *Fogo-Fátuo* as a feminist *roman noir*, both strengthens and complicates Azucena’s characterization as a hardboiled detective. Her outlook, narrated in a close third person in roughly half of the chapters (other chapters follow other characters), is outwardly tough, even cynical, but also fundamentally honorable (Moraes 679-680 and 684-688). Like the prototypical hardboiled detective, Azucena participates actively in a criminal investigation that sometimes threatens her safety. Unlike the prototypical male detective, she faces the added challenge of convincing her male colleagues that she is not a woman in need of their protection.

When Azucena experiences conflicting pressures between job and family life — in her case, young children, sick and aging parents, and a cheating husband — she repeatedly prioritizes her work identity, even when the consequences for her personal life are quite grave. After a separation, her ex-husband Luís attempts to win custody of their two daughters by arguing that Azucena’s demanding and dangerous job makes her unsuitable as a primary caregiver. She surprises everyone, including herself, by giving him what he is asking for: the huge responsibility of care work that is normally placed on mothers. Azucena misses her children during the week, but she knows they will be cared for, and she needs to free up her own schedule to solve a murder. By having her character make this difficult decision, Melo acknowledges that professional success — especially for a woman in a sexist profession — involves trade offs. This is not the kind of triumphalist narrative that claims women can have it all, nor does it cast a judgmental eye over the mother who puts her career first.

Another example of Azucena’s intense identification with her job comes toward the end of the novel when she is sexually assaulted. After locating an isolated house where she suspects a crime to have taken place, she accepts a cup of coffee from the man she finds there. When she wakes up in a hospital, she quickly deduces that the coffee must have been drugged, and that she was raped while unconscious. Furthermore, she soon learns that she was photographed in ways that suggest she consented to degrading sex acts with strangers; the criminals have died in a chase, but they intended to use the pictures for blackmail. Among its many other harms, rape is a crime that attempts to rob people of agency and identity, reducing

them to objects and victims. In an interview centered around *Fogo-Fátuo*, Melo states that it is “a forma como a nossa sociedade machista [tenta] colocar Azucena no ‘seu lugar da mulher’” (the way our sexist society tries to put Azucena “her place as a woman”; “Entrevista” 254). Having been unconscious during the incident, Azucena does not experience the trauma of the assault directly, and her difficulty in the aftermath centers on her damaged credibility: “não é o estupro em si que causa tanta comoção” (it is not the rape itself that’s causing so much commotion; 282), she reflects upon returning to the office and monitoring her colleagues’ reactions. Rather, it is the knowledge that she fell “numa armadilha na qual só velhas bichas caem” (for a trap only old queens fall for; 282). The practice of drugging women and gay men in order to assault them, known in Brazil as “Boa-noite, Cinderela” (Good night, Cinderella), is so common that Azucena believes — and believes all her colleagues are saying behind her back — that a good cop should have been able to recognize the signs.

Despite frequent conflicts with her fellow members of the police, Azucena consistently aligns herself with them and, as Mendonça notes in her dissertation on Brazilian women’s crime fiction, benefits from institutional protection (129). Azucena’s disparaging of victims with the terms “bicha” (a grammatically feminine word used both as an insult by outsiders and as self-identification by some gay men, especially those who also use feminine mannerisms) and “Cinderela” (implying feminine naivety) illustrates some of her anxieties about gender, sexuality, and professional status. It quickly becomes clear that the victim in the murder Azucena and her team have been investigating, the well-known actor Fábio Cássio, had been entrapped by the same drugging, assault, and blackmail scheme. Earlier in the investigation, when her male coworkers Jair and Tenório joke about the dead actor as a narcissist and a “veado” (faggot), Azucena feels discomfort with their comments but declines to call them out, understanding them as a coping mechanism in a stressful job (91). However, after her own assault, her thoughts follow the same pattern of victim-blaming, a sign that she identifies more strongly with other police officers than with victims, especially if the victims are women or “bichas.” Melo says in the interview cited above that Azucena’s story will — at the time she planned to write two more novels about her — be “cada vez mais feminista” (more and more feminist) (“Entrevista” 254) as a result of the violence the character has suffered. However, the immediate effect is to push the female investigator toward attitudes that help her fit in at the sexist and homophobic institution where she has made her career.

Azucena’s internal sexism invites us to question what it means for a character or a text to be feminist. Renée Craig-Odders observes in a study of Spanish writer Alicia Giménez Bartlett novels about female police detective Petra Delicado that the police procedural is

“perhaps the most ideologically conservative subgenre of crime fiction” in that it uplifts members of the police, “an institutional pillar of male-dominated society” (76). In Brazil, police are known for their violence and corruption and are widely distrusted by the public, a factor that Simpson (20-22), Reimão (16), and others have cited as an impediment to the development of crime fiction in the Brazilian literary tradition. Still, even as Azucena recognizes incidents of corruption, chafes against unequal treatment at the workplace, and fumes against the prevalence of femicide and rape in her city, she is, as Craig-Odders writes of Delicado, “clearly a product of a patriarchal society and [...] recognizes its legitimacy” (76). Neither the police force nor the detective plot is challenged at a structural level in *Fogo-Fátuo*, but they are, to an extent, in Melo’s other woman-centered novel, to which I now turn.

In contrast to Azucena, the woman who narrates most of *Mulheres empilhadas* is more critical of institutions and more willing to see herself as a victim of gender violence; indeed, the novel emphasizes equality between *all* women as potential victims. Melo has stated that she chose not to name this character in order to have her represent all women, a commentary on the “democratic” nature of femicide (Brant). This technique is effective in urging readers to identify with the narrator, but it also obscures conditions that disfavor some women, even when it comes to violence and death. Reports show that Black women in Brazil suffer higher incidence of gender violence than white women (Amnesty International 3), and women in Amazon region — including the state of Acre, where most of *Mulheres empilhadas* takes place — are significantly more likely to be murdered by their partners than in other parts of Brazil — such as São Paulo, where the narrator is from (Igarapé Institute 7). In real life, violence affects all women, but it targets poor Amazonian women of color; Melo’s novel embraces all women, but it elevates white women from São Paulo.

In the main plot of *Mulheres*, the narrator travels from her home in São Paulo to the small city of Cruzeiro do Sul, Acre, for the double purpose of hiding from her jealous boyfriend Amir and, in her professional capacity, observing a series of trials of men accused of abusing and killing women. Familiar with gender violence from both her work and her personal history, the narrator is nevertheless shocked by the case of three young men who hunted, raped, tortured, and killed an Indigenous teenage girl named Txupira. Scions of the robber barons who conquered Acre for Brazil in the late nineteenth century, the defendants are beloved by the public and are acquitted by a jury despite clear evidence of their brutal crimes. When the narrator collaborates with local prosecutor Carla (also a São Paulo transplant) and journalist Rita to publish proof of corruption in the courts, the news only serves to provoke anger toward the professional women. Rita and later Carla are themselves killed, as are the three playboy

defendants. Far from providing relief for Txupira's family, these last murders cause the Indigenous characters to fear retribution from angry whites. To make matters worse Amir, the narrator's ex-boyfriend, manages to follow her to Cruzeiro do Sul and, after she definitely rejects him, he posts online pictures and videos of her that he filmed without her knowledge while they were having sex, along with her full name and phone number, causing her to face harassment and threats from strangers all over the country. While lacking the support of the police force that benefits Azucena in *Fogo-fátuo*, the narrator of *Mulheres* also uses detective skills to make sense of the crimes, eventually uncovering Txupira was not killed randomly but because she filmed the rich young men using her community's territory to smuggle cocaine; that Rita was killed because she had Txupira's cell phone with the video evidence; that the men were in turn killed by Carla's boyfriend, who was trying to protect her; and that Carla was killed by the same boyfriend for failing to show sufficient gratitude. Over and over again, we observe along with the narrator how women are vulnerable and undervalued in Brazilian society, and the police and courts cannot be counted on to protect them.

Throughout the novel, the narrator finds physical, spiritual, and emotional refuge in a fictional Indigenous community called Ch'aska in a remote part of Acre.³ Her participation in a Ch'aska ritual and drinking of an herbal brew provoke a hallucination of revenge and recovery that develops in a separate series of chapters interspersed with the main narrative. In the first of these, an Indigenous warrior woman incants to the gathered participants, "we women, Icamiabas, mothers, *cafuzas*, sisters, Amazons, Black women, Maries, lesbians, daughters, indigenous women, *mulatas*, granddaughters, white women..., let us follow you, bad man, bullshit man, exploiter, abuser, rapist, woman-beater. Murderer (Melo, *The Simple Art* 21).⁴ The long list of plural feminine identities included in the group of female avengers includes different ethnicities and family positions without apparent organization, suggesting not a piling up of dead bodies but a non-hierarchical amassing of power against the singular violent male. In subsequent chapters of this series, the band of women, which includes the narrator and a reincarnated Txupira, exacts quick, magical, but concrete revenge: they kill Txupira's killers and joyfully feast on their flesh. Luciene Azevedo describes this sequence as a playful fantasy that provides relief and catharsis for the narrator and for the reader (119-121), but it can also be read as a fantasy of innocence and acceptance for the white settler, a trope that Tuck and Yang have critiqued in the literature of the United States (13-17). By having the warrior collective adopt the narrator as one of its leaders, Melo instrumentalized Indigenous people, who also lack here the depth and complexity with which she typically draws her characters.

Despite its insistent lionization of its white heroine, *Mulheres empilhadas* constitutes a notable departure from *Fogo-fátuo* — and from most crime fiction — in its endorsement of truth-telling as alternative form of justice, as can be seen most clearly in the final chapters of the main plot. Having returned to the relative safety of São Paulo while sympathetic journalists in Cruzeiro do Sul publish the cellphone video and other new evidence about the murders, the narrator addresses Amir’s internet attack on her. She creates a website, *mulheresempilhadas.com*, where she republishes all the humiliating photos and videos he posted of her, but this time framed within her own narrative: she recounts his jealousy, his escalating abuse, his unauthorized filming, and his act of revenge, thus exposing his misogynistic and possessive attitudes and re-signifying the images. She then expands her story to include the deaths of Txupira, Carla, and all the other women she has learned about: fundamentally, the content of the website is the novel we are reading. Unlike in the ritual fantasy, it is not possible to undo or avenge past crimes: the murder victims are still dead, the naked pictures are still online, and the guilty are unlikely to suffer consequences. Still, both the newspaper and the new website are able to tell a new kind of story, one that indicates not only guilty individuals but the pervasive violence of sexism and colonialism.

Eliana Alves Cruz: True Crimes and Lessons Learned

Eliana Alves Cruz (Rio de Janeiro, 1966) began publishing fiction much more recently than Melo and has not been seen principally as a writer of thrillers or murder mysteries but as a Black woman writer with a strong and committed vision of history and its relevance for modern-day Black Brazilians. Already established as a journalist, she based her first novel, *Água de barrela* (*Lye Water*), on her own family history of enslavement and emancipation from the mid-nineteenth century to the present; it won the Fundação Palmares’s novel prize in 2015 and was published in 2018. Cruz has since released three shorter novels and a collection of short stories, maintaining her preoccupation with Afro-Brazilian history while branching out in terms of audience and genre. In *O crime do cais do Valongo* (2018), set in colonial Rio de Janeiro, and in *Solitária* (2022), set in an unnamed Brazilian city in the twenty-first century, she uses the mysteries surrounding a single death to explore larger questions of crime and justice.

In a 2022 interview promoting *Solitária*, Cruz characterizes the current moment in Brazilian literature as one of “diversification of narratives [that] attracts a new audience, one that for a long time was deliberately ignored by the publishing market” (“Vozes solitárias”).⁵ This diversification, according to Cruz, involves an “ampliação de vozes” (expansion of voices) including those of Black women like her, but also an expansion of “gêneros literários”

(literary genres). That is, newly published books by and about Afro-Brazilians and other historically excluded groups are reaching new audiences who want to see themselves in fiction; simultaneously, the proliferation of crime fiction, fantasy, and other genres that have tended to be undervalued by critics is now reaching a broader audience through the internet and social networks. The genre tropes employed in *Cais do Valongo* and *Solitária* can thus be seen as part of Cruz's project of reaching new readers and inspiring their pride and respect for Black women.

Both of these novels allude in their early chapters to an unexplained death, holding back the full story until the end. However, the work of investigation is intentionally undermined in *Cais do Valongo* and is largely absent in *Solitária*, where the narrators know the story from the beginning but choose to withhold it from the reader. Cruz's Black women characters become heroes not as detectives but as witnesses, defying the social expectation that they should only appear as silent workers and passive victims.

The title and opening chapter of *O crime do cais do Valongo* play with readers' expectations of what kind of novel this will be. The title, evoking those of classic mysteries like *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929) or *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), announces a violent crime at Rio's Valongo Wharf, and in the first chapter a narrator named Nuno Alcântara Moutinho explains that a merchant named Bernardo Lourenço Viana has been found dead at that location with a dagger in his belly and had two parts of his body removed. Nuno will be our guide through the murder investigation, tagging along with police chief Paulo Fernandes Viana (a real historical personage, here supposed to be a distant relative of the fictional victim Bernardo); we expect and are given a solution to the mystery.

However, readers who have studied Brazilian history or followed news from Rio will know to associate the name Cais do Valongo with the larger historical crime of enslavement. Closed with the official ban on international human trafficking in 1831 and buried under later port infrastructure, Valongo Wharf was rediscovered in 2011 and subsequently excavated as the site of disembarkation of tens of thousands of enslaved Africans. Archeologists led by Tania Andrade Lima uncovered African religious objects and, in an adjacent area, the remains of captives who had died on the voyage (Lima 322-323). Lima argues that "it is archeology's historical responsibility to bring to light what others wish to bury" (317) and orients her research toward the cause of racial justice. Fiction, including historical crime fiction, can also be seen as a way of recovering what has been hidden and denied, including both the violence committed and the humanity of its victims. As Barbara Pezzotti writes in the context of recent historical crime fiction from Italy, crime narratives allow writers to "[fill] the gaps

historiography cannot fill” when looking at that country’s history of political violence (1). In the case of Brazil, with its centuries-long suppression of the voices of enslaved people, writers like Cruz have enormous gaps to fill, and their creative re-imaginings can have an enormous impact.

The individual crime that sets *Cais do Valongo* in motion, the murder of Bernardo, is no tragedy from the perspective of the Afro-Brazilian characters, but they do want to avoid the negative consequences that could stem from the investigation. The narrator Nuno, the free son of a Portuguese immigrant and an enslaved Black woman, aspires to upward mobility and owning his own bookstore, but he had been impeded by a financial debt he owed to Bernardo. In the novel’s framing plot, he accompanies (and at times sabotages) Paulo Fernandes’s official investigation, not because he cares about who killed Bernardo, but because he wants to make sure the police do not find records of Nuno’s debt and accuse him of the crime. Far removed from the admiring sidekick of the classic analytic detective story, Nuno does not share the police chief’s mission, has little to say about his methods or intelligence, and ends up drugging the police to keep them from finding Bernardo’s accounts ledger. But in the course of protecting himself, Nuno discovers a manuscript through which he learns more about other crimes committed against individuals by Bernardo, and about the larger crimes against humanity committed by Brazil’s ruling class.

Each of the eleven chapters of *Cais do Valongo* contains not only Nuno’s voice but that of another fictional character named Muana Lòmúé, one of three Black people who were enslaved and abused by Bernardo Lourenço Viana. While her testimony provides clues about how Bernardo ends up murdered and mutilated at Valongo Wharf, she has other motives: to reflect on her journey from her childhood in rural Mozambique, to honor her family and ancestors, and to document the evils of enslavement. Much as Nuno’s sections displace the figure of the elite white police detective to narrate another kind of investigation, Muana’s manuscript de-centers the murder victim Bernardo to tell her own story.

Cruz thus creates a type of text that is not part of Brazil’s historical archive and has only recently begun to appear in its literature: a female slave narrative. African American historian Saidiya Hartman has noted that the difficulty of studying the slave trade is heightened by the fact that “[t]here is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage” (3). Moreover, as John Maddox writes, slave narratives were not an important part of the abolitionist cause in Brazil as they were in the United States and some other countries, nor have other Brazilian fiction writers used this conceit until very recently: only in 2006 did Ana Maria Gonçalves publish *Um defeito de cor*, the first Brazilian novel told

entirely from the perspective of an enslaved African woman (Maddox 155).⁶ It is significant that Cruz has Nuno discover and read a manuscript that Muana, an intelligent and purposeful subject, was able to write by herself. Muana says that she follows after her father in having a talent for languages — they both grew up speaking Makua and learned Arabic upon migrating to the city of Quelimane on the Mozambican coast. Later, Muana not only learned Portuguese but was also able to speak with enslaved people from other regions of Africa in their own languages. She is proud of having learned to read and write, first in Arabic in Quelimane and later in Portuguese while serving as a nurse’s assistant in Rio de Janeiro. She knows to keep her literacy secret in order to avoid punishment and banishment from the city, but she makes use of it to protect herself and other enslaved people, and later to record her memories. The character of Muana this serves as an example for modern-day Afro-Brazilians, including many of Cruz’s readers, establishing that, although Black women have historically been excluded from Brazilian literature, it was not because of a lack of talent or intelligence.

For his part, Nuno shifts his perspective beyond his original concern with individual punishment or advancement. The man who choked Bernardo to death, Nuno reads toward the end of Muana’s memoirs, was Alceu Coimbra, the white Brazilian lover of Bernardo’s fiancée, Emerenciana. The ones who mutilated his corpse were Muana and two other people he enslaved, named Roza and Marianno. But Nuno also learns about an African culture and an experience of slavery that profoundly alters his view of the world. By the end of the novel, he has come to lament his earlier self-identification, “me, born free, with my light black skin, only remembering my Portuguese father and rarely my mother...” (Cruz, *O crime* 195).⁷ Inspired to new admiration and solidarity, Nuno uses selected pieces of the evidence he has gained to convince Paulo Fernandes Viana to help emancipate Muana, Roza, Marianno, and another enslaved character, Tereza Nagô. He also marries the dark-skinned Tereza, despite having always been encouraged to marry a white woman, to “clare[ar] a descendência e depura[r] o sangue” (lighten one’s descendants and purify one’s blood; 38). While Muana may be seen as a model of strength and intelligence for modern-day Black readers, Nuno models a change of attitude for readers who may or may not see themselves as Black but can learn to value the Black people in their family history and in their communities.

By combining the genre of murder mystery with that of a neo-slave narrative, Cruz brings intrigue to the investigation of history and disrupts the roles of detective, victim, witness, and criminal. Crucially, the murderer, Alceu Coimbra, is barely relevant to the story. Instead of focusing on his identity, Nuno comes to understand that the enslavement of Black people was “o verdadeiro crime do cais do Valongo” (the real crime of Valongo Wharf; 195), as he

says in the last chapter. It is the work of thoughtful people like Nuno and Muana to bear witness and to investigate, to tell stories, and to leverage them for good in the world.

The questions of witnessing and of suitable work for Black women are also central to Cruz's fourth novel *Solitária*. Here she is still writing about resistance to slavery and other forms of racist exploitation, but she ties these themes explicitly to modern-day issues like COVID-19, access to university education, and above all the experience of domestic workers. In order to live their full potential, the characters in *Solitária* need to break out of the boxes that white society has put them in. This means speaking out against injustice, coming together in solidarity with other marginalized people, and rejecting roles that do not accord with their inherent dignity.

Solitária's two main characters and narrators are a Black mother and daughter named Eunice and Mabel. Eunice has worked for many years as the live-in maid and nanny for a wealthy white family. In the first chapter, Mabel tries to convince her mother to defy her former employers and go to the police with what she knows about a recent death — readers won't learn what has happened until near the end of the novel. Mabel's narration then moves back in time, and over the next fifteen chapters she recalls her upbringing, sharing the tiny maid's quarters in a luxury high-rise apartment building, keeping to the quiet and shadows all her life so as not to annoy or inconvenience her mother's employers, Lúcia and Tiago. Determined from a young age to become a doctor, at fourteen Mabel confronts an unwanted pregnancy and receives assistance with an illegal medication abortion from Lúcia. They keep it a secret from Eunice, who upholds the Catholic doctrine and Brazilian legal definition of abortion as a crime. In reality, abortion is widely practiced but tends to be more accessible and safer for upper-class women, a disparity that raises its salience for Black and working-class feminists.⁸ Lúcia, far from a selfless helper, wants to keep Mabel in her debt and will later attempt to control her by threatening to reveal the secret to Eunice. This episode illustrates Mabel and Eunice's dependence on Lúcia but eventually helps them realize her manipulative nature. When the truth does finally come out, Eunice chooses to support her daughter and leave the job with Lúcia and Tiago.

Mabel's dedication to becoming a doctor is both a defiance of white societal expectations for Black women and an affirmation of her family's traditions. She fixates on the goal precisely because, when she first mentioned the idea to Tiago, he smiled and said that "it was very difficult to get a place in a public university and that private institutions were very expensive" (Cruz, *Solitaria* 45).⁹ Without directly mentioning her race, poverty, or social status, Tiago communicates that the idea of his maid's daughter becoming a doctor is

impossible, laughable. Mabel works hard against his expectations and earns high enough test scores to be able to study at a tuition-free public university. Finding time, space, and other resources to study while working other jobs (challenges not faced by her more privileged classmates) is indeed very difficult, but both Mabel and her mother are determined that she will not end up working as a maid.

Eunice's mother Dona Codinha, who dies of a long illness shortly after Eunice leaves her job, encourages her daughter and granddaughter to be true to themselves and to the legacy of their ancestors. She opposed Eunice becoming a maid in the first place, saying it reminded her of her own grandmother's stories of when she was enslaved. Codinha, for her part, has nurtured plants for food and medicine at her small house on the outskirts of the city, and before dying she makes medical student Mabel promise not to forget the home remedies she has taught her (94). Later Eunice recognizes that, like her syncretic religious objects and prayers, Codinha's plants "tinham um passado grande que ia muito além de mamãe ou da mãe de mamãe" (had a great past that went much further than Mom or than Mom's mother; 117). Thus, domestic service — caring for and being dependent on rich white folks — is presented as an imposition and aberration within the noble tradition of Black women who care for each other and for their communities. Mabel will use her medical degree to carry on with this tradition during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tiago should not have been amused or surprised.

In the second large section of the novel, narrated by Eunice, she too has to make a choice about her role. Like Mabel in the first part, she briefly alludes to the recent tragic incident before moving back in time to recall years of humiliation and exploitation by her employers. Some months after the abortion revelation and Eunice's quitting her job, she is called back and promised a significant payment for one day's work if she will teach her replacement, a young Black woman named Irene, to prepare Tiago and Lúcia's teenage daughter Camila's favorite dish for a party. Irene, like Eunice in her time, is raising a young child who accompanies her at work. When Irene is forced to go out on an errand, Camila promises to look after her five-year-old son but quickly forgets the responsibility, and the unattended child falls through a window to his death. Instructed by Lúcia to lie to the police in order to protect Camila, Eunice then has to choose whether to do as she is told or to follow the guidance of her daughter and her own conscience. After reflecting on her life story that we have just read, Eunice decides to break the cycle of loyalty and servitude by telling the truth, sharing her story with the world.

Conclusion: Detectives and Witnesses

Eunice's journey in *Solitária* recalls Nuno's in *O crime do cais do Valongo*. On the one hand, both these characters have been raised to accept the dominant racist ideology of the world that surrounds them. In the course of his investigation, Nuno learns from reading Muana's testimony to respect and honor Black women, including his own ancestors and his beloved Tereza. Eunice begins with love and sympathy for her mother, her daughter, and other members of her community, but through conversations with these characters and by processing her own experience of mistreatment, she learns to prioritize these relationships and reject the false promises of belonging and protection from her employers Lúcia and Tiago.

On the other hand, these characters differ markedly when looked at in their relationship to the classic detective plot, with the more recent *Solitária* departing more from the pattern. In the course of subverting the official investigation of Paulo Fernandes Viana, Nuno follows him and acts like a detective, listening to witnesses and collecting clues. In contrast, neither Eunice nor other characters in *Solitária* take on an investigative role, and the police are even more peripheral and instrumental than in *Cais do Valongo*. Eunice and Mabel know the truth, and so do the other Black employees and families who live in the service areas of the building where the young boy died. Moreover, despite the assumptions of outsiders, these characters are intelligent and aware, capable of articulating who is responsible and how the specific crime relates to larger injustices. Once Eunice makes the decision to tell what she knows, there is no need for a higher authority, whether police detective or private eye, to make sense of what she is saying. The role of the police and the state, if they are going to act responsibly, is simply to listen, and then to act.

Since *Solitária* has no detective or analog, one may question the sense of labeling it as a crime novel at all, or of including it in a study or a special issue like this one. Indeed, more of this novel's promotion and reception has emphasized the continuity between historical slavery and contemporary domestic service, and this theme is clearly important to Cruz as well. Still, it is also possible to read the lack of a detective as a deliberate statement, urging us to reflect on such a character's superfluousness in a context where injustice is so blatant as to be taken for granted.

Reddy argues that narrow definitions of crime fiction tend to exclude writing by women and proposes instead looking at "all those works of fiction in which a central interest lies in the examination of events, often but not always criminal, that are partly concealed at the beginning of the story" (5). Such a broad definition certainly takes in *Solitária* as well as other important recent Latin American women's novels such as Claudia Piñeiro's *Las viudas de los jueves*

(2005), María Inés Krímer's *Lo que nosotras sabíamos* (2009), or Fernanda Melchor's *Temporada de huracanes* (2017). Something else all four of these novels share is that, along with the vividly drawn and voiced individual characters each speaking in turn, there is a collective voice of the community with its shared knowledge. The final chapters of *Solitária* are narrated in the voices of rooms where the action has taken place, including the maid's room, designed to function as a kind of solitary confinement cell for women like Eunice and Irene but finally "speaking" as another witness to solidarity between them. Rather than replace the conflicting voices with that of a single authority in the form of a detective — of any gender or race — Cruz calls us all to witness.

Patrícia Melo too moved away from the traditional detective plot and the detective character after creating the compelling Azucena Gobbi featured in *Fogo-Fátuo*. Instead of writing the promised further adventures of the São Paulo police detective, she created the narrator of *Mulheres empilhadas*, another white Paulistana but one who strongly identifies as a woman and a potential victim in solidarity with others. Notwithstanding its problematic approach to race, *Mulheres empilhadas* emphasizes collective identity, knowledge, and action. Read together, Melo's and Cruz's works show that, despite continuing discrimination and violence, Brazilian women are capable of reshaping history by taking control of the narrative.

Notes

- 1.- Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 2.- In this count I include Melo's first book, *Acqua toffana* (1994), which is composed of two related novellas, one featuring a female poisoning victim and the other a male poisoner.
- 3.- See Magri pp. 2-3 on the relationship between Melo's creations Ch'aska, Kuratawa (Txupira's community), and real Indigenous communities of Acre, as well as other aspects of the region's history.
- 4.- Translation by Sophie Lewis. *Icamiabas*, derived from the Tupi words for broken chest, was the name given by outsiders to female warriors who participated in an attack on the Spanish explorer and conquistador Francisco de Orellana in 1542. The encounter led Orellana to name the river after the Amazon warrior women of Greek myth. *Cafuzas* refers to women of mixed African and Indigenous ancestry.
- 5.- "diversificação de narrativas [que] atrai um público novo e que por muito tempo foi solenemente ignorado pelo mercado editorial."
- 6.- Two important antecedents for Gonçalves and Cruz who did portray enslaved women as complex characters, if not as writers, were Maria Firmina dos Reis (1822-1917) and Ruth Guimarães (1920-2014).
- 7.- "eu, nascido livre, com minha tez negra clara, lembrando apenas de meu pai português e raramente de minha mãe."
- 8.- In a study conducted in Brazil in 2010-2011, Diniz and Medeiros found that Black women who had illegal abortions — generally by taking misoprostol, sometimes combined with herbal teas and other home remedies — were three times as likely to be hospitalized for post-abortion

complications as white women, who tended to have better access to medical information and support (1677).

9.- “era muito difícil uma vaga numa universidade pública e que as instituições particulares eram muito caras.”

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**New Women's Voices in Chilean Detective Fiction:
Paula Ilabaca, Valeria Vargas and Julia Guzmán**

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Abstract: This article looks at women's crime writing in Chile from the last decades of the twentieth century to the contemporary upsurge in recent years, highlighting continuities and innovations. It analyses the work of a broad range of women authors within the specific sociopolitical context of the new millennium in Chile. Particular attention is devoted to the works of leading contemporary writers Paula Ilabaca, Valeria Vargas and Julia Guzmán, and their engagement with feminist issues including gender violence, sexual abuse of women and children, and femicide.

Keywords: Chile, crime fiction, gender violence, femicide, feminism.

Resumen: En este artículo se examina la participación de escritoras en el género negro en Chile desde las últimas décadas del siglo XX hasta el auge que se ha producido desde 2014. Se destacan las continuidades e innovaciones en esta producción. Se analiza la obra de una amplia gama de autoras en el contexto sociopolítico específico del nuevo milenio en Chile. Se presta particular atención a las obras de las más destacadas autoras contemporáneas Paula Ilabaca, Valeria Vargas y Julia Guzmán y su compromiso con cuestiones feministas como la violencia de género, el abuso sexual de mujeres y niños, y el femicidio.

Palabras clave: Chile, género negro, violencia de género, femicidio, feminismo.

Introduction

Women authors like Paula Ilabaca, Valeria Vargas and Julia Guzmán have emerged in the last decade, since 2015, as some of the most interesting voices within the detective genre in Chile. Taken collectively, their work has shone a spotlight on women's crime writing in a country where previous female authors had been a marginal minority. This article considers why those earlier authors remained peripheral voices and examines the sociopolitical and cultural conditions that have favoured the emergence of the new generation of writers. We analyze the contributions of women authors to the genre through a feminist lens and argue that there are clear continuities between earlier writers and their contemporary successors, especially in their common concern with inequality and gender violence.

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The first section of the article looks at the contributions made by Isabel Allende, Alejandra Rojas, Marcela Serrano and Elizabeth Subercaseaux from 1984-2014. We consider the importance in the 1990s of the nascent *neopolicial*, a form based on the hard-boiled and adapted to reflect Latin American socio political realities, which was identified with male writers and tough guy detectives. This conceptualization of the genre made it difficult for the works of women authors to match gendered expectations for the form in Chile. Similarly, the early women writers were not primarily associated with the genre and did not cultivate the series form, factors that may also have affected their reception and categorization.

In the second part, we move to an analysis of the main sociopolitical and cultural changes in Chile in the last decade that have fostered conditions favorable to feminist detective fiction achieving greater visibility and success. Among these, we consider the role of a feminist literary activist collective who promoted women within the genre, and we look at the importance of the solidarity and support of male peers and cultural gatekeepers.

Separate sections examine the work of Ilabaca, Vargas and Guzmán, looking at the kinds of detectives they have created and charting how they have each used the series format to build complex fictional universes in which they investigate different kinds of violence and authoritarianism, tracing links between past and present. We argue that the new writers have achieved more recognition in the genre because they benefit from a more receptive cultural environment and because they are all consistent cultivators of the genre in the series format. This identifies them more readily as genre writers and engages a readership that enjoys that format and commits to following particular writers and their fictional creation.

Women Writers and the Genre from 1984-2014

While it is fair to say there was limited cultivation of the crime genre in Chile in the twentieth century in comparison with nations like Argentina or Mexico, even within that small corpus of works, national production remained a predominantly male preserve until quite recently in the twenty-first century.¹ The genre in its more hard-boiled *neopolicial* form began to take off in the 1990s when writers like Ramón Díaz Eterovic (b. 1956) and Roberto Ampuero (b. 1953) seized on its potential to address the legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), and the broader recent history of Chile in the context of the Cold War. They each created popular series around male detectives in the more hard-boiled mode. Therefore, as the genre in Chile became associated with socio political and historical critique, with a special emphasis on crimes of state and abuse of power, it was also associated with masculinity. While male authors dominated genre production, there were also important contributions by women writers. For instance, Alejandra Rojas (b. 1958) published four novels in the 1990s, all of which, to a greater

or lesser extent, draw on the conventions of the crime genre. However, they did not fit within the dominant emergent *neopolicial* model since they were often concerned with the domestic sphere or the intimate world of relationships and friendships gone awry.² Marcela Serrano's *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (*Our Lady of Solitude*, 1999) more clearly complements the male-authored works mentioned above, but offering a female perspective, and expanding the critical focus of the genre to include gender inequality and sexism.

Serrano was the first female writer to create a professional detective who was a woman, and she foregrounds her protagonist's daily experience in the narrative.³ Agency detective Rosa Alvallay is a middle-aged separated mother of two teenage boys, a novel position for a fictional detective in Chilean literature. She wishes she had her own workspace in her apartment but has to privilege the needs of her children, "a study for me or the two boys in the same bedroom, it was an easy decision" (15).⁴ Alvallay is a very politically aware citizen, disillusioned with modern Chile and aware of the gulf between her youthful hopes for her country and the neoliberal state she now inhabits. She is a former human rights lawyer who experienced political exile in Mexico and is familiar with broader revolutionary movements in Central America. These elements all align with *neopolicial*, but the focus on women's lives is new. Alvallay is assigned the case of the disappearance of internationally famous crime writer Carmen Ávila but, when she discovers the author staged her own disappearance to reclaim some form of freedom, she opts not to reveal this fact. The book reflects on the constraints and limitations women face, even wealthy successful women like Ávila. As one of the characters observes: "It's difficult for a woman to be independent, even as we find ourselves at the turn of the century" (127-128).⁵

Serrano is one of the most high-profile authors of her generation and, by 1999, was already famous for her books that explored the lives of contemporary women. *Nuestra Señora* shares this focus, while ably demonstrating the potential of the detective genre to extend its socio political critique to feminist concerns. Yet, despite representing a very accomplished approach to the genre, the novel remained an isolated experiment among the author's broader literary production and did not immediately herald a wider female participation in the field. So, why did the genre remain so male dominated until recently?

Barbara Loach addresses this question in "Detecting Women: Crime Fiction by Contemporary Chilean Women Writers" (107-126) where she focuses on three authors born within the span of a decade, Isabel Allende (b. 1942), Elizabeth Subercaseaux (b. 1945) and Marcela Serrano (b. 1951). Their contributions to the genre provided the main female corpus available to her at the time of writing.⁶ For context, she provides a history of advances and

setbacks in women's rights in Chile in the twentieth century, from early organization to key moments like suffrage in 1949, the election of a female senator in 1953, and tepid advances under Popular Unity and reversals under the Pinochet regime, which promoted traditional conservative values of marriage, motherhood and domesticity. She asks "whether the apparent dearth of women writers is due to their lack of interest in the crime fiction genre, a lack of recognition or opportunity for them, or some other possible cause" and one explanation she posits is that in the 1980s "most Chilean women writers were still struggling with fundamental issues of identity and patriarchy" (111). They also faced conservative cultural expectations around the role of women in society, their representation in literature and their participation in literary endeavors.

Loach mentions the 1980s specifically and, interestingly, she suggests that Allende's *De amor y de sombra* (*Of Love and Shadows*, 1984) merits consideration as a precursor to the politically inflected *novela negra* that emerged later, since it draws so heavily on the conventions of the thriller and crime novel. If we look at the plot from the perspective of the genre, there is considerable merit to this argument. A young woman journalist goes off to write a type of fluff piece on an adolescent who seems to have supernatural abilities, but then undertakes a serious investigation when the girl goes missing. This investigation uncovers kidnap, rape and murder at the hands of agents of the state, and the subsequent cover-up perpetrated through the disappearance of the body. Of course, this is a partial perspective on the wider novel, and the author's reputation meant readers and critics associated her more with magical realism and women's writing, yet, the connections to the crime genre are undeniable. Moreover, Allende explicitly links the oppression of the dictatorship with sexual and gender violence against women in a way that anticipates the work of our contemporary authors.

In a sense, the same problem of categorization also applies in the case of Serrano and Subercaseaux, since their production in the genre is just a small part of a broader literary profile, even in the case of Subercaseaux, who has written several crime novels. They are not primarily identified with the genre and when they are pigeonholed, it is within the category of women's literature. Another factor hindering their ability to make a bigger impact in the genre is their failure to embrace the series detective format, unlike male creators of detective series such as Ramón Díaz Eterovic with Heredia and Roberto Ampuero with Cayetano Brulé.⁷

In this context, it is interesting to consider Subercaseaux, a prolific author in multiple literary genres as well as in non-fiction, whose crime novels include *Asesinato en la Moneda* (*Murder in La Moneda*, 2007) and *Asesinato en Zapallar* (*Murder in Zapallar*, 2007), featuring the sixty-year-old sleuth, Julieta Barros, who acts as sidekick to police detective Guillermo

Cabrales. Although there are female victims in each of these cases, neither novel explicitly addresses feminist issues. Yet, in the following decade, particularly in the standalone novels *Un affaire casi perfecto* (*An Almost Perfect Affair*, 2010) and *La última noche que soñé con Julia* (*The Last Night I Dreamt of Julia*, 2012), Subercaseaux very clearly addresses gender violence and femicide, with the latter exposing networks of power and privilege spanning generations that allowing victimizers to enjoy impunity as their friends and families make excuses for them and turn a blind eye to their crimes. This establishes gender violence as a systemic ill, an approach that was gaining greater traction in society as the new millennium advanced and new waves of feminist activists took to the streets in Chile, a point we will return to shortly.

If Subercaseaux's later novels had been part of a series identified with a singular female detective or detective duo, they may well have resonated more clearly with genre aficionados. As it is, these later novels stand on the cusp of a new wave of women's crime writing in Chile. In the last decade, Paula Ilabaca, Valeria Vargas and Julia Guzmán have embraced the series format and have secured visibility and recognition for women authors within the genre at national level. Their success can be linked to a growing societal awareness of feminist issues and an appreciation of how the genre can express such concerns. Before analyzing the novels of Ilabaca, Vargas and Guzmán, we will briefly look at how socio political developments and feminist activism helped prepare the cultural field for their work.

Social and political developments in the last decade

In the decade since the publication in 2014 of the last of the books analyzed by Loach, a concern with cultural authoritarianism, “the continuing societal acceptance of violence against women and other vulnerable groups” (Loach, 122) has gone mainstream. This is, in no small measure, thanks to the activism of women and girls, including mass protests on the streets of Chilean cities.⁸ In this decade, Chile witnessed the return to power of Michelle Bachelet, the first woman President of Chile who served two terms from 2006-2010 and from 2014-2018.⁹ Bachelet included steps to address gender and sexual equality in her broader social agenda, for instance equal pay legislation and the expansion of access to emergency contraception, and overturning the Pinochet era total ban on abortion to allow limited access in cases of fatal fetal abnormalities, risk to the life of the mother, and pregnancies that are the result of rape – a measure finally approved in 2017. During her second term, gender violence and femicide became a major focus of mass feminist protest. The #NiUnaMenos movement that originated in Argentina in 2016 quickly spread to other Latin American nations, including Chile. In 2017 there were protests against sexual harassment and gender violence in schools and universities

and growing demands for a gender equal education. During center-right President Sebastián Piñera's second term (2018-2022) there was a mass feminist strike on May 8th 2019, the year in which the Valparaiso collective LASTESIS first performed "Un violador en tu camino" ("A Rapist in Your Path") on November 20th. This anti-patriarchal feminist protest quickly went viral and global. Moreover, on the 18th October 2019 came the start of the *estallido social*, the mass social revolt that took to the streets of all the major towns and cities until the pandemic brought curfews and limits on movement in the course of 2020. Debates around constitutional reform and the nature of Chilean democracy dominated the political landscape for the next few years, ending inconclusively with the rejection of two proposed new constitutional documents. Feminist organization played a key role in these major events, which have also had an impact on the crime genre in Chile.¹⁰

Colectivo Señoritas Imposibles and the Visibilization of Women

This activism has extended to the crime genre, most notably in the work of the Colectivo Señoritas Imposibles (The Impossible Ladies Collective) whose aim is to increase the participation and visibility of women within the crime genre. The Colectivo is comprised of six authors: Gabriela Aguilera, Fernanda Cavada Díaz, Lorena Díaz Meza, Claudia Farah Salazar, Francisca Rodríguez Aguilera and Carla Zúñiga. They promote women's crime writing primarily through the micro fiction form where they explore the perspectives of perpetrators, victims, witnesses and family or friends affected by violent crimes. Founded in 2015, they have published several books, among them *Señoritas Imposibles: Antología de microcuento negro (Impossible Ladies Anthology of Noir Microfiction, 2016)*. The Collective have pursued their feminist agenda for the genre by presenting at specialist conferences on crime, horror and fantasy.

The issue of broader visibility is an area in which women writers have found allies in established male authors and organizers of conferences, often gatekeepers to broader access. The principle of equality in gender representation is gaining greater weight in conferences and cultural events linked to the genre, as well as in specialist publications. For instance, in 2020 Bartolomé Leal founded a specialist online magazine *Trazas negras (Black Traces)*, which regularly features stories and other contributions by women, including members of the Collective. Indeed, *Trazas negras* has delivered two special editions devoted exclusively to women's crime writing, issues 13 and 14 from September and November 2021.¹¹ Similarly, while early anthologies either omitted women or included only a small number among their contributors, this lacuna was addressed in the recent anthology of women's crime writing compiled by Ramón Díaz Eterovic *Crímenes con M de mujer (Women Write M for Murder,*

2024).¹² This collection includes stories by members of the Collective, among them Gabriela Aguilera's "El rayo golpeó el espejo" ("The Ray of Light Hit the Mirror" 33-45), a powerful psychological study of the making of a violent criminal who repeats patterns of domestic abuse he witnessed as a child. Other stories by members of the Collective present scenarios in which women characters turn the tables on their victimisers or enact revenge against them, subverting the trope of the woman as victim, while some present violent female criminals, challenging accepted gendered behavioral norms. Most of the work produced by the Collective falls within the broader category of crime fiction, rather than detective fiction. In this latter category Valeria Vargas (b. 1969), Julia Guzmán (b. 1975) and Paula Ilabaca (b. 1979) have very successfully embraced the series format, producing novels that explore the nexus between political and cultural authoritarianism.

Paula Ilabaca

Paula Ilabaca is a former employee of the Chilean police, the PDI, who has established herself as a leading crime writer in the decade since the publication of her first novel *La regla de los nueve* (*The Rule of Nine*, 2015). Across the three novels published to date, recurring characters link the fictional universe in a timeline that now stretches from 1984 to 2007. The first novel, set in the late 1990s, was followed by *Camino cerrado* (*No Way Out*, 2022) where the action begins in 2006, and most recently *La mujer del río* (*The Woman in the River*, 2024), set in 1984. All three draw on the author's intimate knowledge of professional police work, leaning on the procedural format, and they all offer multiple points of view on each investigation. All three novels foreground feminist issues of inequality and gender violence from multiple perspectives, as a quick overview will establish.

In *La regla de los nueve* readers have the first-person testimony of Gloria, mother of a young man believed to have died in a house fire, and the reflections of Amparo Leiva from the PDI and her superior Esteban Cuevas, who must establish the cause of the fire. Leiva is relatively new to the Homicide Division and Cuevas brings her along partly for gendered reasons, because he believes it is good to have a woman there when there is a mother involved. In addition to the perspectives of these three characters, through letters and diary entries, readers gain an insight into the lives of the victim and his circle of friends who are coming of age in the 1990s, the decade of Transition. Thus, Ilabaca offers a complex, layered perspective on victims, witnesses and investigators.

In *Camino cerrado*, while Leiva is investigating a case of femicide along with her ambitious and competitive colleague Urquiza, she and Cuevas are forced to revisit their earlier case, when they learn they misidentified the burn victim. Once again, the novel offers different

perspectives on the femicide investigation and includes messages and witness testimony that shed light on the victim and the perpetrator. *La mujer del río* broadens Ilabaca's fictional universe by focusing on an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the discovery of a woman's mutilated body in 1984, during the dictatorship. The novel introduces new characters like veteran homicide detective Mercedes Torrealba who works alongside the then much younger Cuevas. It has a subplot in which the child Amparo Leiva is the traumatized witness to the hit-and-run death of her best friend, events first mentioned in *Camino cerrado* (58). The book does not follow a straightforward chronological line, instead the thread of the case in December 1984 is interspersed with chapters evoking earlier months and other events in the lives of the police detectives, while also permitting the author to present the living woman who was to become the object of the main investigation.

The multiplicity of female characters in Ilabaca's novels allows the author to explore a broad spectrum of the female experience. The novels explore *machista* (sexist) attitudes, gender violence and femicide, linked to broader issues of authoritarianism. The perspective of victims, witnesses and relatives adds to the critique of societal attitudes presented in the novels. Indeed, one of the most powerful explorations of the devastating impact of patriarchal values is presented through the character of Gloria in *La regla de los nueve*. She exposes the power of motherhood as a cultural myth that is directly challenged by her own experience. As she poignantly explains: "No one prepares you to be a mum, you know. Everyone says being a mother is the most wonderful thing that can happen to you. But it wasn't like that for me" (7).¹³ Once her son Gabriel starts to grow up, she becomes increasingly estranged from the studious, creative son she has so little in common with. When a teenage Gabriel throws in her face that she has never finished a book, she does not know how to tell him she never finished school (23-24). Orphaned young, she fell in love and dropped out of school, allowing her husband to become her whole life (38). She is acutely aware of how little she knows and her shame, in the face of her son's derision, cowers and silences her. Some years later, when he verbally abuses her again, she reflects: "Men... I never existed for either him or his father" (35).¹⁴

Her lack of education and her inability to imagine another life for herself limit her life choices when her marriage fails. Here too, we see the impact of societal values around the family. When she was unable to have more children, her husband left her for a much younger woman with whom he could have the big family he always wanted. Although deeply hurt, Gloria does not question his logic. She has internalized the *machista* values of the wider society and validates his choice. She speaks of how she sacrifices everything for her son, just as other mothers do. This self-abnegation that comes close to self-annihilation is a cultural model her

generation learned from their own mothers. In the household, Gloria defers to Gabriel's wishes and moods. She never dares interrupt his reading and he is never required to do housework, considering this women's work. She recognizes her complicity in perpetuating misogyny and in fostering *machista* attitudes in her own son. Her brothers too uphold this value system. Former police officers who were kicked off the force for corruption, they believe their nephew is a sissy because he reads so much. They are only satisfied with his display of masculinity when he takes to practicing with the nunchakus, they give him to make a man of him (28), displaying a keen interest and innate skill. For the first time they see him perform a masculinity they recognize and endorse.

In her second novel, *Camino cerrado*, which is set in the new millennium, Ilabaca confronts explicit gender violence and femicide and how the media and society react to such crimes. Shortly after the death of the former dictator Pinochet in December 2006, Leiva is assigned a femicide case, the murder of a supermarket worker by her colleague and lover. The victim was a married mother of two young children, details that might typically be used in the press to apportion some measure of blame to the victim herself for engaging in an illicit affair. However, Ilabaca, through her detective protagonists, both male and female, lays the blame exclusively on the perpetrator, whose identity is clear to them from the outset. He is an unremarkable manipulative young man with sadistic tendencies. Leiva is adamant that this type of murder should never be termed a crime of passion, when it is quite simply the cowardly act of a man killing a woman, and she deplores how the media turn such crimes into lurid headlines that dehumanize the victim. Instead of headlines along the lines of the supermarket stabbing or the Christmas Eve killing, it should be referred to as the murder of Noelia (18). For Leiva the key question is why another woman has been killed, a refrain that seeks to interrogate the underlying structures of gender violence.

Similar to the use of diary entries and letters in the first novel, here text messages – backed up by eyewitness testimony – reveal Noelia's lover Joel subjected her to violence and non-consensual sexual acts. Later, while under investigation for the murder, he is banned from a BDSM club for non-consensual violence against a new partner. Negotiated ongoing consent is vital for these practices and Joel violates this principle. He wants to impose his will violently on subjugated female partners, denying them full agency. He cannot recognize the full humanity of his sexual partners, instead viewing them as objects for his gratification. The exploration of power, control and violence encompasses all aspects of the patriarchal order, from the domestic sphere to broader political authoritarianism. For instance, in *Camino cerrado*, the death of the dictator is described as the end of an era but, at the same time, Leiva

still feels as if he were about to rise from the grave "" (12).¹⁵ The narrative proximity of Pinochet's death with the murder of Noelia invites a deeper meditation on violence, one that acknowledges the permanent spectral legacy of the dictatorship, and the authoritarian strong man who embodies the worst of the patriarchal order. Indeed, to explore the link between political and cultural authoritarianism, Ilabaca sets her most recent novel in the era of the dictatorship.

La mujer del río, a novel inspired by a true crime, brings this link into sharper focus, with its setting in 1984. The association between authoritarian military rule and gender violence is underscored by Torrealba having suffered gender violence, including marital rape, at the hands of her husband, who is now a member of the CNI, the secret police. The theme of power and control, dominance and submission is explicitly linked to the patriarchal order and the heteronormative family when Torrealba recalls how her husband abused her on their wedding night. "I remembered the phrase that he kept repeating: you're my wife, obey me" (67).¹⁶ His sadistic treatment of her invite's comparison with the cruelty of the authoritarian state and how it enacts its will on the bodies of others. When the police are called to the discovery of the mutilated body of a woman, they immediately think of secret police torture and murder, since this is a depressingly familiar pattern. However, it turns out the victim died during a botched illegal abortion carried out by medical personnel unqualified to conduct such procedures. This is another kind of violence that readers are invited to compare to broader authoritarian control, the limiting of a woman's autonomy over decisions about her own body, her subjugation and control at the hands of the state. We must remember that under Pinochet there was a total ban on abortion. The conservative religious mindset that underpins this legal position is shared by several of Torrealba's male colleagues, who view this as the murder of an unborn child and consider the deceased woman as a criminal accomplice in this act. Only Torrealba sympathizes with the woman who died, understanding her desire to decide her own future. This case reminds the reader that even at the time of publication in 2024, forty years after the events that inspired the novel, access to abortion in Chile is still extremely restricted.

The procedural form has a long pedigree in Chile, but Ilabaca is the first woman to write this kind of fiction and she brings new perspectives and concerns to bear in her novels, pointing to the ways in which women can adapt and renew existing forms. Our next author, Valeria Vargas, has turned to the amateur sleuth model for her detective series and we will now examine how she has adapted this form.

Valeria Vargas

Valeria Vargas has published two crime novels to date in her Laura Naranjo series, *El misterio Kinzel* (*The Kinzel Mystery*, 2018) and *Profanaciones* (*Desecrations*, 2024).¹⁷ Laura is an independent sleuth who gets drawn into investigations in each of the novels. In *El misterio Kinzel*, puzzled by an old neighbour's resemblance to the photo of a notorious criminal from the late 1940s, she gets pulled into the orbit of a network of elderly amateur detectives, proving instrumental to thwarting a family vengeance generation in the making, and along the way solving a separate case of femicide. In *Profanaciones*, another family mystery impels her to trace the fate of a young woman who disappeared during the dictatorship. For readers, another ongoing mystery is Laura's own past, with details of her estrangement from her family alluded to in the first novel, and the disappearance of her own parents during the dictatorship standing as a mystery she is set on solving by the end of the second novel. A standalone story in *Crímenes con M de mujer*, "Chiquillo mío" ("My Child"), presents a thirteen-year-old Laura uncovering the true circumstances behind the death of a local priest. This story deals with clerical child abuse and coverups within the Catholic Church in Chile, presenting a particularly poignant portrait of one victim, made vulnerable by parental neglect due to alcoholism. Laura's own childhood is one of loss and alienation.

From these brief synopses, we can see, once again, a concern with gender violence and sexual crimes against women and children being at the centre of each story. The serial format allows the author to build up and expand her fictional universe. In the first novel, Laura collaborates with her elderly neighbors who have taken it upon themselves to investigate cold cases, including the murder of a young woman engaged in sex work, and this friendship and solidarity remains present in the second instalment of the series. Laura's personal life is of great interest to readers. Her reconnection with an old boyfriend, which is a positive feature of the first novel, becomes a weight on her in the second as he tries to persuade her to join him in Argentina and give up her investigation. Her curiosity and doggedness, even in the face of extreme physical danger, and her ability to connect with others make her a highly effective detective.

"Chiquillo mío" goes some way toward presenting an origin story, shedding light on her relationship with her grandparents and wider family, and presenting Laura as an observant child, driven to find an explanation for the inconsistencies she notices in the staged body of a dead priest. The story clearly reflects contemporary disgust at the nature and extent of clerical abuse and subsequent coverups in Chile. One of the most notorious examples is the Karadima case. In 2010 accusers went public alleging sexual abuse of minors, claims that were upheld by the Vatican in 2011. However, it came to light that the first denunciations of Karadima dated

back to 1984 but were not taken seriously by senior Church figures, who allowed the priest to continue in his work with unrestricted access to children. The duration and extent of Church protection of Karadima provoked widespread public anger, as did the inadequate institutional response to the revelations. The Catholic Church is one of the most powerful pillars and drivers of patriarchy. For a long time, the Church in Chile enjoyed a special status for its role in defending human rights during the dictatorship but this status took a massive hit after Karadima. Vargas situated her story in the decade when Karadima was first denounced.

Secrets, lies and violence within families are consistent features of Vargas's work. In *El misterio Kinzel*, acts of abuse and revenge have unintended repercussions down the generations. In killing the uncle who abused his twin brother, Kinzel unwittingly condemns his then unborn cousin – fruit of an affair with a servant – to a life of misery and abuse at the hands of her stepfather. Kinzel's mother, who enjoys a life of wealth and class privilege, shows no solidarity with this other woman, despite them having been close in their younger years. The great national myth of the family is exposed as hypocritical and exclusive, only those legitimated by people in positions of power and authority enjoy its protection.

In *Profanaciones*, as in Ilabaca's *La mujer del río*, the political context of the dictatorship leads characters to assume the disappearance of a young woman in the 1980s must be linked to state repression and that she is one of the "Disappeared". Yet, reality proves more complex. Ornella Vannucci survived kidnap, sexual abuse and attempted murder at the hands of a man who was a civilian collaborator of the CNI. At the end of the novel, we learn her father enacted vengeance for her and it was the perpetrator who was made to disappear. The perpetrator enthusiastically helped the secret police in their targeting of so-called subversives and had one of Ornella's female friends in his sights. Her sense of loyalty towards her friend and desire to save her life is what gave her the strength to survive her own ordeal. However, the trauma she suffered, compounded by her inability to speak of it, led her to flee Chile to create a new life for herself.

Her tormenter was a misogynist and Laura's present-day investigation uncovers evidence that he was also a psychopathic serial murderer of women and girls, operating with impunity and protected by his associates. Moreover, there is video evidence of his activities that prove members of the CNI were involved. As in Ilabaca, gender violence and sexual abuse of women is narratively associated with authoritarian military rule, and here, more broadly with the *dictadura cívico-militar* – the collaboration between civilians and military in the oppression of their compatriots. Once again, rape and sexual torture are linked to political repression, as

they are used here to punish women who do not conform to conservative expectations around their behavior, either through their sexual or political activities.

Like so many Chilean crime novels, this book demonstrates the unresolved nature of the past and the need to revisit the Pinochet era from new perspectives that shed light on its legacy in the present, including in the area of gender violence and women's rights. In this series, the reality of Laura's own situation as a child of disappeared parents is hinted at in the first novel and then confirmed in the second. It takes on greater focus and significance in *Profanaciones* and the novel ends with Laura deciding that her next step must be to investigate what happened to them. Therefore, readers of the series can be confident that the next instalment will, once again, link present and past, this time in the personal life of the detective herself.

Julia Guzmán's first novel also reveals a strong connection between the dictatorship era and the present as her reluctant PI, Miguel Cancino, undertakes an investigation in his hometown of Talca. However, as we will see, although Guzmán has built a series around Cancino, this is far from being a conventional one. We will also see how Guzmán projects concerns about a possible resurgent authoritarianism into the future.

Julia Guzmán

Julia Guzmán's largely conventional first crime novel, *Juegos de villanos* (*Villains' Games*, 2018) offers an interesting take on the male detective. In this book, second-hand bookseller Miguel Cancino is invited back to his home town of Talca to investigate the disappearance of a man on his wedding night. Cancino was friends at school with the wife of the missing man, though they are from different social classes as she belongs to a wealthy powerful local family. He is reluctant at first because he is not an official professional detective and has no licence to operate in that capacity. Indeed, in an amusing intertextual nod, he compares himself unfavorably to Díaz Eterovic's Heredia. This makes a serious point about the dominant tough-guy masculinity associated with the *neopolicia* that Cancino does not embody. Unlike the more confident Heredia, he is not successful with women and he remains in the friend zone as "the harmless friend, the one who listens" (84).¹⁸ As such, he is a sympathetic listener to Nicole, another friend who is in an unhappy marriage. She is also unhappy that, as a woman, she is not considered an equal by the majority of her male peers. However, she tells Cancino that with him: "I don't get the impression I belong to an inferior species" (93).¹⁹ She knows he resents her for class reasons but he is not "a sexist asshole" (93).²⁰ Through the character of Nicole, Guzmán can reflect on gender inequalities. She is separated from her husband because marriage is not what she dreamt it would be. She feels

stultified and taken for granted in the domestic role expected of her, and resentful of the fact that, although she also works outside the home, she is expected to take on all of the childcare responsibilities when she gets back. Nicole's articulation of this female experience of frustration is framed in feminist terms.

Guzmán is equally interested in class inequality. Cancino despises the tiny wealthy enclave of former classmates and their families who consider themselves superior to all around them. He describes them as *latifundistas* (the landed class), a conservative clique who supported Pinochet. Their conversations betray their causal misogyny and homophobia. They are willing to see others die to preserve their power and privilege, whether that means betraying neighbors to the military dictatorship in 1973 or sacrificing a son-in-law unwilling to play along with a financial fraud in the present. Cancino, with help from a PDI officer, exposes the self-protecting criminal network of local landowners, businessmen and members of the legal class, the same groups who collaborated in the *dictadura cívico-militar*. As we have seen in Ilabaca and Vargas, this kind of link between present and dictatorial past is commonplace in the genre in Chile. However, while Guzmán also frames themes of gender inequality and violence against the backdrop of the dictatorship, here they are connected to a much longer history of accumulation of power through violence that goes all the way back to the colonial period. *Juegos de villanos* presents a complex sociopolitical critique of power and violence at the level of the state, the family and the individual.

Miguel Cancino in *Juegos* emerges as a complex, nuanced character. Despite not presenting a tough guy persona, he perseveres in uncovering the truth, although he nearly dies in the process. There was clear potential for development of a series and Guzmán has continued to publish crime fiction with Miguel Cancino as a character, just not the Cancino from the first novel. Where Ilabaca and Vargas expand their fictional universe through links between past and present crimes, in *La conjura de los neúroticos obsesivos* (*The Conspiracy of the Obsessive Neurotics*, 2021) a different, rather inept Miguel Cancino works alongside PI Ester Molina to solve a murder spree conducted across multiple realities. This science fiction premise is played to ironic effect when dimension-hopping Molina tells Cancino she has met another version of him who was almost a hero, a likely nod to the original protagonist from *Juegos*. The metafictional touches continue. Where Cancino is an avid reader of detective novels, Molina is an avid student of crime fiction theory, which she deploys to comment on her investigation into a man crossing dimensions to eliminate alternate versions of himself and usurp their lives. This delightfully ludic, philosophical, self-referential narrative is one of the most inventive novels published in the genre in Chile.

La conjura is also groundbreaking in its introduction of the first fictional lesbian detective in Chilean literature, Ester Molina. This innovation can be mapped onto societal changes like the greater visibility of minority groups and the enshrining into law of LGBTQ+ rights. For instance, gay marriage was legalized in 2021 during Piñera’s second term in office, demonstrating the broad political consensus behind this change. Cancino and Molina return in some of the stories in Guzmán’s collection *De un infierno a otro* (*From one Hell to Another*, 2024), among which we find them facing the challenge of investigating cases with pandemic restrictions in place.

Given the focus between crime fiction and the past, it is interesting to note that the most terrifying thing Cancino witnesses in this collection is the emergence of an ultra-right political demagogue, feared for his violence by men and women alike. After listening to a speech filled with typical right wing tropes of founding “a new orderly, united society” where they would put an end to “the chaos caused by crime and terrorism” and build “a Chile that would not be stuck in the past” (34), Cancino is horrified at the thought of the future they plan to make.²¹ This kind of backlash to the liberal social advances made over recent years reminds us of the dictatorship and serves as a warning against the ever present threat of authoritarianism. While all the authors connect past and present, Guzmán also projects a warning for the future.

Conclusion

If we agree to accept Isabel Allende’s *De amor y de sombra* as a precursor to the *neopolicial*, then we can see that women writers have been using the crime genre, or elements of it, to address interrelated structures of injustice and violence at the level of the family and the state for forty years now. The new generation of women crime writers continues to address issues relevant to their precursors but they do so at a time when these issues have become part of mainstream discourse. Feminist activism in Chile dragged the subject of gender violence and femicide into the spotlight and feminist mobilization turned women into a powerful political force. The contemporary authors discussed reflect on and are part of this wider socio-political and cultural change. The most important observation from the above analysis is that the new millennium, and particularly the most recent decade, produced the conditions to attract women writers to the crime genre and to afford them greater visibility within it.

The Colectivo Señoritas Imposibles made a concerted effort to increase the visibility of women writers in the genre. Established male authors and anthologists also made a platform for new women authors, understanding the role they could play in addressing the historic gap in national production. Ilabaca, Vargas and Guzmán, with their cops, PIs and amateurs have,

above all, created engaging protagonists and narratives, capitalizing on the strengths of the series format to develop complex fictional worlds that reflect real-world issues.

The success of Vargas, Guzmán and Ilabaca as genre writers in itself opens a space to reconsider the legacy of their female precursors. Although there are clear differences between all the authors analyzed from across the last four decades, it is still important to view them under the section on women's crime writing. Where the broader category of women's writing served to marginalize the earlier contributions of Allende, Rojas, Serrano and Subercaseaux, the term women's crime writing invites them back into the genre and provides an important lens for reassessing their earlier works. It makes visible all the women writers who have contributed to the development of the crime genre in Chile and offers a framework to link and compare them across generations, revealing continuities and highlighting areas of innovation.

Notes

- 1.- For an overview of the broader development of the genre in Chile, see Quinn, Kate M., "Detective Fiction in Chile: Developments in the Genre", *Clues* vol. 41, no. 2, 2023, pp. 8-20.
- 2.- Alejandra Rojas's novels are *Legítima defensa* (*Self Defense*: Planeta Meridion, 1993), *Noches de estreno* (*Premiere Nights*: Planeta, 1994), *El beneficio de la duda* (*The Benefit of the Doubt*: Seix Barral, 1997) and *Stradivarius penitente* (*Penitent Stradivarius*: Planeta, 1999). For further information on Rojas, see Franken Curzen, Clemens, *Crimen y verdad en la novela policial chilena actual* (*Crime and Truth in the Contemporary Chilean Detective Novel*: Universidad de Santiago de Chile, 2003), pp. 179-202. Rojas's first two novels merit reassessment, especially in light of recent scholarship around the idea of domestic noir.
- 3.- For more on Serrano, see Collins, Shalisa, "Feminizing the Detective Novel: Marcela Serrano's *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*, the *Neo-policial* and the Creation of Feminine Spatial Poetics." *Chasqui*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2012, pp. 73-84. Serrano was the first woman but not the first person to create a female detective. Mauro Yberra – the pseudonym used by the writing partnership of José Leal and Eugenio Díaz Leighton – created the first female investigator in Chilean crime fiction, one of the teenage protagonists of *La que murió en Papudo* (*The Woman Who Died in Papudo*: Ediciones Linterna Mágica, 1993), a novel set in 1963. José Leal also publishes under the name Bartolomé Leal. Much earlier, in the true crime account of the murder of Sara Bell in Santiago in 1886, written by investigating detective Daniel Castro Hurtado and published in 1887 (*La Leí*), the author describes the participation of a female police agent in the case.
- 4.- "un escritorio para mí o los dos niños en la misma pieza; la decisión se tomó por sí sola."
- 5.- "Para una mujer ser independiente es algo difícil, aún a bordo del cambio de siglo en que nos encontramos."
- 6.- Loach appears to have selected texts where there is a clear detective working to solve a mystery. She does not consider the work of Alejandra Rojas. Another author who published within the timeframe studied by Loach is Cinthia Matus, whose novel *El caníbal de Laguna Verde* (*The Laguna Verde Cannibal*: Emergencia Narrativa, 2013) deploys the trope of the plucky ambitious reporter on the trail of a suspected cannibal serial killer operating in the city of Valparaíso to markedly comic effect. Matus, who is a journalist by profession, pokes fun at the more lurid style of tabloid journalism as well as subverting the thriller format in this resolutely tongue-in-cheek narrative. Similarly, the current study concentrates on three

contemporary authors from the last decade who have created series detectives, but there are other women who have made interesting contributions to the genre within that period, for instance Cecilia Aravena Zuñiga and Claudia Readi.

7.- Díaz Eterovic published his first Heredia novel in 1987 and the most recent in 2024. Ampuero published his first Cayetano Brulé novel in 1993 and the most recent in 2021.

8.- Loach rounds off her study with an analysis of Isabel Allende's *El juego de Ripper (Ripper's Game: Vintage Español, 2014)*, a novel set in San Francisco featuring teenage amateur detective Amanda Martín.

9. - Despite her popularity at the end of her first term, she could not stand again since the Chilean Constitution does not permit incumbents to serve consecutive terms in office.

10.- For more context on the recent history of feminism in Chile see Forstenzer, Nicole, *Políticas de género y feminismo en el Chile de la postdictadura: 1990-2010 (Gender Politics and Feminism in Post-dictatorship Chile: LOM, 2022)*.

11.- All of the back editions of *Trazas negras* can be found at: <https://www.trazasnegras.cl/>

12.- A literal translation, *Crimes with M for Woman*, clearly does not work. Earlier anthologies of Chilean crime fiction included no or few women writers. Díaz Eterovic's *Crímenes criollos (Creole Crimes: Mosquito Editores, 1994)*, includes no women writers which is not surprising given the date of publication, but his later anthology of Latin American crime stories *El crimen tiene quien le escriba (Crime Has its Writers; LOM, 2016)*, includes three women among the twenty-three contributors and only one of them is Chilean. Three out of the sixteen contributors to Bartolomé Leal's anthology *Santiago canalla (Santiago Riffraff: Espora, 2019)*, are women.

13.- "Nadie le prepara a una para ser mamá, sabe, y siempre dicen que ser madre es lo más maravilloso que le pueda pasar. Para mí no fue así."

14.- "Hombres... nunca existí ni para él, ni para su papá."

15.- "en un acto patético y final in a final pathetic act."

16.- "Recordó la frase que él repetía: eres mi esposa, obedece."

17.- Both of Vargas's novels are published by Huéders.

18.- "el amigo ofensivo, él que escucha."

19.- "No tengo la sensación de que soy de una especie inferior."

20.- "un huevón machista".

21.- "el caos provocado por la delincuencia y el terrorismo" [...] "un Chile que no se quedaría en pasado."

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Ladies in *Noir*: Amateur Investigators, Unprofessional Criminals, and Police Detectives in Contemporary Crime Narratives from the River Plate

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Abstract: This article examines distinctive authors writing and re-writing *noir* fictions reflecting the development of crime narratives in their native countries at both sides of the River Plate: Argentineans Claudia Piñeiro (b. 1960), the most internationally visible exponent of the so called *ola negra*, or *noir* wave, the literary phenomenon observed from the 2010s, and María Inés Krimer (b. 1951), whose *Kosher* trilogy introduces Ruth Epelbaum, the first private eye in the Argentinean tradition; and Mercedes Rosende (b. 1958), the first Uruguayan crime novelist to appear in English. Together, they epitomize key aspects of the *ola negra*: interrogation of history, cynicism and disillusionment with the State, while they also engage with sensitive issues current to the public agenda.

Keywords: *noir* fiction, Latin America, River Plate, *ola negra*.

Resumen: Este artículo examina autoras destacadas que escriben y reescriben ficciones *noir* y al hacerlo reflejan el desarrollo de las narrativas policiales en sus países de origen a ambos lados del Río de la Plata: las argentinas Claudia Piñeiro (n. 1960), la exponente más visible internacionalmente de la llamada *ola negra*, el fenómeno literario observado desde la década de 2010; y María Inés Krimer (n. 1951), cuya trilogía *Kosher* introduce a Ruth Epelbaum, la primera detective privada en la tradición argentina; y Mercedes Rosende (n. 1958), la primera escritora de policial uruguaya en ser traducida al inglés. Juntas, personifican aspectos claves de la *ola negra*: la interrogación de la historia, el cinismo y la desilusión con el Estado, mientras también abordan temas sensibles de la agenda pública actual.

Palabras clave: policial, *noir*, latinoamérica, Río de la Plata, *ola negra*.

Introduction

In its many shades (detective, hardboiled, crime, mystery, police procedurals, *noir* or *novela negra*), *noir* fiction has become very popular in contemporary world literary production

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for its capacity to generate a space where current debates are laid bare.¹ As a model which for Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen is “well suited for capturing societies undergoing dramatic change, for representing and responding directly to an age of social conflicts, risks and inequalities” (5), many Hispanic literary traditions use *noir* narratives as the go-to vehicle mediating between reality and fiction as they portray and challenge various types of violence. Indeed, according to Karen Seago, crime narratives have the capacity function as a “barometer of a society’s values and morals reflecting and interrogating what is described as a crime.” Here we look at contemporary crime narratives from the River Plate, namely Argentina and Uruguay, in the context of what Gabriela Saidón called the *ola negra* phenomenon. First observed from the 2010s among Argentinian women writers, the term applies to other Latin American literary traditions as its ripple effect was felt throughout the subcontinent: the promotion and visibilization of Hispanic American authors whose works can be read under the umbrella of *noir* fiction. Many of the writers associated with such wave went on to win international literary prizes, something that led to their entering the English-speaking market in mass.

While throughout the twentieth century Argentina and Uruguay have been avid consumers of the genre, their local crime fictions developed at different paces and in various directions. Nevertheless, one thing these River Plate traditions have in common is that until the late twentieth century crime writing was mostly dominated by male authors. Here we aim to highlight the gendered transformation of the genre across both sides of the River Plate. Thus, this article focuses on key writers exemplifying central developments in *noir* fictions at both sides in Argentina and Uruguay. Starting with Claudia Piñeiro (b. 1960), considered the most internationally visible exponent of the *ola negra*, we look at *Las viudas de los jueves* (*Thursday Night Widows*), *Tuya* (*All Yours*; both 2005), and *El tiempo de las moscas* (*Time of the Flies*, 2022). Second, we scrutinize María Inés Krimer (b. 1951) whose “Kosher trilogy” comprising *Sangre Kosher* (*Kosher Blood*, 2009), *Siliconas express* (*Silicones Express*, 2013), and *Sangre Fashion* (*Fashion Blood*, 2015) features Ruth Epelbaum, the first woman private eye in the country’s tradition. Last, we turn to the other side of the River Plate and analyze Mercedes Rosende (b. 1958), the first Uruguayan crime novelist to appear in English. Introducing amateur criminal Úrsula López, and Leónida Lima, a persistent, undervalued cop, Rosende’s caper series includes *Mujer equivocada* (*Mistaken Woman*, 2011), *El miserere de los cocodrilos* (*Crocodile Tears*, 2017), *Qué ganas de no verte nunca más* (*The Hand that Feeds You*, 2019), and *Nunca saldrás de aquí* (*You Will Never Leave*, 2023).²

Argentina: Claudia Piñeiro and María Inés Krimer as Flag Bearers of the new *noir*

Crime fiction has long underpinned the Argentinean literary production of the twentieth century. This section starts with a brief exploration of the place women writers have forged in the construction of the local tradition. Then, we present two examples from one side of the River Plate: Claudia Piñeiro and María Inés Krimer.

Although the genre has circulated widely from earlier, it is in the mid-1940s when it achieves high-brow status with the publication of the *Séptimo Círculo* collection.³ The brainchild of Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, the collection radically altered the genre's literary esteem both in Argentina and in other Spanish-speaking countries. As editors-creators, their stamp was particularly evident in the first 121 issues when they were closely involved in the selection and translation of all titles. During this first period, 90% of the 63 writers included were imports and mostly male; they also published one title by Agatha Christie, four by Vera Caspary and seven by Lucy B Malleson writing as Anthony Gilbert (Miranda, "More than the Sums of its parts" 37). If women writers included in the *Séptimo Círculo* were few, local ones were even fewer. Two exceptions were Silvina Ocampo, with a novel co-written with her husband Bioy Casares, *Los que aman odian* (*Those who Love, Hate*, 1945), and María Angélica Bosco (1917-2006) (Miranda, "More than the Sums of its parts" 32-33).

Publishing well into the 1990s, Bosco's contribution was significant. Labelled the creole Agatha Christie, she was an accomplished writer and translator. Her first novel *La muerte baja en ascensor* (*Death Takes the Elevator*, 1954), published under *Séptimo Círculo*, constitutes a neat, classic mystery in which the historical backdrop is prevalent; it can also be read as a novel of manners. Echoing traits of the whodunit, all suspects dwelling in the building where a woman is found dead had both opportunity and motive to want her dead; they also have secrets and foreign names. This reflects the moral and psychic disjunction of World War II; most South Americans distrusted Europeans who migrated after the War assuming they had something to hide. Later moving away from the detective's presence and creating stronger female characters, overall, Bosco's novels present interesting narratives and intricate plots, combined with a psychological approach to both suspects and victims (Schiminovich 44-45). Crucially innovative is *Historia privada* (*Private Story*, 1972), which can be read as a precursor of later issues addressed by *ola negra* writers: the novel introduces aspects of the hard-boiled but focuses on the social status and the position of women in society. Here Bosco presents the contrast between different paths local women are offered in 1960s and 70s: the long-suffering

wife, the wealthy, privileged mother, the struggling professional woman, and the younger generation fighting for freedoms.

It is in their role as translators that many intellectual women contributed to the development of crime fiction in Argentina. Between 1930s and 50s, Buenos Aires consolidated as a prestigious publishing centre in the Americas. Up to then, the translations that circulated in the subcontinent were old, anonymous peninsular Spanish versions. Under the various literary ventures of cultural agent Victoria Ocampo, such as her magazine *Sur* (*South*, 1930) and the homonymous publisher (1931), a new repertoire of literary models was created through translation (Willson 273). A key aspect of the *Séptimo Círculo* collection was the fact that it constituted part of that cultural operation, which under Borges and Bioy Casares' editorship only featured translators closely associated with the *Sur* group: apart from five male translators, it is mostly women being acknowledged: Estela Cano translated four issues (10, 18, 74 and 75), Haydée Lange contributed with three (24, 82 and 106), Silvina Bullrich, Dora de Alvear, and Leonor Acevedo (Borges' own mother) all did one each (72, 78 and 12 respectively); under Borges and Bioy Casares' stewardship the rest of the translators remain anonymous (Miranda, "More than the Sums" 36-37).

Fast-forward a few decades and in the new millennium women writers will dominate the scene. The first case we look into is multi-award winner Claudia Piñero who is considered the most internationally visible exponent of the *ola negra*.⁴ Dubbed the "Argentine Patricia Highsmith" for narrating the story but mainly putting the lens on the social backdrop against which the crime is set, Piñero has consistently challenged "dominant discourses by exposing the hypocrisy of certain social" and political sectors (Miranda and Ríos Castaño 3). The second case we investigate from Argentina is María Inés Krimer's "Kosher trilogy" introducing Jewish private eye (PI) Ruth Epelbaun. The fact that Ruth "is not part of an institution is significant as she offers a critical examination of her own community, local and national institutions, and society in general" (Miranda, "Terra Nullius No More" 88-89).

Interrogating Society: Three Novels by Claudia Piñero

Novelist and screenwriter Claudia Piñero (b. 1960) has been awarded numerous literary prizes, among them the German LiBeraturpreis (for *Elena Knows*, which also made the international Booker Prize shortlist in 2022), the Dashiell Hammet in 2021, the Valencia Negra and the Negra y Criminal Prize Tenerife Noir (both in 2021), the Pepe Carvalho (2018), the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Prize in 2010 for *A Crack in the Wall*, and the Clarín de Novela in 2005 for *Thursday Night Widows*. The third most translated Argentinian author (Suroor), six

of her novels are available in English (Bitter Lemon Press and Charco Press) and have also been adapted to the screen.

Piñeiro gained international success with *Las viudas de los jueves* (*Thursday Night Widows*), a novel that offers a close-up view of a gated community located outside the boundaries of the city of Buenos Aires. What begins as a search for a culprit to restore peace is gradually enlarged into a broader social enquiry. Set against the backdrop of the 2001 economic crisis, it tells the story of a group of affluent middle-class families struggling to maintain a lavish lifestyle. Mavi, the main narrator, recounts how the idyllic community of Cascade Heights is rattled when the bodies of El Tano Escaglia and two other friends appear floating in Escaglia's swimming pool. Although the forensic report confirms the men died of accidental electrocution, it will turn out that their deaths were not entirely accidental. What also comes out in the end is that El Tano is behind the supposed misfortune. Having lost his job due to the financial crisis and encouraged by a corrupt lawyer, though respected neighbor, who explains the benefits of insurance fraud by "accidental death," El Tano had plotted to commit suicide and had persuaded his friends to do the same as they can no longer afford the life style they achieved thanks to the so-called economic miracle of the 1990s.

Through a series of flashbacks and flashforwards, Mavi recollects how their paths had crossed in Cascade Heights, while also painting a picture of President Carlos Menem's 10-year government (1989-1999), a period often referred to as "the Menemist party."⁵ In that respect, the novel is a sharp reflection on how a privileged community is built and subsequently destroyed by the ephemeral economic boom of the short-lived prosperity of the 90s. The reader may find cathartic pleasures: First, there is restoration of justice of sorts, as "the unsuspected killer takes with him some of 'the worst' husbands" turning three "of the Thursday night widows into full-time ones" (Miranda, "Blood Beyond Borders" 87). Second, as these men embody the nouveau riche epitomized by the Menemist administration, "their deaths signal the end of the apparent economic miracle... and the neoliberal economic model" (Griesse 67). As we will see in other novels by Piñeiro, the younger generations offer hope and foster change: in the cover of night Mavi's son Juani and his friend Ramona used walk, skate and spy (Piñeiro 216); as modern *flâneurs* they had caught on camera what happened that Thursday night in question. Leaving Cascade Heights with his parents, Juani and Ramona ensure that El Tano's crime will not go unpunished.

Tuya (*All Yours*, 2005) and *El tiempo de las moscas* (*Time of the Flies*, 2022) are also narrated through various viewpoints featuring internal monologues from Inés Pereyra. In *All Yours* we read Inés', her husband Ernesto's, and daughter Laura/Lali's accounts, the plot also

advancing through a series of dialogues between the main protagonists, police reports, forensic information and newspaper cuts. Similarly, we read the detailed notes Inés takes as she becomes a self-appointed private detective when she finds out a mysterious love note addressed to Ernesto written in red lipstick reading “All yours” in a heart, signed with an “A” (Piñeiro 5). Dysfunctionality and overall lack of communication is at the heart of the novel: Inés resents her estranged mother who, we learn, encouraged her to marry up, suggesting she gets pregnant tricking Ernesto into doing the right thing. Equally unaware of what is happening at home Ernesto pursues what Inés describes as “monologues with Lali” (Piñeiro 5), while both parents fail to realize that their teenage daughter is having issues of her own: she falls pregnant, her boyfriend ghosts her, his mother verbally bullies her.

Overall, the novel explores “knowledge and ignorance as driving forces in all the characters’ relationships; the first crime serves to throw into relief the endemic cover-ups” (Mackintosh 306), triggering a series of deceptions unveiling what lies behind the façade of perfect marital appearances and happy families. Thus, Inés decides not to confront Ernesto; instead, she tells him to ascertain whether the affair she suspects is with his secretary, Alicia, is important to him. In such pursuit, she witnesses his violent confrontation with Alicia, which ends in accidental manslaughter. And another lie ensues: Inés plays the devoted wife and provides Ernesto with a false alibi when he becomes a suspect in Alicia’s death. The web of deceit expands further as Ernesto is hiding a second affair, while the note Inés had found was from Alicia, he is now seeing her niece, Charo. When Inés eventually finds out, she plots to kill Charo, planting evidence to incriminate him. Ironically, they end up serving sentences for the crime the other one committed (Piñeiro 164). Lali is left an orphan, and distances herself from both parents. As Mackintosh points out, the novel ends with “the younger generation’s break from the hypocrisy and deceit of the elders” (Piñeiro 308). Yet, not all is lost between Inés and Lali, as we later see their paths crossing in *Time of the Flies*.

Time of the Flies is set 15 years later and follows Inés’ release from prison. The novel offers multi-voiced narration, alternating first-person accounts with chapters narrated in third person driven by a female chorus. These alternating, chorus-led chapters constitute in-text footnotes as a group of anonymous voices denounce that “the penal code takes the masculine as universal” (Piñeiro 63). The chorus also quotes from prominent feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler, Lina Meruane, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rita Segato and (Piñeiro 61-65; 153-157; 165-171; 360-364). For the most part, the novel reflects on issues of gender, identity, motherhood and language. After serving her sentence, Inés emerges into a society she no longer recognizes. Having re-discovered and re-invented herself, she is longer Inés Lamas, her

maiden name, or Pereyra, the name she was given when she married. Now she is Inés “Experey” which “comes from ‘ex Pereyra’, of course. Ex of Ernesto Pereyra” now she identifies “as Inés Experey. Isn’t that how they say it these days? I identify as” (Piñeiro 17). Current debates such as how inclusive language is used today intertwine with broader interrogations. For example, Inés thinks that calling Charo Ernesto’s lover is “inadequate, because the woman didn’t love him more than I did,” and while she agrees that her own love for him was “damaged, betrayed, mistreated, played for a fool” it was not “sick,” as they said during her trial: “all my objections were in vain. His Honor did not understand anything beyond what duly registered in the Penal Code” (Piñeiro 19). Changes and advances happening during the time Inés was incarcerated are also noted: at the time Inés was sentenced, gender violence was not registered as a crime, “it didn’t exist, so Ernesto couldn’t have been charged with it” (Piñeiro 20). In engaging with such issues, Piñeiro invites to look at matters pertaining to “social dysfunction,” as Patricia Varas highlights, rather than on looking at “the crime itself” (89).

From one of the two-bedroom apartments Inés could afford with her divorce settlement, she and loyal friend, ex-con and partner Manca (she is missing a hand) run an ethical pest-control company that doubles up as a detective agency offering help to women in distress. When client, Ms. Bonar, asks Inés’ help to get poison to murder her husband’s lover, Inés hesitates. While she understands her client’s pain, as “a former inmate, who received early release for good behavior,” Inés thinks about her freedom being potentially in jeopardy (Piñeiro 43). In a series of storylines that will intertwine, we follow Manca’s investigations, Ms. Bonar’s real reason to want someone dead and to whom the poison is really destined to. Lali’s new life as Laura, now a psychologist and mother of Guillermina and baby Dante, are also weaved into the narrative of Inés’ journey; it will be Guillermina who will eventually reunite her mother and her estranged grandmother. At the end of the novel, as Ostrom points out, the role of the younger generation is critical as they distance themselves from hypocrisy and misinformation (Ostrom167), thus portraying hope.

For the most part, we agree with Mackintosh in that Piñeiro’s fiction focuses on ethical questions as much as in plotting and suspense (Mackintosh 321). In doing so, Piñeiro’s narratives contribute to conversations about the political and the social, inviting to debate “not only of what constitutes an offence in the legal sense but also of the line between ‘crimes’ that may not be punishable by law and yet are morally questionable,” ultimately inviting a critical reading of the system that underpins it (Miranda and Ríos Castaño 26).

Investigating the Past, Problematizing the Present: Ruth Epelbaum, the Yiddish PI

The second exponent of Argentinean *noir* we address is María Inés Krimer (b.1951). A former lawyer, Krimer contributes regularly to prestigious newspapers and literary venues. She first published a short story collection, *Veterana* (*Veteran*, 1998), but is best known for her novels *La hija de Singer* (*Singer's Daughter*, 2002), which was awarded the first prize of the Fondo Nacional de las Artes (National Arts Fund). Other works include *El cuerpo de las chicas* (*The Girls' Bodies*, 2006); Emecé prize-winner *Lo que nosotras sabíamos* (*What We Knew*, 2009), *La inauguración* (*The Inauguration*, 2011), and *Papeles de Ana* (*Ana's Papers*, 2021). Most of Krimer's narratives are set in contemporary Argentina; they combine mystery and suspense addressing current social and cultural issues. Here we tackle *Sangre kosher* (*Kosher Blood*, 2010), *Siliconas express* (*Silicones Express*, 2013) and *Sangre fashion* (*Fashion Blood*, 2016).⁶ The “Kosher trilogy” is distinctive for two reasons: it features a private eye who is a woman: Ruth Epelbaum. Having worked for the Israelite Society Archive for thirty years, she investigates a collectivity she knows like no one, allowing her to operate freely and unnoticed within the Jewish quarters of Buenos Aires.⁷ In her mid-fifties, she is resourceful, brave and is not afraid of using a gun. Ruth has a tight network of collaborators: her part-time maid and sidekick, Gladys; a chatty cousin, Lea; and Lola, a loyal, streetwise transvestite friend. Gladys's husband, a sergeant in the Forensic Department of the National Federal Police, also provides useful insights into the official investigations of the cases she is involved with. Ruth's web of unofficial sidekicks is metonymic of the collective imagination; it also provides an interesting reflection on the development of the genre in Argentina. After numerous *coups d'état* (six in the twentieth century) the official institutions policing the nation often evoke repression, corruption, as well as abuse of authority and power. Thus, Ruth still distrusts cops and does not like being referred to as the “Yiddish detective;” often complaining that even PIs get bad press: for Argentines Marlowe is as strange as Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple (Krimer, *Sangre kosher* 18).

Her first assignment is finding the missing daughter of José Gold, an eminent member of the Jewish *keilá* or collectivity. Risking a scandal in the run-up to the local elections, Gold would rather keep the police out of this matter, turning to one of his own for help. It later becomes apparent what other reasons he had to want to keep this matter unofficial. The second novel is set a few years later, when Ruth's reputation as the first *idishe* PI is already well-established. She tails Dr Vidal, a flamboyant plastic surgeon and television personality. As the plastic surgery industry and the cocaine business boom in Buenos Aires, Ruth's investigations remain realistic, eventually exposing a ring of drug traffickers commanded by the famous doctor: he used Paraguayan, Peruvian and Bolivian young women as mules, having them

smuggle cocaine in their implants. In her last case, Ruth is hired by the head of a model agency to find an It girl who went into hiding after her twin was murdered. She also collaborates with an investigative journalist; together they blow the whistle on the high-end fashion community, eventually dismantling a lucrative brand sustained by a garment sweatshop exploiting illegal Bolivian citizens. This echoes a real case in Argentina which caused public condemnation and brought about a change in immigration law: a tragic fire incident in which three Bolivians died. The incident revealed the widespread utilization of undocumented immigrants under a regime of debt slavery (Cartonera). This also resonates with international incidents like the 2013 Rana Plaza fire in Bangladesh, which killed over 1000 workers.

An overarching preoccupation of Ruth is the *Zwi Migdal*, the organized group of Polish Jewish men trafficking women from Eastern Europe operating in Argentina between the 1860s and 1930s. Dismantled in the 1940s, by 1929 the ring had 500 members and controlled 2,000 brothels throughout the country where 30,000 women worked (Goldar 240). While that particular organization does no longer exist, networks of corruption facilitating such operations remain in place. In the first novel, Gold's ring emulated the modus operandi of the *Swi Migdal*; the difference is that instead of importing Polish women, they brought girls from the Buenos Aires conurbation and the interior, who were subsequently trapped in a prostitution network (Krimer, *Sangre kosher* 176). As well as reflecting upon the history of the Jewish community in Argentina, Ruth's personal history echoes Krimer's own: "I open a box with the file of the Zwi Migdal and I take the newspaper cut of auntie Malke. Like so many other Polish women... [a]s she arrived in Buenos Aires she was locked up in a brothel" (Krimer, *Sangre fashion* 19).⁸ In various interviews Krimer mentions that she learnt her grandfather's sister had been "imported" to Buenos Aires from Poland (Krimer, "El cuento" n.p.). Several decades later, Ruth reflects, women could still be bought: since the time of the *Zwi Migdal* things had not changed much in matters of human trafficking (Krimer, *Siliconas express* 56).

Apart from being the first of her kind, the value of the "Kosher trilogy" is that Ruth's fictional investigations echo recent episodes of local history. The lack of resolution typical of the local *noir* tradition resonates throughout: emulating the outcomes of the real cases evoked by the trilogy, there is either no justice or justice is only partially achieved, which constitutes a critique of the institutions responsible for enforcing law and order. As one of the salient authors of the *noir* wave, in recalling the distant and so-distant pasts, Krimer problematizes the present.

Uruguayan Capers Narratives: Amateur Criminals and Undervalued Cops in the Úrsula López Series

Turning to Uruguay, writer, journalist and lawyer Mercedes Rosende (b. 1958) has been awarded numerous national and international prizes. Publishing two short story collections, Rosende's first crime novel was *La muerte tendrá tus ojos* (*Death Will Have Your Eyes*, 2008), for which she was awarded the Premio Nacional de Literatura (awarded by the Ministry of Culture; Sudamericana). While the first in the Úrsula López series is *Mujer equivocada* (*Wrong Woman*, 2011), it was *El miserere de los cocodrilos* (*Crocodile Tears*, 2016) that gained her the 2019 LiBeraturpreis, and was the first to be translated into English. The third novel in the series, *Qué ganas de no verte nunca más* (*The Hand that Feeds You*, 2019) is also available in English. The last two installments have been translated into German, Italian, and French; film/TV adaptation rights for the first three novels have been secured. A fourth installment, *Nunca saldrás de aquí* (*You'll Never Get Out of Here*), came out in 2023.

Set in contemporary Montevideo, the Úrsula López series combines caper narratives with plots that seem disconnected but intertwine with humor. Criticism to public institutions such as the police and the judicial system, also extends to exposing ideals of health and beauty imposed by patriarchal society, ideals that are drilled into women's heads from a young age by the beauty industry, and are also inflected in the home. Described by *The Times* as a series that "reads like a marvelous mash-up of Anita Brookner and Quentin Tarantino," it features Úrsula López, an unlikely criminal with a big appetite, Diego, an clumsy kidnapper, Antinucci, a corrupt and well-dressed lawyer, and Captain Leonilda Lima, an undervalued and over-superstitious cop. As the series advances, it is the women who reveal themselves as the protagonists, Úrsula's sister, Luz, also featuring more prominently from the second novel onwards.

Mujer equivocada starts following Úrsula, a socially awkward, overweight translator who lives alone in a gentrified area of the capital. The protagonist's trials and tribulations of her daily life take us in a journey through weight-loss groups, visits to clothes shops that become a form of torture as trendy, slim shop assistants "slap" her with comments such as "ese era el [talle] más grande" ("that was the biggest size"; Rosende 11), and a depressing medical appointment she had been postponing for four years that leaves her feeling a "una gorda diagnosticada" ("diagnosed as fat"; Rosende 53). One night she receives a phone call that sets off a series of twists and turns that will continue in other installments: a hesitant voice tells her that her husband has been kidnapped. But "¿qué marido?" (What husband?; Rosende 91), she asks herself when they hang up.⁹ The caller was Diego, a small-time crook with very low self-

esteem, who had rung the wrong Úrsula López to negotiate a ransom to release Santiago Losada, a well-known businessman he and his partner had kidnapped. Realizing she could do better than the kidnappers, Úrsula will take matters into her own hands. But things do not go to plan.

The second instalment, *Crocodile Tears*, begins with Diego jailed for the kidnapping of the businessman; his accomplice, Sergio, enjoying freedom after he found a briefcase with cash Losada was planning to smuggle out of the country. Recommended by prison mate Ricardo, a.k.a. Hobo, duplicitous lawyer Antonucci visits Diego in jail offering to negotiate his early release on one condition: that Diego agrees to be the lookout for a robbery Antonuchi has lined up with Hobo. Captain Leonilda Lima had been working on a case her male supervisor had landed on her desk involving a murder at the prison, and it was on her own visit to jail that she crosses paths with Diego and with Antonucci; it did not take her long to work out the mix up with the two Úrsulas. But her boss, Inspector Clemen, did not listen. While Captain Lima is resourceful and intelligent, she is often undervalued by male colleagues, who conversely display arrogance or incompetence. Indeed, “Leonilda’s whole life and her police career in particular have been like walking over a bed of nails, trying to climb a steep snow-covered slope...” (Rosende, *The Hand That Feeds You* 118). First assigned to investigate the assault Antonuchi orchestrates on the armoured truck, she is subsequently removed from it: she suspects this is an internal plot to avoid her blowing the whistle on the crooked lawyer and his network of corruption extending far and wide. As Captain Lima continues her unofficial investigations, her perseverance, compared to her colleagues’ ineptitude and lack of initiative, constitute a critique of the entrenched power structures in law enforcement.

The “blacklycomic caper in the style of Fargo” label featured in the cover of *Crocodile Tears* paints the tone of the whole series. The plot advances through various forms of narrations alternating first, second and third person perspectives with internal monologues, dialogues, newspaper articles, and police reports as well as short chapters that offer lively and casual observations. Furthermore, the fourth wall is often being broken with aside comments, the main narrator often addressing the reader. Thus, Úrsula explains a scene she has just described saying that the lady with a knife in her hand is not going to kill anyone, but “[s]oy yo” (“it’s me”), at 11 in the evening, about to cook some soup for “mi nueva dieta” (“my new diet”; Rosende, *Mujer equivocada* 86), or she reminds us that Úrsula “it’s me” and “I have a pile of translations sitting beside my bed” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 18). Likewise, the narrator instructs the reader to imagine scenarios such as the waiting room of the Criminal Court. But “it’s not one of those court waiting rooms you see in American television series painted in subtle colors”;

here you will not find “those neatly combed and clean-shaven agents of the law” but “the smell of caged animals” and “the row of red or orange plastic chairs” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 42-43). The image is metonymic of a tired, repeatedly ineffective justice system where the likes of Antonucci are allowed to play with people’s rights and freedoms. Thus, Antonucci epitomizes corruption and abuse of power. Not only is he a professional lawyer who does not uphold the law, but he is also someone who operates outside the legal system with no apparent conflict. He takes advantage of his prison visits to clients he defends to recruit them to commit crimes and split the profits. Carrying a “briefcase that guards don’t check. Ever” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 10), Antonucci has a free pass in and out of the penitentiary. As he fails to see the contradiction of his actions, the series also invites to critically review the ways in which the institution of the Catholic Church operates: Antonucci feels compelled to confess his sins (lusting over his private secretary, taking the Lord’s name in vain), showing sorrow and repentance with a speedy “Our Father” prayer. Yet, as he is throwing some coins into the charity box, he takes the call from an inmate, Hobo, with whom he is conspiring to plan a heist. As expected, the robbery Antonucci organized, and Úrsula and Diego intercepted, is not to have a happy ending either. In the next installments a game of cat and mouse ensues: Captain Leonilda Lima is hot on their trail, and so is Luz, Úrsula’s sister.

Through a series of flashbacks readers discover Úrsula’s weight issues originate in her childhood. Recurrent memories of her father constantly telling her “[Y]ou’re fat [...] your heart could give you;” his controlling voice interrupting her thoughts as an adult, reminding her “you need to do another slimming treatment”, which she usually combats with an “I told you to shut up... I am not a little girl any more” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 21-22). Her recollections also feature punishments for overeating: locking her up in a dark room “for your own good” and to “correct your weakness,” despite her pleading and crying what he thinks are “[c]rocodile tears, darling” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 15-17). This is particularly cruel when we learn that her sister Luz is thin and allowed to eat as much as she wants. It comes as no surprise that Úrsula grows up resentful and unhappy. Indeed, her trauma is the main motivation to get involved in crime as she needs to make quick money: she is hoping to have a gastric surgery to lose weight once and for all, something she has not been able to do by dieting. Úrsula’s taste for the best food the capital offers turns her into a gastro-expert as she knows all the bars and restaurants in the old town. Choosing the quieter ones, the ones opening late, the ones cops do not frequent is not a problem for her when meeting up with Diego to plan how to take over the heist Antonucci has lined up. As readers follow Úrsula’s journey from amateur, opportunistic crook to self-employed professional criminal, she remains an unreliable narrator as things are not

always the way she reveals. For example: she is not as big as she perceives to be, nor is the crime she committed with Diego in *Mujer equivocada* her first one. It becomes clear that she had something to do with the death of Aunt Irene, the same one she visits, religiously, at the cemetery every year in the anniversary of her passing, the same who “was always tyrannical, vindictive, even malevolent towards her,” and whom as Úrsula grew older “began to fear her” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 28). Similarly, her model sister Luz, whom in their father’s eyes she was “more beautiful” and a “better person” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 32) for being thinner also hides wrongdoings of her own. But like Piñeiro and Krimer, Rosende’s novels do not dwell on judging the crimes committed; instead, the series highlights the circumstances leading these characters to get involved in criminal activities. As Úrsula consolidates as a murderess exploiting her self-deprecating humour, there is an overall critical undertone inviting readers to ponder more serious issues at the level of what constitutes a punishable offence (such as robbery or murder), and what goes unpunished (such as institutional body shaming and parental abuse).

As *flâneuses* navigating Montevideo, Úrsula and Captain Lima take readers along when they move in and out the richest and poorest areas of the capital. In pursuit of her investigations to prepare for a holdup, Úrsula rides the bus from the gentrified cobbled streets of Montevideo’s Old Town to upper-middle class areas, through close-by “dwellings constructed from wood and corrugated iron, shacks where the poorest of the poor live, where the poverty resides” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 114). The juxtaposition of such diverse socio-economic settings highlights how close the haves and the have-nots live. This is particularly evident in the first two installments of the series when the protagonist ponders about how different existences she and her namesake lead: while she can only dream “to move out of the Old Town, buy a house in Carrasco with a swimming pool and a maid and a fancy car,” the better Úrsula López lives in a luxurious apartment block in Punta Carretas “with its polished bronze frame... waxed marble entrance... [and] uniformed doorman” (Rosende, *Crocodile Tears* 22-23). Certainly, Punta Carretas functions as a palimpsest where we can read the country’s recent history. Most people visiting the wealthy mall where the best “clothing and jewelry stores are” (Rosende, *The Hand* 28) will be aware that the shopping center sits in an old jail. Built in 1915, Punta Carretas Penitentiary became infamous for its political prisoners during the civic-military dictatorship (1973-1985). In 1971, over 100 prisoners from the Tupamaros guerrilla group escaped through a tunnel. The prison was closed in 1986 after a mutiny; a few years later, it became the upscale mall it is today. Likewise, the third instalment includes a prologue featuring a cutting from *La Diaria* explaining how “[o]n 6 September 1971, Tupamaro

guerrillas escaped” through an underground passage “and without firing a single shot;” the novel starts with Úrsula and Luz absconding through a tunnel (Rosende, *The Hand* 2-5). In fact, that prison break also contributes what became a national caper narrative in itself: “Self-styled revolutionaries with a knack for publicity” the Tupamaros already had a reputation for “Robin Hood-esque economic redistribution stunts when their escape from Punta Carretas Prison landed them in the Guinness Book of World Records” (Hayman). Weaving such snippets of recent history contributes to Rosende’s series not only being verisimilar in tone but, most importantly, also anchoring it to the Uruguayan locale.

It is because of such anchors that Rosende’s novels made such a contribution to Uruguayan *noir*. Published under *Cosecha Roja*, the crime fiction collection edited by Marcela Saborido (HUM publishers), Rosende is one of the few women featured, and one of the few authors with multiple titles. The collection itself constitutes a major development and consolidation of local crime writing: with over 30 novels published since it came out in 2010, it was crucial to give visibility to a genre, which in contrast to what happens in Argentina, Uruguay had relegated to a second place, as Saborido claims (Ferreira). While *Cosecha Roja* is still to feature many women writers (apart from Rosende, the other exception is Cecilia Ríos’ *Volver de noche* (*Coming Back at Night*, 2019), such trend is something that, as chief editor, Saborido is set to revert, particularly because in her opinion both Ríos and Rosende write beyond *noir*, their novels considered feminist pieces in their own rights (Ferreira).

Conclusion

Discussing the many shades of *noir* Latin American women’s crime fiction have taken, Patricia Varas points out that Piñeiro’s narratives underscore “social dysfunction more than the crime itself” (89), something that also applies to the works of María Inés Krimer and Mercedes Rosende. In narrating issues that affect women’s private and public spheres, such as mothering, health, domestic violence, and financial independence, these narratives shed light on what Piñeiro calls “the crime behind the crime” (*Escribir un silencio* 210). If we take into account that, as Charlotte Beyer puts it, “contemporary crime fiction urges readers to challenge what culture deems ‘legitimate’ and to reassess the meanings of” what constitutes a crime (9), then the works by Piñeiro, Krimer, and Rosende articulate critical readings reflecting and reflecting upon current issues not only at a socio-political level but also at the level of crime writing.

Set in contemporary locales, the authors analyzed here combine humor with elements of classic and thriller novels, channeling themes such as corruption, social divides, gender prejudice, and state-sanctioned crimes. As such, they portray some key preoccupations at the forefront of many of the writers associated with the *ola negra* that have been discussed in this

special issue: interrogation of history, cynicism and disillusionment with the State, while they also engage with sensitive issues current to women’s public agenda.

Ultimately, in their own individual ways, Piñeiro, Krimer and Rosende challenge dominant discourses as they address gender issues contributing to marking a shift in local crime writing. If, as Karen Seago tells us, crime narratives often function as indicators of the values and morals of the society in question as they reflect and interrogate what is considered a crime (2014), through their leading amateur investigators, improvised criminals, or police detectives Piñeiro, Krimer and Rosende epitomize the essence of the many shades of contemporary Latin American *noir*.

Notes

- 1.- While in the Latin American tradition the terms *relato policial*, or simply *el policial*, are most frequently used as an overarching term for crime fiction, here we make use of *novela negra* or *noir* narrative to refer to what Glen S. Close calls “a broad generic category encompassing both detective-centered and criminal-centered subgenres” (142).
- 2.- Here we use Miranda France’s translations of /Other translations are Carolina Miranda’s.
- 3.- Published by Emecé, the collection issued 366 novels between 1945 and 1983 (Miranda “More Than the Sums” 32).
- 4.- Many of Piñeiro’s novels have made a successful cross to the big screen: *Las viudas de los jueves* (directed by Marcelo Piñeyro, 2009), *Betibú* (directed by Miguel Cohan, 2014), *Tuya* (directed by Edgardo González Amer, 2015), *Las grietas de Jara* (directed by Nicolás Gil Lavedra, 2018), and *Elena sabe* (directed by Anahí Berneri, 2023). Piñeiro also co-wrote the acclaimed and controversial *El reino* (*The Kingdom*), a mini-series portraying the corruption and criminal activities of an Evangelical Pastor and his family. The first season was launched on Netflix in 2021, the second in 2023.
- 5.- The name first appeared in Silvina Walger’s *Pizza con champagne. La fiesta menemista* (*Pizza with Champagne. The Menemist party*; Espasa, 1994).
- 6.- Krimer’s most recent trilogy features journalist-cum-detective Marcia Meyer and includes *Noxa* (*Toxic*, 2017), *Cupo* (*Quota*, 2019), and *Fin de temporada* (*End of Season*, 2022).
- 7.- Argentina has the biggest Jewish community of South America (87,000), 90 percent of whom live in the capital. The first wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in Buenos Aires in 1889 from Russians and settled as land workers in the province of Santa Fe; many later moved to Buenos Aires, to the quarter of Once, seeking education and social advancement. The 1920s saw a second major wave of Jewish immigration coming from Eastern Europe. Neighboring Villa Crespo was the chosen place for the Eastern European Jews; Yiddish was the *lingua franca* (Fingueret 304). Both areas have retained their traditionally Jewish heritage.
- 8.- “Abro una caja con el archivo de la Swi Migdal y sacó el recorte de la tía Malke. Como tantas polacas... [n]i bien llegó a Buenos Aires... fue encerrada en un prostíbulo.”
- 9.- This is the first of a series of plot diversions that lend the novels to be compared to films such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), and to Paul Auster’s trilogy, *City of Glass* (1985) which starts with a phone call in the middle of the night to writer Quinn asking if he was Paul Auster, the private detective.

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CRÍTICA-ESSAYS



Miguel Ángel Sosme con su obra

**Challenging Constructions of Masculinity in Mayra Santos Febres's
*Cualquier miércoles soy tuya***

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Abstract: In this essay, I explore how the novel *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* (2002) by Mayra Santos Febres seeks to dismantle the myth of the Caribbean macho and the interplay between patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. By analyzing the depictions of four male characters, I examine how Santos Febres redefines notions of masculinity and patriarchy to create a redefined Caribbean man. The characters negotiate their identities in a territoriality that relentlessly enforces traditional gender roles. Through closed readings that shed light on the processes of shows deconstruction, re-territorialization, subversion, and the formation of a new male identity, I demonstrate how Santos Febres establishes a foundation for the demystification of the alpha man in Puerto Rico.

Keywords: Detective fiction, patriarchy, masculinity, Mayra Santos Febres, Puerto Rico.

Resumen: En este ensayo exploro cómo la novela *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* (2002) de Mayra Santos Febres trata de desmontar el mito del macho caribeño y la interacción entre el patriarcado y la masculinidad hegemónica. Analizando las representaciones de cuatro personajes masculinos, examino cómo Santos Febres redefine las nociones de masculinidad y patriarcado para crear un hombre caribeño redefinido. Los personajes negocian sus identidades en una territorialidad que impone implacablemente los roles de género tradicionales. A través de una lectura detallada que arroja luz sobre los procesos de deconstrucción de los shows, re-territorialización, subversión y la formación de una nueva identidad masculina, demuestro cómo Santos Febres establece una base para la desmitificación del hombre alfa en Puerto Rico.

Palabras clave: Ficción detectivesca, patriarcado, masculinidad, Mayra Santos Febres, Puerto Rico.

Introduction

The detective novel *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* (*I Am Yours Any Wednesday*; 2002) by Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos Febres, tells the story of a Puerto Rico that resists the supremacy of a hegemonic society and creates liminal spaces from where the island negotiates the experience of the Caribbean that is both subordinate and hegemonic.¹ The novel is about Julián Castrodad, a not-very-successful writer who, although racially and ethnically fitting within the myth of the great Puerto Rican family, fails to position himself in the hegemonic

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world of dominant masculinities. After losing his job as an editor at a news journal, Julián takes a night shift receptionist job at the Tulán Motel. Very soon, Julián discovers that anomalous situations are occurring at the Motel: strange visitors and mysterious clients who look like drug dealers. Julián becomes aware of where he is and begins to take notes for what could be his first novel. Yet, he is the kind of detective who never solves the mysteries or crimes happening around him. There, he also finds himself in a complicated network of relationships that leads him to question his own masculinity. His job at the Tulán Motel allows him to intertwine himself in the margins and centers of the cosmopolitan city, to position himself inside and outside, and in both hegemony and subalternity. The novel unfolds between the modernity of the urban and the tradition of faith in *Santería* (ways of saints), as well as on the margins of nightlife. The copious novel's descriptions propose a new worldview on the Caribbean subject, and consequently, the narrative constructs protagonists and characters who are (de)objectified and detached from the Caribbean myth—that which characterizes a seductive, bewitching, and loutish land—with the clear purpose of cultivating the antonymy of the great Puerto Rican family and deconstructing the patriarchy that flourishes in the macho Caribbean.²

In this essay, I examine how the novel *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* aims to deconstruct the myth of the Caribbean macho and dismantle the dynamics between patriarchy and the construction of hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, through the analysis of the layers that construct the masculinities of the novel's characters such as Julián, Chino Pereira: a drug trafficker, mulatto man, and underworld patriarch; Bimbi: the teenager who sells drugs; and even for Efraín: a white, rich, unfaithful, and privileged patriarch, I explore how Santos Febres plays with the concepts of masculinity and patriarchy to then reconstruct a new Caribbean man who negotiates his manhood in a territoriality that tenaciously masculinizes him. Through closed readings that shed light on the processes of shows deconstruction, re-territorialization, subversion, and the formation of a new male identity, I demonstrate how Santos Febres establishes a foundation for the demystification of the alpha man in Puerto Rico.

Why conduct a deconstructive analysis of hegemonic masculinities using a literary corpus from the detective genre when it has been viewed with suspicion by the established Puerto Rican literary canon? According to Yasmine Cruz Rivera, in her analysis of the development of the detective novel, *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* is part of the detective genre, which from a hegemonic/canonical perspective, “is a lesser genre, a product of mass culture; since it seeks only to entertain, amuse, distract” (130). However, the genre goes beyond narrative hierarchies since it breaks the justification of writing novels for the cultivated reader. It is worth noting that Santos Febres also reshapes the detective genre, a genre that presents

mainly masculine protagonists who defend society, resolve crimes, and provide closure (Brownson 96), by creating a male protagonist (Julián) who is primarily concerned with defending himself, presents himself as a vulnerable man, and does not reinforce the archetypes of a hero.

Santos Febres, in an interview with Elba Birmingham-Pokorny, confesses that “what drives me is the need to say my version of things, to add my version to the myriad of perceptions that are out there” (457) and whose motive makes her rely on the marginalization of the detective genre. The break with the Puerto Rican literary canon and the delivery of multiple versions or perspectives of the Caribbean is not accidental, since the same author proposes a new writing that has the ability to subvert the hierarchical roles of paternalistic literature and bury “the systematic exclusion of women authors from the canon” (Moreno 17). Similarly, Cruz Rivera suggests that the detective literature of Santos Febres originates from the microcosms of the city (or the urban slums or within spaces of liminality), from where the discovery of the other and of oneself can be achieved (132). In this way, the recognition of the other and of hegemonic and subaltern spaces—such as the centers and the peripheries from where marginalized individuals enact—allow multidimensional mobility both by the literary genre and the subversive discourse proposed by the novel.

Another aspect to consider in the analysis of *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* is othering and its relation to colonial discourse and representation. Homi Bhabha observes that an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of the other (*El lugar* 91). This concept of fixity marks the cultural, historical, gendered, and racial patterns imposed by the hegemonic discourse when viewing the other, but refuses to make it visible. However, the colonial discourse and the fixity it imposes are fragmented by the urban microcosms, which in turn allow the other to gain the mobility and fluidity necessary to move from hegemonic spaces to subaltern ones, and vice versa. Regarding the novel's male characters, Cruz Rivera explains that in the city they live above the law and challenge mortality and legal codes in order to gain power and money. While Cruz Rivera observes the relationship between the city and the struggle of contradictions, frustrations, and insecurities of the characters, her reading can be expanded in terms of the city as a heterotopic space in the patriarchal construction of masculinity. By drawing from her observations, I read the novel as a way to explore the representations of othering and the existing mechanisms between dominant and subaltern masculinities.

Just as Cruz Rivera proposes a reading based on Mitchell Foucault's concept of heterotopias and the analysis of heterotopic spaces in the city,³ Nadia Celis argues that these

spaces are spaces of desire and are presented as melting pots of the Caribbean forces that roam the margins. Part of her analysis is based on the reading of the Tulán Motel, from which Julián enables lines of trespass, escape, and re-affirmation of manhood. Julián “wants to create, write, find the voice from which to tell his stories. To achieve this, he undergoes metamorphosis... That is, the acquisition of an awareness of his marginalization, the re-territorialization of his difference beyond the meanings imposed by the colonial and patriarchal word, and the re-territorialization of those differences and of themselves as subjects” (148). In this sense, territorialization is associated with a process in which an individual, community, or social group appropriates and connects with a physical place, as the geographical space is marked by the experiences, memories, and the production of meaning of the individuals at a specific moment in time. Territorialization relies on the space-time relationship, which makes it dynamic and subject to transformation according to the social, cultural, and political context (Castaño-Aguirre 2006). Based on this definition, I infer that Celis employs re-territorialization to suggest that Julián shapes his masculinity. He does this within the liminal space of the Tulán Motel, making masculinity uniquely his.

Celis is also aware of the authoritarian power of colonial discourse, so she proposes that the colonized subject makes his subalternity visible and then resists his ascribed place within the great Puerto Rican family. However, more than a metamorphosis and a process of re-territorialization, it is a mechanism of powers that try to subvert the colonial discourse and patriarchal patterns. Celis’s reading starts from the ideological construction of the other to suggest that the colonized subject sees the heterotopic space (the Tulán Motel) as a bridge that would lead him to his escape and the decolonization of his marginal position. On one hand, there is the argument of Celis that proposes the re-territorialization of the marginal subject in a space from where he can negotiate his freedom as a writer, and on the other, Bhabha’s argument about colonial discourse. He notes:

The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, require an articulation of forms of difference, racial and sexual. This articulation becomes crucial if it is maintained that the body is always simultaneously (albeit conflictively) inscribed both in the economy of pleasure and desire and in the economy of discourse, domination, and power. (*El lugar* 92)

The construction of colonial subjects is part of the homogenizing project of colonial difference, which demands the formation of individuals who conform to the dominant patterns established during the colonial era and that has expanded to current times. At the same time,

this normalizing process implants neo-colonialism and the formation of the subject shaped by colonial discourse. Bhabha's concept demonstrates that the narrative of Santos Febres, which deliberately expresses "I have never been a man complexed by the beauty of another man. I imagine that counts as a liberated quality" (98), aims to destabilize hierarchical masculinities and consequently deconstruct the patriarchal colonialism that has been setting the ideological construction of the postcolonial and neo-colonial subject.

In the novel, for characters like Julián, Chino Pereira, Bimbi, and even Efraín, patriarchy and colonial discourse are present in all spaces, whether marginal or hierarchical. So, how can we discuss re-territorialization when the process of deconstruction has not been analyzed? The reading by Celis is fruitful in terms of her analysis of heterotopia and their relationship with the re-territorialization of the colonized subject. However, before reconstructing or re-territorializing, it is essential to deconstruct, analyze, and provide an explanation for Santos Febres's project and how her narrative manifests the dynamics and negotiation processes between the masculinity, patriarchal discourse, and the inscription of men in the world of desire, seduction, marginality, consumerism, and drug trafficking. We can begin this process by thinking with bell hooks and her definition of patriarchy. In her words, "patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak" (1). That is, society positions the male subject as a privileged and superior being.

However, it should be considered that within what is defined as man, there also exist subordinate masculinities that do not follow the homogenizing patterns of manhood. Santos Febres's novel proposes the subversion and deconstruction of the hegemonic masculinities of the Caribbean, but how does it do so? To answer this statement, the following questions must also be considered: What is masculinity, and how is it constructed? How does the ideology of patriarchy develop? How do colonial discourse and language influence the construction of a patriarchal Caribbean? And how does the patriarchal epidemic begin in self-proclaimed machos? These are just some of the questions that aim to challenge the discourse of the great Puerto Rican family as a paternalistic system and the myth that normalizes every citizen into a single racial, cultural, social, and engendered prototype.

The rhetoric of paternalism is based on the fundamental metaphor of representing the nation as a large family (Gelpí 12). For Juan Gelpí, paternalism is a social phenomenon that implies a hierarchical relationship between the hegemonic subject and the subordinate. The former positions himself in a privileged category while the subordinate tries to resist the power

relationship established between them (12). The construction of the great Puerto Rican family arises from the need to hierarchize paternalism and subordinate all marginalized gender identities—those who are odd, different, gay, lesbian, queer, trans—who live on the margins of a nationalist discourse that marginalizes them. In this vein, for David Gilmore, “manliness is a symbolic script, a cultural construct, endlessly variable and not always necessary” (13). That is, the male subject is made both by himself and by the culture in which he lives. *Machismo* (male chauvinism), or the overwhelming tests of manhood, constructs a homogeneous dynamic between what is perceived as macho and what is known as such. These mechanisms promote a colonial discourse that asks, who is the most macho? or who gives the most proof of manhood? The myths of the patriarch branch out as a symbol of so-called manhood and transform into new masculine standards.

Hierarchical masculinity follows models imposed by patriarchy, and from this dynamic, manhood and virilities are produced that transform men into machos. According to Keith Nurse, “masculinism is the dominant philosophical value system in the gender framework. It is a totalizing philosophy in that it operates with a high level of consensus, as a well-constructed myth and as an instrument of disciplinary power” (4). Based on what is established, it can be inferred that masculinity is a gender ideology constructed from social factors that are not rigid, and therefore, this masculinity could be shaped by different sociocultural processes. R.W. Connell points out that “some masculinities are hegemonic and dominant while others are subordinated and marginalized. Subordinate masculinities have been constructed and represented as effeminate and infantile to distinguish them from the hegemonic forms” (736). Consequently, the formation of masculinity is related to the different expressions of individual/collective masculinity and femininity. Contact with the multiple characteristics of gender makes masculinity multidimensional, or in terms of García Canclini, it is a hybrid construction of social practices that generate new structures or new identities.

Santos Febres’s novel represents the fluidity and malleability from which masculinities and the myth of the macho man are formed, and that is why the plot exemplifies identities that are situated between the borders of dominant and subordinate patriarchal discourses. The flexibility of Santos Febres’s characters allows them to enter and exit the rigidity of patriarchy and negotiate the virility of a society that perpetually masculinizes men. In the novel’s chapter “Macho Alfa” (alfa male), language in conjunction with the heterotopic space (the Tulán Motel) not only re-territorializes the colonized subject but also gives him the power to dismantle the hierarchical patterns to first deconstruct the patriarchal discourse linked to hegemonic masculinity. Chino Pereira is the patriarch of the underworld who positions himself

above subordinate masculinities—characterized by Bimbi and Julián—with the intention of legitimizing himself as the dominant male and the one who “would not only be the most powerful protector... His power would spill over the entire urban coastline, reaching the mangroves” (91). However, his legitimation as a patriarchal macho is questioned by the indiscreet and deep glances that Chino has with Julián. Initially, the narrative voice notes that Chino was “sitting in his usual armchair rolling a tobacco with herbs” and that “his hands with long, sinewy fingers seemed those of a concert pianist” (97). The patriarch here is characterized as that masculine subject who looks down on his subjects and, with his large, muscular pianist hands, can construct the musicality (or masculinity) of his patriarchal world. Chino Pereira awakens in Julián the curiosity to know what factors construct a dominant subject with a pianist’s hands. Julián, while observing Chino sitting in his armchair, begins “to wonder what the saliva of that powerful man would taste like, impressive for his posture and his peace, for the composure with which he allowed chaos to form around him without barely touching him, without participating except to mark the boundaries that gave way to the silence that always enveloped him, like armor” (97). The idealization of the patriarch is revealed by Julián’s thoughts, who through careful observation, reconstructs what he, and therefore society, perceives as a man.

Julián’s observation expresses what Bhabha argues about the construction of the colonial subject and the rigidity of its construction and inscription in the neocolonial discourse.⁵ However, Santos Febres’s narrative deconstructs Chino’s fixity of the hegemonic masculinity and step by step begins to crumble the idealization of the patriarchal subject through that curious gaze (of Julián) that wishes to get closer to the patriarch and read in his eyes an alternative manhood. The first encounter between Julián and El Chino occurs in a room of the Tulán Motel, from where Julián looks at Chino sitting in his patriarchal armchair and who, to Julián’s astonishment, also returns those glances that question the fixity and rigidity of the hegemonic masculinity that Chino represents:

Chino raised his eyes... to look at me. I held his gaze, a bit surprised by the intensity and trying to hide the thoughts that were swirling around my head. What was I doing thinking about Chino Pereira’s fingers? What fascination was that man capable of awakening with just his presence in the spectacle of living? (97)

The curious and revealing glances do not stem from the fraternity among males, but rather, they break through the idealization of the patriarch as a subject who looks at his followers from a hierarchical position. The glances between Chino and Julián intertwine. They

undress before the gaze of the other and betray the porosities existing in the construction of the Caribbean macho. Not only does the narrative voice question the intense gaze of the patriarch towards the other, but also his sexuality and masculinity. That is, from the encounter of the two masculinities—the hegemonic and the subordinate—the fixed constructions of masculinity are questioned and begin to deconstruct the patriarchy built by the great Puerto Rican family.

Subtly referring to the masculinities and how homoerotic spaces may be produced in Santos Febres's novel, Rosana Díaz-Zambrana argues that “not in vain, the (ex)centric field of the Motel will be a catalyst for a series of encounters that test the contours of masculinity” (117). Yet her analysis is limited to the focus on liminal spaces—the Motel—that would allow for the fluidity of normativized subjects. For Díaz-Zambrana, this marginal space fosters the visibility of the subaltern subject, who from liminality is transformed into material for the new construction of cultural models and those who do not adhere to pre-established patterns. The theoretical approach of Díaz-Zambrana starts from the concept of hybrid cultures by García Canclini. She writes:

I understand hybridization to be the sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, which existed separately, combine to generate new structures, objects, and practices. In turn, it should be clarified that the so-called discrete structures were the result of hybridizations, so they cannot be considered pure sources. (14)

Unlike the analysis of Díaz-Zambrana and her focus on border spaces, the concept of García Canclini and his question “How does hybridization of discrete social structures or practices generate new structures and new practices?” (16), as well as Bhabha's suggestion that “masculinity, then, is the taking up of an enunciative position, the making up of a psychic complex, the assumption of a social gender, the supplementation of a historic sexuality, the apparatus of a cultural difference” (“Are you a man” 58), allows for a more nuanced analysis of the anti-patriarchal discourses expressed in the novel. Those inquisitive exchanges between Chino and Julián, which could be interpreted as an expression of homoeroticism, along with numerous instances in which the narrative disrupts traditional notions of masculinity and manhood, are just a few examples.

Bhabha argues that each attempt to define masculinity is poured into a compulsion and, therefore, into an endless psychosis. The critic confesses that “my attempt to conceptualize its conditionality [masculinity] becomes a compulsion to question it; my analytic sense that masculinity normalizes and naturalizes difference turns into a kind of neurotic acting out of its power and its powerlessness” (“Are you a man” 58). For instance, after having his first sexual

experience with M. or the white lady, Julián begins to question his own masculinity. The white lady is a woman from the upper class who has been cheated on by her husband Efraín. To cope with his anger and desire to control his sexuality, Julián turns to the nightlife scene for comfort and complicity: “I, the great joker, the unfaithful, the undefeated... And yet still that thorn that did not let me precisely perceive which manhood had manifested that Wednesday in the Motel: whether M.’s or mine” (75). The narrative creates liminal spaces where the protagonist questions his masculine and hegemonic position and then questions his own condition as a macho. As Julián emerges from the turmoil caused by his perceived lack of traditional manhood, his perspective shifts, and he reveals to M. that “Clearly, I don’t lift weights; there’s not even the faintest imprint of a beeper or cell phone holster on my belt. Trust me, I don’t flaunt cars or conquests. Daphne [his girlfriend] is nearly my provider... I do the washing, cooking, and ironing for her” (108). Julián recognizes that his sexuality is questioned by the hierarchies of hegemonic masculinities; however, he accepts that he does not follow the patterns imposed by the patriarchal society. His acceptance of his ‘lack of manhood’ is a deconstructive signal that begins to end the fixation created by male heterosexual compulsion.

Just as Bhabha explores the ambivalence of masculinity, García Canclini’s concept of hybridity, when applied to the construction of masculinity, reveals that new masculinities emerge in the liminal spaces between the core and the periphery of colonial masculinity, straddling the lines between the validity and invalidity of manhood. At the same time, this new masculinity is situated in the hybrid border that impartially questions the static and patriarchal standards that construct hegemonic masculinities. According to García Canclini, the new practices or identities are the unforeseen result of some processes that constantly arise from collective and individual creativity. In this process, there is an attempt to reconstruct a set of knowledge that, at the same time, deconstructs the fixity and rigidity of the culture of the other (16).

In Julián’s journey, his recognition of male beauty and his embrace of vulnerability and perceived lack of manhood illuminate the constraints of patriarchal discourse. The Tulán Motel, with the boundary it establishes within the city, enables a redefinition of the relationships among the Caribbean’s diverse masculinities. Julián and Chino—the man devoid of traditional manhood and the patriarch of the underworld, respectively—forge new identities within the margins of masculinities. Their exchange of curious glances unveils the other’s ambivalent masculine condition, making it visible and tangible. This emergence of a new subject dismantles the anxiety tied to male heterosexual compulsion and concurrently unravels the rigidity of the hegemonic male standard. After his initial encounter with Chino, Julián

ponders, “that man [Chino] was a stone of mystery that... he wanted to decipher” (100), yet he cannot pinpoint the reason. Julián’s masculine identity is navigating through processes of hybridization—dynamic, not static. The enigma embodied by the patriarch must be deconstructed, re-territorialized, subverted, and finally reconstructed. According to García Canclini’s theory, this hybridization challenges and redefines the concept of identity, particularly masculine identity. Hybrid processes not only end the era of presumed authentic or pure identities (17) but also redefine the masculinities striving to establish themselves as hegemonic.

The novel “celebrates the man who wishes to tear off the bulge, rid himself of his excesses to incorporate and embody the other gender” (Jiménez 109). Santos Febres plays with hegemonic and subaltern masculinities to destabilize patriarchal patterns. The male characters are depicted as machos on the borders between the construction and deconstruction of dominant and subordinate masculinity. Chino Pereira operates in the world of drug trafficking and the illicit enrichment from drugs. His role in the novel is to represent the patriarchal boss whom teenagers and women follow, not for his social status but for his ability to acquire power and money in the underworld. In the city, he commands, directs, manipulates, builds, and controls everything related to the world of drug trafficking. Chino interacts with marginalized youths from the city’s most impoverished neighbourhoods, teaching them how to survive in the world of drugs. These teenagers have no alternative but to get involved in shady dealings, following patriarchal patterns to establish themselves in the construction of future Chinos and, thus, the formation of dominant and subaltern masculinities.

The dynamic between dominant and subordinate masculinities is generally one-sided and stems from what is known as man. According to Connell, “it is also recognized that there is a power differential within masculinities” (736). Hegemonic masculinity is justified by the myth of the ideal man to subordinate and dominate others on the periphery. However, subordinate masculinity, from its position of alienation and marginalization, can find spaces from which to negotiate an alternate masculinity. The ideal man in the globalized world is one like the character Efraín. The white man, equipped with a college education, married, heterosexual, and upper class is what is defined as hegemonic or dominant masculinity (Connell 735). This mythical construction has determined what is perceived as the ideal man and the standard that every man may aspire to.

Chino Pereira, at just fourteen years old, already had experienced social injustices and had no other choice but to follow the same illicit steps that his contemporaries would also take in the world of drug trafficking. Julián cannot explain why Chino, “with so much intelligence,

had fallen into the world of drug trafficking. Well, he confessed this last question to himself. What other opportunity for progress and dare does an island like this offer to a poor and intelligent kid?” But Julián also reflects that “working for him for a few nights would put [his] wallet in a positive balance” (80). Although Julián belongs to a better social class, he also validates what Chino’s power represents for him and for the neo-colonial subjects. Julián, despite having racial and ethnic privilege over Chino, lacks access to the privileges granted to the patriarch Efraín and hegemonic masculinities. Julián makes his subordinate masculinity visible and justifies the patriarchal power of the marginal subject. He then acknowledges that Chino, despite belonging to the underworld, also represents a form of hegemonic masculinity. Through this process of subverting hegemonic and subordinate hierarchies, Santos Febres’s novel shows the process of negotiations within the Caribbean world, where the future Chino must find ways to survive and negotiate his marginality, to then position himself in the hegemonic masculinity of patriarchy, and in the process destabilize the concept of the ideal man and his hegemonic position.

The dynamic between paternalism and the construction of the male subject is based on the legacy of colonialism, which also informs notions and definitions of masculinity. According to Felix Jiménez, Puerto Rican manhood and the island’s masculinity stem from the legacy of Spanish colonialism and American imperialism. He notes:

The sudden diversity of manhood available to the Puerto Rican man... proposed an alteration in the representation of the Puerto Rican... It would no longer be just the interplay between the imagination of Puerto Rican futurity and the reality of the colonial present... Federalist masculinity was lurking, and for the American rulers, colonizing... this Puerto Rican masculinity... would become a desirable object. (19)

The objective was the creation of a virile man, and this desired virility had to stem from the discourse imposed by colonialism and imperialism, thereby creating a masculinity and virility aligned with the status quo in favour of the dominating discourse. This diversity of masculinities encompasses the power struggles between patriarchal discourse and male identity. In this way, masculinity is caught between hegemonic, masculinized manhood in plural and the possibility that these hegemonic masculinities could be mimicked by the other. The clash between colonialism and imperialism can explain the construction of patriarchy as the driving force behind macho discourse and, therefore, the foundation from which to decentralize and deconstruct the masks of patriarchy and the myth of the great Puerto Rican family.

Jiménez's argument, in dialogue with *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya*, provides a glimpse of how the foundation from which the new Caribbean man can be reconstructed. Julián, the protagonist of the novel, says, "I'm not the type to walk around all day with a baseball cap on my head, like a gym guy (swollen biceps, triceps, stiff legs from too much weightlifting, but oh well) or a rap fanatic" (11). Julián does not conform to the parameters of the Puerto Rican macho and, therefore, does not recognize the power of the patriarchy imposed by the macho society. He questions and rejects the paternalistic discourse, then (re)defines his own masculine identity. This quote is just one example of how some of Santos Febres's male characters oppose the homogenizing force of patriarchy.

In the novel, Santos Febres demystifies and subverts gender roles to question what patriarchy has been imposing on both female and male subjectivities. The colonial heritage is questioned as Julián destabilizes the image of the Caribbean macho. In the Tulán Motel, both Julián and El Chino demystify hegemonic masculinity and reveal a different masculinity that is displayed through their observation of each other and their body language. Julián observes that "his [Chino's] toasted straw-colored skin, his eyes..., his hair and impeccable hands, the width of his shoulders, the narrowness of his waist and his broad, firm thighs" (98-99) are characteristics of a beautiful man. This recognition does not make Julián question his own masculinity. Instead, he realizes that he "was a liberated man, who recognized male beauty from afar and with respect" (99). The narrative voice also notes that this gaze is reciprocated by Chino, who, to Julián's bewilderment, "without even blinking... kept looking at him, insistently, as if penetrating him with his eyes" (99). The power dynamics—and penetrating gazes—between Chino and Julián not only question male virility and their fraternal relationships but also negotiate their identity as men, thus subverting the rigid construction of colonial, hegemonic, and fixed masculinity.

The exchange of glances, once indiscreet, now becomes visible and acknowledges the other's alternative masculinity. However, this visibility seeks to be suppressed. In this negotiation of power, masculinities also refuse to look at the other. Julián says, "Chino Pereira handed me the marijuana joint with his wide hands and stared at me for a long time. I decided to act as if I was unaware of that gaze... Acting distant and controlled, closed off to that look" (99). Chino's intense gaze strips away Julián's masculine layers, questions the macho performance that refuses to recognize an alternate masculinity, and infiltrates the porous and hybrid boundaries of hegemonic and subordinate male identity. The result would be the formation of a new male subject who admits that "it's difficult to accept that another man touches, shakes, or eroticizes you, especially when living... among a pack of machos concerned

with hiding that mysterious current that makes them acknowledge the strength of another” (98). A new subject that recognizes the weakness of machismo and the imperialist and colonial discourse clings to heteropatriarchy. The fear of being subjected to another’s masculinity creates an endless chain of hierarchical and dominant masculinities. At the same time, these discourses try to subjugate all male otherness. “The terrible fear of being a woman... provokes the entire paraphernalia of jokes and violence that constantly attempt to subdue the next man until he becomes a weak stone where the much-coveted virility is installed” (98). The fear of being called a woman is so intense that dominant masculinity appropriates the masculinity of the other in order to mold and subdue it to patriarchal discourse. Santos Febres’s novel exposes a masculinity that moves from the centers to the margins and from the margins to the centers, negotiating its own virility that distances itself from the colonial and imperialist legacy. A theoretical concept that has helped me understand this shift from the peripheries to the center and back is mimicry.

According to Bhabha, “mimicry is the effect of the contained authority in the disturbing and profound colonial discourse. This discourse seeks to normalize the other to obscure their visibility, their freedom of speech, and to produce another knowledge that deviates from their own norms. However, mimicry involves the slippage, excess, and difference of the other” (*El lugar* 112). In other words, mimicry starts from the ambivalence of imitation, which in turn causes a double articulation and a complex strategy of regulation, reform, and discipline that the authoritarian power has over the other—who, in turn, is aware of the dominant power. Similarly, this mimicry is “the sign of the inappropriate, a difference or obstinacy that cohesively enhances the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and projects an imminent threat both over the “normalized” knowledge and over the disciplinary powers (*El lugar* 112). The audacity to imitate what is imposed by the dominant discourse has the ability to sabotage the perfect representation and camouflage an alternate truth in the negotiation processes of the subaltern. Mimicry then is a double-edged sword since although the hegemonic discourse dominates the colonized, at the same time the act of imitating breaks the rigidity of the patterns and allows for fluidity and camouflage to recreate one's own authority. Through this lens, we can also interpret how masculinities in the novel are constructed through mimicry.

Bimbi, a secondary character in the novel, is the archetypal Caribbean male adolescent who mimics patriarchal patterns to achieve a certain fluidity in his quest for power, money, and recognition. The teenager, who barely has a few facial hairs, is involved in the world of drug trafficking and serves his boss Chino Pereira. Bimbi is not just a teenager trying to adapt

to the ways of the drug trafficking world; in reality, he seeks to become the patriarch or the figure of Chino. His mimetic zeal leads him to find refuge in what he knows as masculinity, from which he will start the establishment of the patriarchal society and its myth of the great Puerto Rican family. Julián, as the narrator, describes that the boy was “a studied imitation of a teenage thug, my new Motel mate. Bimbi without first or last names” (176). Unlike a born thug, the teenager is a studied thug, which represents the joy felt by the numerous Caribbean Bimbi in imitating other ‘real’ men, and hence the continuous proliferation of masculine hierarchical patterns.

Just as Bimbi imitates hegemonic masculine patterns, this imitation also authorizes him as a male. The act of mimicry gives him the option to negotiate his subordinate status and achieve some mobility in social hierarchies. Bimbi, who has no first or last name, has access to certain material comforts that distinguish him from other young men. Julián observes that “he displayed a gold Rolex on his wrist... Bimbi sought the light so that his watch would sparkle against the streetlight poles. The Rolex reminded me of Chino Pereira. He had a similar one” (176). The mimicry of dominant masculinities builds new patriarchs, but the act of imitating them also creates new subjectivities, new masculine identities, and consequently the sabotage of the rigidity of hegemonic masculinities. Bimbi says: “I am a rank-and-file soldier... But that’s going to change faster than you think. You’ll see. When Bimbi starts to rise, he’ll rise like foam” (186). On one hand, Bimbi negotiates his marginal position, makes use of the opportunities the patriarchal system offers him, imitates Chino—the patriarch of the underworld—and shows submission to the authority of the dominant discourse. On the other hand, Bimbi is aware of his marginalization, makes it visible to then take agency and subvert his position as a rank-and-file soldier and reach the hierarchical peak. Although Bimbi is not directly situated between the borders—or liminalities—of hegemonic or subaltern masculinities, his mimicry allows him to move within and outside of dominant and dominated masculinity. This mobilization camouflages him, hides him, but like any double-edged sword, it will also allow him to wear a patriarch's Rolex, become visible, and finally (perhaps) rise like foam.

Mayra Santos Febres’s narrative formulates and opens spaces from which the protagonists and characters, who have been governed by a hegemonic society that tenaciously marginalizes them, create their own agency that negotiates their status as subaltern subjects. *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* is just one example that demonstrates the author’s commitment to demystifying stereotypes about the Caribbean. The novel enters into complicity with its readers and communicates to them that “perhaps my story may serve for someone to see

themselves reflected in its murky waters... searching for how to rescue themselves... I cannot assure you that the reflection will be of much use... But here, between these pages, the promise throbs” (255). A promise that, step by step, deconstructs the myth of the great Puerto Rican family and provides the seeds of a hybrid discourse that questions the patriarchal discourse of the Island. The characters analyzed in this study, Julián, Chino, and Bimbi, show that Santos Febres’s narrative proposes the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinities and reconstructs a new masculinity, which, surely and gradually, moves away from the mythological construction of the Caribbean male archetype.

Notes

- 1.- The author has translated all quotes from Spanish into English.
- 2.- According to John Waldron the great Puerto Rican family “is based on an idealized concept of mestizaje that appears to include all races and ethnicities. However, this mixture of blood and cultures has as its goal the symbol of sangre pura represented by the icon of the jibaro. The figure of the jibaro represents a return to the idealized, purified culture of la madrepatria, España” (42).
- 3.- Heterotopias are those spaces that disturb the everyday because they destabilize language, break common names, and prevent differentiating the sacred from the profane, thus evoking that place of nowhere (Foucault 95).
- 4.- Given Puerto Ricos’s geopolitical position, I rely on neocolonialism as a concept. According to *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Maryanne Cline Horowitz, “neocolonialism can be defined as the continuation of the economic model of colonialism after a colonized territory has achieved formal political independence... The idea of neocolonialism, however, suggests that when European powers granted nominal political independence to colonies in the decades after World War II, they continued to control the economies”. For Frantz Fanon, the role that play the middle class in neocolonial nations “has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism” (152-153).

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**House of Madness: Neoliberal Control and Feminist Resistance in
Aline Pettersson's *Querida Familia***

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Abstract: This article analyzes Aline Pettersson's novel *Querida familia* (1991) as a critique of Mexico's neoliberal transformation during the Miguel de la Madrid presidency (1982-1988). Through the character of Julia, a seemingly schizophrenic woman, and the domestic space she inhabits, the novel prefigures both the social fragmentation brought about by neoliberal policies and the emergence of feminist resistance movements in Mexico. The analysis introduces the concept of *derecho deseante* (desiring law) to understand how Julia's apparent madness anticipates forms of political agency that would later materialize in feminist achievements at the legislative level. This reading becomes particularly relevant in the current context of global backlash against women's rights, exemplified by the reversal of reproductive rights in the United States.

Keywords: México, neoliberalism, feminism, desiring law, Aline Pettersson

Resumen: Este artículo analiza la novela *Querida familia* (1991) de Aline Pettersson como una crítica a la transformación neoliberal de México durante la presidencia de Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988). A través del personaje de Julia, una mujer aparentemente esquizofrénica, y el espacio doméstico que habita, la novela prefigura tanto la fragmentación social provocada por las políticas neoliberales como el surgimiento de movimientos de resistencia feminista en México. El análisis introduce el concepto de *derecho deseante* para comprender cómo la supuesta locura de Julia anticipa formas de agencia política que más tarde se materializarían en logros feministas a nivel legislativo. Esta lectura se vuelve particularmente relevante en el contexto actual de retroceso global contra los derechos de las mujeres, ejemplificado por la reversión de los derechos reproductivos en los Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: México, neoliberalismo, feminismo, derecho deseante, Aline Pettersson

Introduction

The year 1982 marked a pivotal moment in Mexican history, as the country confronted the collapse of its development model and the illusion of the "Mexican Miracle." Amid a devastating economic crisis characterized by hyperinflation, capital flight, and massive external debt, Miguel de la Madrid assumed the presidency with a discourse that promised "moral renovation." This renovation, ostensibly aimed at combating government corruption,

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would inaugurate Mexico's neoliberal period and fundamentally transform the relationship between state and society, particularly concerning the control of female bodies and subjectivities.

De la Madrid's moral renovation campaign operated on two seemingly contradictory but ultimately complementary levels. On one hand, it promoted the retreat of the state from its traditional welfare functions, advocating for individual responsibility and market solutions. On the other hand, it intensified mechanisms of social control, particularly over women's bodies and behaviors, through what could be called a "privatization of surveillance." This contradiction found its clearest expression in the 1984 General Health Law, which simultaneously elevated health to a constitutional right while delegating its implementation to individuals and family units.

Amidst this climate of profound social and economic transformation, Aline Pettersson published *Querida familia* (*Dear Family*, 1991). Through its protagonist Julia—a thirty-year-old, apparently schizophrenic woman—the novel exposes the fissures between the state's modernizing discourse and its practices of social control. Julia's domestic space becomes a microcosm of neoliberal Mexico, where the retreat of public institutions leads not to greater freedom but to more intimate forms of surveillance and control.

In this context, the arrival of Frederik Lust, a foreign tenant, to Julia's house serves as a powerful metaphor for the penetration of neoliberal logic into Mexican society. Just as Lust's presence disrupts the familiar dynamics of Julia's household, promising modernization while delivering new forms of domination, the neoliberal policies of the period promised progress while intensifying social inequalities and gender-based violence. Julia's mental fragmentation, far from being merely symptomatic, becomes a form of resistance to this new order, prefiguring the collective resistances that would emerge in subsequent decades.

This paper proposes to read *Querida familia* not simply as a critique of neoliberal transformation but as a prophetic text that anticipates forms of feminist resistance that would later materialize in Mexico's social movements and legislative achievements. Through the concept of *derecho deseante* (desiring law), I examine how Julia's apparent madness—her use of bodily fluids as artistic medium, her non-normative occupation of space, and her fragmented discourse—anticipates strategies of resistance that contemporary feminist movements would later employ successfully in their struggles for legal recognition and rights.

The relevance of this reading is heightened in our current moment, marked by simultaneous advances and setbacks in women's rights across the Americas. While Mexico elected its first female president and continues to expand reproductive rights, the United States

witnesses an unprecedented rollback of established rights, exemplified by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* on June 24, 2022. In this context, Julia's "madness" acquires new significance, urging us to question not individual sanity but the rationality of systems that seek to control and restrict women's autonomy.

By closely examining Julia's domestic confinement, her artistic expressions, and her interactions with family members and the foreign tenant, I demonstrate how Pettersson's novel prefigures both the fractures that neoliberal policies would create in Mexican society and the forms of resistance that would emerge to challenge them. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of literature's capacity to anticipate social transformations and imagine alternative forms of legal and political subjectivity.

This analysis of *Querida familia* positions itself within broader scholarship examining cultural responses to neoliberalism in Mexico. Like Sayak Valencia's *Gore Capitalism* (MIT Press, 2010), which discusses how economic violence produces new forms of subjectivity, my reading reveals how neoliberal policies created new forms of control and resistance within domestic spaces. While Valencia focuses on how bodies become sites of economic violence in public spheres, Pettersson's novel shows how domestic space becomes a battlefield where neoliberal policies materialize as psychological and physical control.

In addition, it aligns with Irmgard Emmelhainz's analysis in *La tiranía del sentido común: la reconversión neoliberal de México* (Paradiso Editores, 2016) on how neoliberalism reshapes cultural understanding of what is possible or rational. Through Julia's character, Pettersson exposes how neoliberal logic pathologized forms of existence that challenge market rationality. Similarly, just as Ignacio Sánchez Prado's *Screening Neoliberalism* (Vanderbilt U P, 2014) examines cinema's role in reflecting and critiquing Mexico's neoliberal transition, Pettersson's novel anticipates the social fragmentation that these policies would produce, though focusing on domestic rather than public spaces. In doing so, it extends the work of the above-mentioned scholar by introducing *derecho deseante* (desiring law) as a framework to understand how the act of desiring challenges neoliberal rationality as well, and by examining how domestic space became both site of control and resistance during Mexico's neoliberal transformation.

It is important to clarify do not romanticize mental illness or diminish the suffering of individuals living with schizophrenia and other conditions. Rather, I seek to explore how literature can use these conditions metaphorically to critique social and political structures, while acknowledging that the lived reality of mental illness is complex and often devastating. In Pettersson's novel, Julia's purported schizophrenia serves as a lens to examine broader

societal issues, without suggesting that mental illness itself constitutes resistance or that psychological suffering is inherently liberating. Instead, I focus on how literature transforms even painful human experiences into tools for understanding and critiquing oppressive systems that determine what forms of existence are considered valid or rational.

In summary, *Querida familia* serves as both a critique of neoliberalism and an exploration of feminist resistance. Through Julia's "madness," Pettersson's novel highlights how literature can anticipate social transformations, offering new ways to understand both gendered forms of oppression and the potential for political agency within the constraints of the neoliberal state.

The House as Neoliberal Microcosm: De la Madrid's Mexico and the Politics of Control

When Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado took office in 1982, Mexico faced a severe economic crisis, grappling with unsustainable debt levels, an astronomical 127.3% devaluation of the peso, and soaring inflation rates that peaked at 98.8% (Bortz 44-51). In response to this dire situation, De la Madrid introduced a policy framework dubbed "moral renovation," which sought to combine economic austerity measures with enhanced social control. This strategic initiative aimed not only to stabilize the economy but also to reshape Mexican society fundamentally (De la Madrid; Dávila). However, the consequence of these policies was the dramatic rise in the cost of essential goods, placing enormous pressure on Mexican families. For example, the price of tortillas, a staple food in virtually every household, escalated from around \$5.50 MXN per kilogram in 1982 to a staggering \$45 MXN by 1984 (Diario Oficial de la Federación). This stark increase illustrates the harsh economic realities that families, particularly women, were forced to confront, as they navigated the complexities of shrinking household budgets and rising living costs.

Women, often the primary caretakers and managers of household resources, faced acute challenges as the price of food and basic necessities soared. The imbalance created by De la Madrid's neoliberal policies exacerbated the burdens on women, intensifying their unpaid labor while simultaneously deepening their economic vulnerability. These women not only had to manage the household amid severe resource shortages but were also expected to fulfill societal roles that emphasized nurture and familial support. This dual pressure—economic and social—left women contending with a reality that not only constrained their personal ambitions but also forced them into the position of managing a family's survival under increasingly grueling circumstances.

In Aline Pettersson's book, *Querida familia*, this socio-economic transformation finds a powerful metaphor in the deteriorating grandeur of Julia's house. Once an emblem of upper-

middle-class stability, the house now rents rooms to survive, mirroring the broader economic shifts as Mexico opened its doors to foreign capital. The arrival of foreign tenant Frederik Lust to rent a room is emblematic of these changes, coinciding with De la Madrid's aggressive pursuit of neoliberal reforms, symbolized by initiatives like Mexico's membership to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986 and the maquiladora program expansion that promised modernization while delivering exploitation. Julia's house, thus, transitions from being a sanctuary to a site of commodification, reflecting the broader economic landscape where the interests of foreign investors overshadow local needs and identities.

The repercussions of De la Madrid's neoliberal policies are intricately woven into the lives of the novel's three primary female characters: Julia, Aunt Sara, and Soledad. Julia's mental fragmentation escalates as she grapples with the realities of a household that increasingly accommodates foreign influences, serving as a metaphor for the societal fractures resulting from the privatization of Mexico's state-owned enterprises. Between 1982 and 1988, the radical privatization initiatives fundamentally disrupted social cohesion, presenting a visceral reflection of how economic policies precipitated personal turmoil (Bernal and Pereyra Linares 682). When the De la Madrid government establishes health as a constitutional right—although its organic law did not specify how the state was going to provide for the physical and mental health of its citizens—he articulated what Irmgard Emmelhainz identifies as neoliberalism's fundamental transformation of common sense (19). In *Querida familia*, this transformation materializes in the daily rhythms of Julia's household. The family's decision to confine her at home rather than seek institutional care reflects the "privatization of social responsibility" or the process by which collective obligations become individual burdens (Emmelhainz 115). In doing so, the novel reveals the pervasive environment of social neglect and individual accountability that defined Mexico through the character's lived experience.

Aunt Sara's character embodies a more complex internalization of the neoliberal logic permeating Mexican society. Her preference for foreign tenants over local residents, whom she derogatorily refers to as "los pelados de aquí" (Pettersson 15), symbolizes the entrenched beliefs created by De la Madrid's policies that prioritized international capital over domestic welfare. This preference is echoed in real-life policies, such as the 1984 industrial development program, which promoted foreign investment through tax incentives at the expense of local businesses suffocating under the weight of austerity measures (Witker 755-759). These decisions ultimately reflect a collective societal choice that favors global economic engagement while dismissing local realities, rendering a significant portion of the Mexican populace marginalized and economically disenfranchised.

Moreover, De la Madrid's "moral renovation" and his declaration that "our nationality is strong because we have a strong family, largely thanks to an admirable and responsible woman" (5) directly operationalizes Octavio Paz's philosophical conception of Mexican womanhood in government policy. When Paz positions women as "the will of life," inherently impersonal and devoid of individual desire (33), he provides the intellectual foundation for what would become De la Madrid's political project. This philosophical framework materializes even in the president's attempts at humor, as when he joked that Mexico's rapid population growth stems from the fact that "we like our women very much" (De la Madrid; Quinlan). This seemingly casual remark reveals the deep-seated conceptualization of women as passive vessels for male desire and national reproductivity rates, exactly as Paz theorized. The president's rhetoric transformed Paz's abstract philosophy into concrete policy: women are responsible for national strength precisely because they are denied individual will. Their value lies in their capacity to channel and maintain social order rather than in any personal desire or ambition. This political appropriation of Paz's ideas created a double bind: women were simultaneously elevated as guardians of national values and denied the right to have values of their own.

In this sense, Aunt Sara embodies this contradiction perfectly; Pettersson portrays her as a woman who never considered marriage (12), never imagined defying authority (17), and refrained from wearing pants, seeing them as an exclusively male attire (20). She is depicted as someone devoted to caring for her parents until their passing (24), maintaining her parents' house, and ultimately assuming responsibility for her niece Julia when she was orphaned (25). She performs exactly the role that both Octavio Paz and Miguel de la Madrid envisioned: maintaining order, upholding values, channeling the "will of life" through domestic management. Yet her character also reveals the impossibility of this position. Her preference for foreign tenants over "gente sin aspiraciones e ignorantes" (Pettersson 13), betrays precisely what Paz claims impossible: personal desire. When she chooses Lust as a tenant, prioritizing European sophistication over local connections, she acts as what Paz warns against: a woman being "mistress of her desire" (33). However, this desire itself has been shaped by the same neoliberal logic that De la Madrid's policies promote, creating a complex web where personal desire becomes indistinguishable from internalized social values. Sara thus becomes both enforcer and victim of a system that simultaneously requires and denies female desire, embodying the fundamental contradiction in both Paz's philosophy and De la Madrid's politics, demonstrating what Irmgard Emmelhainz describes as the internalization of market values in intimate spaces (40).

Unlike aunt Sara, by utilizing bodily fluids in her art, Julia transforms a supposedly impersonal life force into a medium of personal and expressive empowerment, embodying the complexity of desire that Paz erroneously claimed was unattainable. Her artistry becomes a radical reclamation of personal agency, challenging the prescriptive narratives that attempt to limit the scope of female identity to familial and national service. In doing so, Julia represents a profound contradiction to what both Paz and De la Madrid deemed impossible: a woman who not only asserts ownership of her own desire but also actively resists the constraints placed upon her by a patriarchal society.

This reframing of Julia's experiences highlights why her behavior is pathologized as madness within a system built on the premise that women lack genuine aspirations. In a societal framework grounded in Paz's assertion that women "have no desires of their own" (33), any authentic expression of female autonomy must be classified as deviant to preserve the existing ideological and political order. Julia's supposed madness, therefore, transcends individual pathology, transforming into a significant critique of the philosophical underpinnings that render female desire as illegitimate. Her identity, fragmented yet resilient, serves as a powerful manifestation of what the system condemns: female desire as a legitimate force capable of driving both personal and political transformation.

However, the most devastating impact of De la Madrid's policies fell upon Mexico's working class, embodied in the novel through the character of Soledad, whose very name ("Solitude") becomes a powerful literary device revealing the isolation and invisibility of working-class women under neoliberalism. Pettersson's narrative technique reinforces this erasure: Soledad never speaks directly in the novel; we know of her existence only through Aunt Sara's monologues. This narrative silence mirrors how neoliberal policies rendered working-class women simultaneously essential and invisible, or transparent—present enough to maintain the functioning of middle-class households but absent from political discourse and social recognition.

The fact that we only access Soledad through Sara's voice reflects the power dynamics of neoliberal Mexico: working-class women's experiences are mediated through their employers' perspectives, their own voices systematically silenced. While real wages fell to 60% of their 1982 value by 1988, affecting workers like Soledad most severely, their suffering remained largely unvoiced in official narratives (Acosta). Pettersson makes this silencing visible precisely by making it audible—Soledad's absence of voice becomes a presence that haunts the text, just as the invisible labor of domestic workers haunted Mexico's narrative of modernization. When Sara mentions Soledad's longer hours or reduced status, she does so

without recognizing the violence of these changes, mirroring how neoliberal rhetoric normalized the exploitation of working-class women under the guise of economic necessity. The house thus acts as a containment unit for female desires, a vessel for national values, and a site permeated with surveillance—continuously monitoring and controlling female behavior.

“Desiring Law” and Feminist Resistance: From Individual Defiance to Collective Transformation

These harsh socioeconomic conditions pushed women—who did not necessarily consider themselves feminist at the time—into the public arena to claim their rights. As Adriana Ortíz Ortega and Mercedes Barquet note, unlike traditional democratic theory which posits economic stability as a prerequisite for democratic development, it was precisely in periods of crisis and repression that Mexican women organized to demand their rights, eliciting state responses that were often slow, mediated by elites, and driven by unexpected, unprecedented routes rather than structured institutional policy (110).

Although the mobilizations of the 1980s cannot be compared in scale to those that began emerging in Mexico in 2017, Julia’s actions in the novel offer valuable insights into the transformation that would take place. When Julia uses her menstrual blood to paint on her bedroom walls, declaring “Today the world is red like an apple... The river flows between my muscles, warm, dark, thick like life escaping” (95), she creates what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call a “line of escape” from neoliberal rationality (279). This line of escape embodies an early form of feminist protest, and challenges what Emmelhainz identifies as the tyranny of common sense—the way neoliberalism makes market logic appear natural and inevitable (41). Decades later, in 2021, when Mexican feminists are using menstrual blood to paint messages on Mexico City during International Women’s Day demonstrations (Juárez; Vargas, Ramírez, Flores, Molina, Alvarado and Miranda), they transform this individual line of escape into what I call “derecho deseante.” *Derecho deseante* is a legal framework that emerges from desire rather than control, a desire once dismissed as madness catapulted into powerful political action.

When Julia declares “the hand must keep painting so I can see the path” (18), she articulates how desire creates new possibilities that law must eventually recognize. The journey from Julia’s private resistance to collective legal transformation reveals how challenges to neoliberal common sense evolve. Emmelhainz argues that neoliberalism maintains power by convincing people there are no alternatives to market-based solutions and individual responsibility. Julia’s apparent “madness” in her refusal to recognize herself in the mirror—“I do not want to look in the mirror and see the eyes... Now I look at them, fear devours me”

(Pettersson 65)—prefigures feminist challenges to imposed gender identities and the heteropatriarchal gaze. This act of rejecting the mirror anticipates Mexico's 2018 gender identity laws, which affirm self-perception over biological determinism. Female behavior which, without a diagnosis, could be reported as schizophrenic fragmentation in Julia's time has since evolved into a legally protected right to self-determination. Julia articulates what Emmelhainz identifies as the fundamental challenge to neoliberal thinking, the refusal to accept its binary categorizations and market-based values.

The multiplicity of voices that Julia hears throughout the novel takes on prophetic significance in this context. When she speaks of "other voices" telling her to "be calm" (Pettersson 27), these are not merely possible symptoms of mental illness but can be also read as anticipatory echoes of future feminist collectivity. Her statement that she "paints those other faces she does not know but will be with her in the future" (27) becomes particularly powerful when we consider how individual resistance would indeed transform into collective action. These unknown faces she paints could be read as prefiguring the thousands of women who would later paint their faces green and purple in abortion rights demonstrations or mark their hands red in femicide protests.

Julia's artistic practice, guided by these voices, creates a temporal bridge between individual and collective resistance. When she declares "I kept only the voices of the sea" (104), of the tide, this image acquires new resonance in our contemporary moment. The tide she hears could be read as a prescient echo of what would now be known as the "marea verde" (green tide), the feminist movement that would sweep across Latin America demanding abortion rights and eventually succeeded in Mexico and other countries. Just as the tide moves between individual drops and collective force, Julia's apparently isolated resistance contained seeds of future collective action.

This reading transforms our understanding of Julia's supposed schizophrenia. Her multiple voices represent not fragmentation but multiplication, not illness but emergence. They embody the resistance to the tyranny of common sense, refusing neoliberalism's insistence on unified, market-compatible identities. These voices, moving from private whispers to public chants, from individual art to collective protest, chart the path from lines of escape to *derecho deseante*. When contemporary feminist movements flood the streets in waves of green, they realize the tide Julia heard decades earlier, transforming her private voices into public demands for justice.

Derecho deseante, emerges thus from this intersection of desire and law. Unlike traditional jurisprudence that seeks to control and channel desire (especially female desire) into

socially acceptable forms, desiring law recognizes desire as generative of new rights. This transformation is evident in recent Mexican legislation like the labor rights extensions to sex workers in Mexico City in 2013, legitimizing previously stigmatized forms of work (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación 2013); the 2018 gender identity laws that prioritize personal desire over biological designation (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación 2018); the 2019 reforms recognizing diverse family structures, moving beyond traditional patriarchal models (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación 2019); and the 2021 Supreme Court decision decriminalizing abortion nationwide, which validates bodily autonomy over state control (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación 2021).

These legal transformations represent the institutionalization of what Julia could only express through “madness.” Her apparently irrational behaviors—using bodily fluids as art, refusing traditional domestic roles, speaking in fragments—have become recognized forms of political expression. When feminists throw glitter at police during protests or use performance art to denounce femicide (Gerth; Crisanto), they are employing strategies that Julia’s “madness” anticipated.

However, as Julia’s confrontation with Lust suggests, these victories remain precarious. Just as before fleeing Lust stole Aunt Sara’s silver coins, betraying her blind faith in him, and just as Lust’s modernizing presence masked new forms of control, contemporary challenges to women’s rights often come wrapped in languages of protection or tradition. In Julia’s words “Frederik Lust is a liar. Damn him. A thousand times damn him [...] Frederik Lust is a traitor.” (Pettersson 104-105). Yet Julia’s “madness” offers strategic insights for resistance. Her refusal to be oedipalized—to be normalized within patriarchal structures—prefigures how contemporary feminist movements maintain autonomy while engaging with institutional politics. The recent election of Mexico’s first female president, while historic, does not guarantee structural transformation. As Julia’s experience suggests, real change requires more than surface-level alterations to power structures; it demands fundamental reconceptualization of how power operates.

The emergence of *derecho deseante* from Julia’s individual resistance to collective feminist achievements demonstrates how literature can anticipate social transformation. What was once dismissed as madness has become constitutional law; what was seen as delusion now shapes public policy. In this light, Julia’s question “Who is mad?” (Pettersson 14), acquires new relevance: Is it the woman who demands autonomy over her body, or the systems that seek to control it? Is it the movements fighting to preserve hard-won rights, or those seeking to reverse decades of progress?

From “Madness” to the Presidential Palace: The Paradoxes of Feminist Progress

The trajectory from Julia’s confined artistic expression to Mexico’s first female president reveals how *derecho deseante* challenges what Emmelhainz identifies as neoliberalism’s fundamental transformation of common sense. In 1982, when Rosario Ibarra de Piedra became Mexico’s first female presidential candidate, her campaign embodied what neoliberal rationality deemed impossible—a mother’s grief transformed into political demand. Like Julia’s art born from bodily fluids, Ibarra de Piedra’s activism emerged from embodied pain: her experience as mother of a disappeared student became political action. The system’s responded to both women with the tyranny of common sense and their expressions were dismissed as unreasonable, too emotional to be considered legitimate political discourse.

During De la Madrid’s presidency, while some women held public office, their exclusion from executive power was absolute (Tovar y López Portillo 145). The president appointed no women to his Cabinet. This institutional landscape, as Emmelhainz would argue, represented neoliberalism’s capacity to present exclusion as natural and inevitable. Just as Julia’s art remained confined to her room under the guise of protection, women’s political participation was confined to prescribed roles under the pretense of maintaining social order, or what appeared to be “common sense” arrangements.

Four decades later, as Mexico elected its first female president and celebrates gender parity in Congress, these achievements might seem to challenge neoliberal common sense. Yet, as Emmelhainz warns, neoliberalism excels at incorporating resistance into its logic without fundamentally transforming power relations. Current statistics reveal this persistent contradiction: ten women murdered daily, a 14% gender pay gap, and 66% of women experiencing gender-based violence (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer 4; Hernández, Muñoz). The gap between institutional achievement and lived experience manifests in three ways that exemplify neoliberalism’s capacity to maintain control through apparent progress. First, in the marketization of rights (Emmelhainz 110-111) where legal protections exist but access depends on individual resources. Abortion rights, though nationally recognized, remain inaccessible to many women in Mexico, particularly in rural areas where the market logic of supply and demand determines access to fundamental rights. Gender identity laws exist in fifteen states, yet trans women face persistent violence, illustrating how legal recognition without material support perpetuates neoliberalism’s empty promises.

Second, neoliberalism’s capacity to maintain control through apparent progress is also shown in the contradiction between political representation and economic power, revealing the entrepreneurship of the self (Emmelhainz 93) where success or failure becomes purely

individual responsibility. While women occupy high political offices, only 45% participate in formal employment (México cómo vamos 1). Women's unpaid domestic labor, representing 23% of Mexico's Gross Domestic Product (Viña), remains invisible and undervalued, exemplifying how neoliberalism naturalizes exploitation by presenting it as personal choice.

Third, neoliberalism's capacity to maintain control through apparent progress is also shown in the persistence of violence despite legal protection, demonstrating its ability to manage violence without eliminating its root causes (Emmelhainz 41). The novel's warning about how Lust's modernizing presence masked new forms of control finds echo in how progressive legislation coexists with persistent femicide and impunity. In this way neoliberalism can acknowledge problems while ensuring they remain individually rather than systematically addressed.

These contradictions reveal why *derecho deseante* must operate beyond institutional reform. As Julia's life and art created meaning despite confinement, *Derecho deseante* must challenge neoliberalism's core power and its ability to make market logic appear as common sense. Statistics highlighting these contradictions tell a story Emmelhainz would recognize: While abortion is legally protected, access remains market-dependent; despite domestic worker rights, only 2% have social security (Juárez); gender parity in politics coexists with economic marginalization, progressive laws have not reduced femicide rates, and maternal mortality in indigenous communities remains three times higher than average.

The achievement of Mexico's first female president thus presents a critical moment of possibility and danger. Like Julia's life and artistic expression, it marks not an endpoint but a new phase in challenging neoliberal common sense. The issue becomes, then, how can institutional power be used to challenge rather than reinforce neoliberalism's fundamental logic? *Derecho deseante* suggests one answer by insisting that desire, particularly female desire previously deemed impossible or irrational, can reshape legal and institutional frameworks. When Julia declares "the hand must keep painting so I can see the path" (Pettersson 18), she articulates resistance to neoliberal rationality's closure of possibility. Similarly, contemporary feminist movements must transform institutional presence into material change by challenging the common sense that makes market logic appear natural and inevitable.

This struggle operates simultaneously within and against institutions, much like Julia's life created meaning within confinement while pointing toward liberation. The challenge lies in using institutional power without being contained by neoliberal rationality, in transforming symbolic victories into material transformation of daily life. Only by maintaining this tension

between institutional engagement and radical critique can feminist movements ensure that *derecho deseante* challenges rather than reinforces the tyranny of neoliberal common sense.

The tension between institutional power and radical transformation manifests uniquely in Mexico's rural and indigenous feminist movements. The Zapatista women's movement, for instance, participates in national feminist initiatives while maintaining autonomous forms of governance. Their *Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres* (Revolutionary Women's Law) operates parallel to state institutions, creating alternatives to neoliberal frameworks of rights (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional 1993). Like Julia's multiple voices that spoke of future solidarity, they combine traditional knowledge with contemporary feminist demands.

Another striking example emerges from the Movement for Legal and Safe Abortion. While working through institutional channels to expand abortion access, activists maintain networks of informal support systems helping women access abortion care regardless of legal status. These networks, operating in the shadows of institutional healthcare, mirror how Julia's art created meaning despite confinement. When abortion defenders wear green bandanas while serving in Congress or local governments, they embody the dual nature of contemporary resistance by working within institutions while signaling allegiance to autonomous movements.

SINACTRAHO (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar, National Union of Household Workers) demonstrates this duality in labor rights struggles. While working through institutional channels to achieve the 2019 reform that granted domestic workers social security rights, they maintain autonomous organizing through worker-led education programs and mutual aid networks. Their achievements include the 2018 Supreme Court ruling that made it unconstitutional to exclude domestic workers from mandatory social security, while simultaneously building grassroots networks for worker protection and education (Juárez). But perhaps most revealing is Las Brujas del Mar (The Sea Witches), who organized the massive 2020 women's strike (Villegas). Their name itself recalls Julia's connection to marine voices, while their tactics combine institutional advocacy with direct action. When they coordinated a nationwide strike that received support from major institutions while maintaining radical demands for systemic change, they demonstrated how movements can use institutional platforms without being contained by them. As stated above, these examples demonstrate that *derecho deseante* operates most effectively when it maintains this tension between institutional engagement and autonomous organizing, between working through official channels and creating alternative spaces of power.

Conclusion: Beyond Institutional Walls - The Future of Feminist Resistance

As Mexico stands at a historic crossroads with its first female president, Aline Pettersson's *Querida familia* offers more than prophetic insight, it provides a strategic blueprint for future feminist resistance. The novel's enduring relevance lies not just in anticipating contemporary struggles but in suggesting how movements might navigate the challenges ahead. Through Julia's story, we glimpse not only the path that led to current achievements but also the potential pitfalls and possibilities that await.

The idea of *derecho deseante* that emerges from our analysis points toward a fundamental reimagining of how rights and resistance operate. Rather than seeing institutional power and radical transformation as opposing forces, Julia's example suggests they might function as complementary energies—like the multiple voices she echoes in her head, or the tide she felt approaching. Contemporary movements' success in combining institutional presence with autonomous organizing demonstrates the viability of this dual approach.

As we look ahead and anticipate the ever-coming tide, we cannot lose sight of the need to maintain what we might call “strategic madness” or the ability to work within institutions while refusing to be bound by institutional logic. Just as Julia's art created a whole new world within confinement while pointing toward liberation, future movements must develop ways to use institutional power without being restrained by it. Present and future feminist movements need to challenge not just specific policies but the very framework that makes neoliberal rationality appear natural and inevitable. This suggests that future struggles must operate simultaneously at material and conceptual levels, transforming both concrete conditions and the logic that sustains them. And above all, we need to recognize that transformation requires new forms of collective voice and action. Julia's prophecy of unknown faces that would join her in the future has materialized in contemporary movements' ability to combine multiple tactics, voices, and approaches. This multiplicity—rather than patriarchal unity—might be key to future effectiveness.

As feminist movements navigate the tension between historic institutional achievements and persistent structural violence, *Querida familia* reminds us that true transformation requires more than occupying existing spaces of power. It demands the creation of new spaces, new logics, new forms of resistance that can exist both within and against institutional walls. The challenge ahead lies not in choosing between institutional power and radical transformation, but in maintaining the creative tension between them, much like the tide Julia heard approaching, moving between individual drops and collective force.

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**FEMINISTAS UNIDAS GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY PRIZE
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Call for 2024 submissions, winning work:

**Sonic Homeplace: Afro-Female Resistance and Reparations in
Lido Pimienta’s *Miss Colombia* (2020)**

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Abstract: This article analyzes *Miss Colombia* (2020), the latest album by Afro-Indigenous Colombian artist Lido Pimienta, as a sonic and visual space of resistance and reparative care for Black women in Latin America. The album centers around San Basilio de Palenque, one of the first free African towns in colonial Americas. It blends *bullerengue*—a traditional music from maroon communities—with contemporary electro-pop, bridging ancestral memory and modern soundscapes. I argue that the album constitutes a “sonic homeplace”—a term inspired by bell hooks’ concept of “homeplace” as a site of Black resistance and care—where music functions as a reparative, embodied archive of pain, resilience, and collective memory. Through a Black and decolonial feminist lens, this analysis explores how the songs “Eso que tú haces” and “Pelo cucú” challenge hegemonic discourses through collaborations with *cantadoras*, oral traditions, and ancestral practices. *Miss Colombia* emerges as a collaborative act of bridge-building that confronts intersectional oppressions based on race, gender, and class.

Keywords: Lido Pimienta, Afro-Colombian females, sonic homeplace, music, resistance

Resumen: Este artículo analiza *Miss Colombia* (2020), el álbum más reciente de la artista afro-indígena colombiana Lido Pimienta, como un espacio sonoro y visual de resistencia para las mujeres negras en América Latina. El álbum gira alrededor de San Basilio de Palenque uno de los primeros pueblos libres de la América colonial. Fusiona el bullerengue —música de comunidades cimarronas— con electro pop, tejiendo un puente entre la memoria ancestral y los paisajes sonoros modernos. Desde una perspectiva de feminismos negros y decoloniales, propongo que *Miss Colombia* se configura como un “hogar sonoro,” inspirado en el concepto de *homeplace* de bell hooks: un lugar de resistencia y cuidado donde la música actúa como extensión de la memoria colectiva, capaz de encarnar el dolor y convertirse en archivo reparador resiliente. Este análisis se centra en las canciones “Eso que tú haces” y “Pelo cucú,” que desafían discursos hegemónicos a través de colaboraciones con cantadoras, tradición oral cimarrona y prácticas ancestrales. *Miss Colombia* emerge como un acto colaborativo de

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construcción de puentes, que desafía opresiones interseccionales basadas en raza, género y clase.

Palabras clave: Lido Pimienta, afrocolombianas, hogar sonoro, música, resistencia

Introduction

Lido Pimienta is an Afro-Indigenous Colombian singer, composer, and visual artist who lives in Canada and has created a space of belonging for the African diaspora in Latin America. Her latest album *Miss Colombia* (2022) revolves around San Basilio de Palenque, one of the first free African towns in colonial Americas, and the only one that has survived until present day. Its repertoire echoes the region's essence through the oral tradition of *bullerengue*, music from maroon communities, and *cantadoras* (Afro-Colombian female singers and composers). It integrates a hybridization of *bullerengue* and *cumbia*, with modern electro-pop sounds, bridging the past and the present to expose historical cycles of pain using current references. The album becomes a symbolic tribute to the maroon town by featuring the folkloric music group Sexteto Tabalá, the *cantadoras* from the group Raíces, and the dance group Kumbé. It manifests as a journey of exploration through eleven songs where the pain and trauma of the past become a lexicon to remember, learn, and heal, creating a sonic space resistance and healing for Black women.

Lido Pimienta born in Barranquilla, Colombia (1986) embodies a multifaceted identity as a woman of African and Indigenous descent. According to her website, Pimienta identifies as an “Afro-Indigenous, queer feminist, and Canadian outsider.” Her identity reflects a complex interconnection rather than a separation of her Afro-Indigenous roots. Her Afro-descendant heritage is traced to her father's side, while her Wayuu Indigenous heritage is rooted in her maternal lineage. The Wayuu community is an Indigenous group from the Guajira region, geographically close to Barranquilla and San Basilio de Palenque. Throughout this essay San Basilio de Palenque and Palenque will be used interchangeably to refer to the same place.

On the other hand, her queer feminist identity aligns with Cathy Cohen's argument that queer politics should destabilize heteronormativity and reconstruct identities. Cohen asserts that “the reconceptualization not only of the content of identity categories but the intersectional nature of identities themselves must become part of our political practice” (461). In this sense, Pimienta in *Miss Colombia* offers a political practice of reconceptualization of the Colombian identity by exposing the history of colonialism, misogyny, and anti-Blackness in her native country and by reimagining the nation from a black female perspective including intersectionality of race, gender, and class.

From a Black and decolonial feminism framework, this article argues that the sonic and visual aesthetics of *Miss Colombia* decolonize hegemonic discourses by positioning empowered Black women as creators of their narrative and by echoing the ancestral memory of Palenque. It proposes that the album becomes a sonic homeplace of resistance, offering reparations of the imagination through Black female knowledge, music, and participative actions. It incorporates the visuals, sounds, and lyrics of the songs “Eso que tú haces” (“That Thing You Do”), featuring the dance group Kumbé, and “Pelo cucú” (“Nappy Hair”), featuring the *cantadoras* of group Raíces to examine the significance of the female voice and oral traditions.

The concept of a sonic homeplace builds on bell hooks’ theorization of “homeplace” as sites of resistance. bell hooks argues that “Black women resisted by making homes where all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects” (42). In this context, home is a space led by Black women where Black individuals can affirm one another and heal from the wounds inflicted by racist domination. I argue that *Miss Colombia* transcends the physical space of a house, transforming into a metaphorical sonic home created by Pimienta, and it becomes a site of resistance and reparative care, nurturing Black women.

Black and decolonial feminisms call for dialogue and bridge-building to combat the multiple, simultaneous oppressions that women of color face through collaborative practices. The Combahee River Collective emphasizes an intersectional approach to oppression, recognizing that race, gender, sexuality, and class do not function as isolated systems but as interlocking structures that shape lived experiences:

We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black, we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face (210).

In this sense, feminism is understood as a comprehensive political movement that develops both analysis and practice to combat the oppressions Black women face, fostering systemic change. *Miss Colombia* challenges hegemonic and colonial discourses by redefining race, gender, and beauty standards in the country, positioning Black women as central figures in the nation’s narrative.

The album takes a praxis approach by creating a poetic space of resistance and reparations through a feminist critique of the patriarchal forms, colonial, and modern power practices. Poetry is understood from Audre Lorde's theorization as a vital necessity of female existence: "It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (37). Pimienta's musical poetry moves from theory to practice, articulating dreams and the disappointments of a painful past. The album and her performances become tangible actions advocating for social change in favor of Black women.

Similarly, Ochy Curiel argues that for Black women, decolonial feminism is a political stance through individual and collective actions, imaginaries, bodies, and ways of being in the world. This transversal position, "creates a kind of intellectual '*cimarronaje*,' of social practices, and the construction of independent thought based on concrete experiences" (Curiel 3).¹ *Miss Colombia* carries political implications in the transmission of knowledge across generations through the aesthetics of *bullerengue*. It exemplifies this *intellectual marronage*, embodying resistance and independent thought through collaborative practices among Black women by incorporating *cantadoras* and evoking ancestry, spirituality, and a connection to African roots.

Music and performance have played a crucial role in Afro-diasporic culture, facilitating political mobilization, resistance, and connection with ancestral spirituality. Paul Gilroy emphasizes the transformative power of music in the Black Atlantic, highlighting its ability to transcend borders. According to Gilroy, music contributes to the Black struggle by "communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational" (36). Building on Gilroy's insights, I argue that Pimienta's music carries a transformative message rooted in the maroon oral tradition of *bullerengue* and women's participatory role in the production of knowledge as *cantadoras*.

The origin of *bullerengue* has a transnational legacy of the African diaspora. During the colonial era, African slaves were not allowed to bring any material possessions with them to the New World. However, by using their bodies as a living archive, they kept cultural and musical traditions in their minds. Afro-Colombian anthropologist and writer Manuel Zapata Olivella emphasizes *bullerengue's* strong African influence, noting it is, "the legitimate descendant of the *lumbalúes* with which the Black people of Palenque de San Basilio said their farewell to their dead" (Zapata Olivella "Tambores" 113).² The main figure in *bullerengue* is the *cantadoras*—Afro-Colombian female singers, leaders, producers, and agents of their own

stories. As noted by Michael Birenbaum Quintero, *cantadoras*, “improvise lyrics and are masterfully intertextual, inserting lines from other jugas, from the repertoire of spoken quatrains, from popular sayings, or directly from their imagination, experience, or the latest village gossip” (47). For Black women in Colombia, music becomes an empowering tool to articulate their sorrows, happiness, dreams, and disappointments.

Pimienta, through her music, exposes the contradictions and ambiguities of her national identity, which resonate with other Afro-Latinx individuals. Music serves as a tool that enables us to perceive and understand the social and cultural dynamics of a community. Jacques Attali points out that music functions as a mirror, “allowing those who hear it to record their own personalized, specified, modeled meanings, affirmed in time with the beat—a collective memory of order and genealogies, the repository of the word and the social score” (9). Pimienta’s music evokes collective memory and fosters possibilities for healing and reparation for Black women by incorporating her ancestral heritage, sounds, and rhythms.

Reparations of the imagination for the Black diaspora are understood as intimate, conceptual, and political projects that are deeply rooted in resistance to colonial imaginaries of being. Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez argues that literary narratives engage in the imaginative reconstruction of histories, identities, and futures that have been erased or fragmented by colonialism, slavery, and racial violence. They offer discursive spaces to imagine the possibilities of decolonial reparations as amends that are both material and immaterial (Figueroa-Vásquez 118). Extending this argument, I propose that not only literary narratives but also oral traditions, ancestral music, and the resonance of drums offer spaces for reparations in Pimienta’s work. According to Figueroa-Vásquez, reparations are actions, “based on relations across difference; a recognition of structural, gendered, and intergenerational violence and a move away from its normalization; and as decolonial love” (124). Reparations emphasize intergenerational and collective acts of love aimed at confronting colonialism and contemporary forms of coloniality. Reparations imply healing of the self and reconciliation with the community, both crucial aspects in visioning decolonial futures. In this context, Pimienta’s musical repertoire serves as a sonic space that facilitates reparation for Black women by acknowledging structural violence and fostering a connection with Afro-descendant ancestors.

For Black communities, the trauma inflicted by transatlantic slavery continues to shape present and future experiences. Christina Sharpe, in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, suggests that care can serve as a radical form of engagement and resistance to this trauma. She calls on Black people to “reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of Care

(as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering and observance” (Sharpe 131). This notion of care and consciousness aligns with *Miss Colombia* as a sonic homeplace for reparations of the imagination. The album becomes a space for remembering, observing, and honoring ancestral histories and traditions, fostering collective solidarity and kinship among Black people.

Lido Pimienta and her Road to *Miss Colombia* (2022)

Pimienta was inspired by the mistake that occurred during the 2015 Miss Universe pageant when African American host Steve Harvey mistakenly announced Miss Colombia, Ariadna Gutiérrez, as the winner instead of Miss Philippines. Announcing Miss Colombia as Miss Universe for a few minutes sparked racist comments on social media directed at the host. These comments mainly came from the Colombian diaspora, prompting Pimienta to reflect on the anti-Blackness and beauty standards she experienced in her native country.³ The idealization of her homeland, rooted in memory, began to crumble in the face of her compatriots’ racist attitudes, leading her to undergo a cathartic process and creatively articulate her love-hate relationship with Colombia through the album.

Despite migrating to Canada as a teenager, Pimienta maintains a strong connection with Palenque and the Colombian coastal region. Two significant influences on Pimienta’s music have been the *cantadoras* and the musical group Sexteto Tabalá. In the podcast *Radio Menea*, Pimienta mentioned that during her teenage years, she used to play with Sexteto Tabalá and developed a close relationship with San Basilio de Palenque and its people:

“Sexteto Tabalá knew me and took me under their wing since I was fifteen years old. So, for half of my life, I have been with Sexteto. So, I knew that there was going to be a moment in my life when I was going to be able to make a song for them and do a song with them” (Perez and Bayetti).

The opportunity and privilege of building her artistic career in Canada allowed her to return to her musical home, Palenque, to channel its sounds and culture through the album. Pimienta explains that the album intended to create a nurturing space for the Black diaspora which connects with the idea of “homeplace”: “I wanted to be referential, but I didn’t want to be a copy. I wanted people to feel like their home, but not necessarily being in Colombia because not everyone is from Colombia and grew up there” (Perez and Bayetti). Thus, *Miss Colombia* was intended to create a sonic homeplace, and it also emerges as a symbolic tribute to Palenque. The album embodies ethics of care by amplifying Black voices, reclaiming narratives, and creating spaces of visibility and empowerment.

Miss Colombia takes on a connotation of resistance through its association with the history of San Basilio de Palenque. According to Roberto Arrázola in *Palenque: Primer pueblo libre de América. Historia de las sublevaciones de los esclavos de Cartagena*, (*Palenque: The First Free Town in America. History of the Slave Uprisings of Cartagena*), San Basilio de Palenque is considered one of the first free African towns in the colonial Americas. One of the reasons for this claim is because its founder, Benkos Domingo Biohó obtained by Royal Mandate the freedom of the San Basilio maroons in 1605 and 1616 (Zapata Olivella, *La rebellion* 270). Palenque holds historical significance, situated seventy kilometers from Cartagena, a prominent port for African slave trafficking. During the colonial period, Palenque served as a refuge for maroons in the 17th century (Friedemann and Patiño Roselli 21). Biohó, originally from the Bijago islands of Guinea in West Africa, called himself “King of the Arcabuco” and “King of the Matuna.” Zapata Olivella highlights that in 1620, King Benkos declared to the Spanish governor: “We Africans have never been slaves” emphasizing on a perspective of Blackness that transcended the confines of slavery (*La rebelión de los génes* 56).

San Basilio de Palenque serves as a Black spatial imaginary, fostering solidarities within the Black diaspora. The concept of the Black spatial imaginary, as noted by George Lipsitz, emerges, “from complex couplings of race and space [and] promotes solidarities within, between, and across spaces” (69). Under the leadership of Benkos Biohó, the people of Palenque resisted formal religious structures and embraced a syncretic animist religion. Biohó, a maroon leader, crafted drums and flutes for entertainment, healing ceremonies, and religious practices (Ali 281). In present times, Palenque continues to preserve its African heritage through sounds, rites, and rhythms. This is evident in the *palenquero* dialect, the *lumbalú* funeral ceremonies accompanied by sacred drum rhythms (Friedemann 54), and *bullerengue*, a traditional maroon drum music that centers on *cantadoras*’ voices. Pimienta channels this cultural and sonic essence of Palenque in *Miss Colombia*, turning the album into a site of resistance and a space for the reparation of the imagination for Afro-Colombians.

The African diaspora in Colombia has been invisible and not a priority for the government since the power and wealth of the country have been in the hands of white male leaders. It was not until 1991 when the country adopted the new National Constitution that the nation-state acknowledged and granted the possibility of certain rights to the country’s Indigenous and Black communities. Peter Wade mentions that for the African diaspora, the new constitution allowed the creation of Law 70 of 1993: “protecting the cultural identity of black communities and the titling of land for some such communities in the Pacific coastal

region” (*Blackness* 226). This is not to say that by recognizing black communities legally, the long racial tensions in the country were solved, but it is to point out that it was not until the late twentieth century that Afro-Colombian subjects became part of the national discourse. Moreover, it was not until the year 2022 that Francia Marquez became the first Afro-Colombian vice president. Pimienta offered her support to Marquez, and as a tribute, she drew and posted a portrait of the candidate with a thank you message on her Instagram. Part of the message said, “I give you this portrait made by me, with admiration and gratitude. I am grateful because you have helped me and my generation to regain hope.”⁴

Nevertheless, Pimienta could also be seen as a Black woman who has helped restore hope to Afro communities in Colombia. Through the sonic and visual aesthetics of *Miss Colombia*, she redefines race, gender, and beauty national standards by positioning Black women in private and public spaces. The album plays a vital role in amplifying the voices and resilience of Afro-Colombian communities by echoing the cultural and sonic essence of San Basilio de Palenque. The connotation of the album as a site of resistance where women are creators of their narrative offering healing and reparations possibilities is channeled through the songs: “Eso que tú haces” (That thing you do) and “Pelo cucú” (Nappy Hair).

“Eso que tú haces” a Sonic Space of Resistance

The visual and aural aesthetics of “Eso que tú haces” (“That thing you do”) encapsulate the broader intention behind *Miss Colombia*, exposing the gender and race tensions of the country through a toxic and contradictory relationship between the nation and its Black communities. The song serves as a space of resistance and ancestral connection, offering opportunities for the reparation of the imagination by challenging hegemonic dynamics and positioning empowered Black women in public and private spheres. Its musical ensemble merges the genre of *bullerengue*, a traditional rhythm of the region with contemporary synthetic sounds of electro-pop and percussion. The rhythm of the drums, integral to *bullerengue*, plays a vital role in invoking gods and ancestors for Black communities. At the same time, the song exposes Colombian Blackness as a transatlantic process, portraying the sand and the ocean as spaces for cultural and sonic exchange.

The song revolves around San Basilio de Palenque, and its music video was recorded in the maroon town, co-produced by Pimienta and Paz Ramírez. It features the Kumbé dance group led by the Afro-Colombian choreographer Matilde Herrera.⁵ In the visual narrative of the video, Palenque assumes a central role as the protagonist. It is presented as a liminal, magical, and ancestral space — a home for the African diaspora of different generations where they can affirm their minds and hearts. However, it also portrays the poverty and difficulties of

the territory. The video shows Palenque not only as a historical site of resistance for maroons but also as a contemporary space where the Black diaspora in Colombia actively contributes to current conversations about race making their experiences visible.

In an interview with Bandcamp, Pimienta mentions that recording the video in Palenque had triple intentions. First, it was a way to give back to her community; second, it aimed to highlight the immense talent within Palenque. Ultimately, the video serves as an aesthetic love letter to the sounds of Palenque and its culture. Pimienta emphasized: “It was important for me to do it in Palenque, to record with those people who are super hardworking dance students, mothers, and fathers... I made sure that, when we shot the video, that I and the group had equal screen time” (García). Palenque emerges as a symbolic space where the past and current history of the Black diaspora comes together. The message of the video echoes the idea of homeplace building, “a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of wounds inflated by racist domination” (hooks 42). *Miss Colombia* transcends as a site of resistance through the symbolism of Palenque, Benkos Biohó, the maroon leader, and the performance of Pimienta and the dancers.

The music video for “Eso que tú haces” opens with an aerial shot exposing Palenque’s geographic location and infrastructure. It shows an orange telecommunications tower, evoking a sense of globalization and modernity. However, this is juxtaposed with the images of the houses with aluminum rooftops and rustic streets, showing the region’s lack of resources, making it difficult for viewers to place Palenque at a specific time. The video’s visual highlights the colonial influence in the country by focusing on the main square and the town’s Catholic church. This colonial reference is enhanced in the opening scene, where Pimienta appears in front of the church’s doors with open arms, resembling a cross. Simultaneously, her body aligns with the skylight at the upper part of the church, shaped like a cross. This alignment with the Christian symbolism grants Pimienta a divine status, suggesting she is either becoming a god or seeing God within herself. By incorporating traditional religious symbols into her performance, Pimienta transforms these elements into a new form of spirituality, positioning herself with a role of authority to be the narrator and storyteller of the African diaspora in Colombia.

The song begins with the sounds of the drums indicating that the opening rhythm is a *bullerengue*. This is followed by Pimienta’s initial verses: “*Hoy te ví, sentada en la arena*” / “*Hoy te sentí, peleando en la marea*” (Today I saw you sitting on the sand/ Today, I felt you fighting in the tide). The first verse establishes the narrative voice from an outsider’s perspective: “I saw you,” which could refer to an ancestor. Here, the image of “sand” evokes

the past and metaphorically indexes the paradoxes of presence and absence within the African diaspora in Colombia. Vanessa Agard-Jones notes that “we consider sand a repository of both feeling and experience, of affect and history, in the Caribbean region. Here, sand links us unswervingly to place, to a particular landscape that bears traces of both connection and loss” (Agard-Jones 326). Although San Basilio de Palenque is not a coastal town, its proximity and connection to Cartagena infuse the idea of sand with this layered significance. This underscores the crucial role of transnationalism in identity construction, highlighting the weight of culture over national boundaries.

The next verse, “Today, I felt you fighting in the tide” juxtaposes the narrative voice gaze with her emotions. It suggests that the Black female narrative is not only observing, but she is also feeling the other woman’s struggle, creating a sisterhood connection with the past and the present. The tide and the ocean acquire multiple meanings: the ocean is a place of connections where the African diaspora met the Caribbean Sea, and it also embodies a site of sorrow and trauma where many ancestors lost their lives during the transatlantic slave trade. Christina Sharpe proposes the concept of Trans*Atlantic as a space, condition, or process about the Black Atlantic. For Sharpe, “Trans* means a “variety of ways that try to get at something about or toward the range of trans*formations enacted on and by Black bodies” (30). Part of this transformation involves the water as a vehicle for the sounds, voices, and emotions of multiple African communities. For Black subjects, the sand and the ocean can represent transnational and diasporic spaces that involve the exchange of beliefs, rituals, and sorrows.

In the music video, Pimienta and the dancers highlight the body as a powerful vehicle for communication and expression through their performance. As a Black collective, they embody their own culture and history, contributing to the creation of new epistemologies. The dancers from Grupo Kumbe serve as a medium for narrating Black history in Colombia, functioning as living archives that convey their stories through movement and performance. During the colonial period, the Black diaspora in Colombia used their bodies as living archives, preserving cultural and musical traditions through embodied memory. This aligns with Paul Gilroy’s idea that “the oral character of the cultural settings in which diaspora musics have developed presupposes a distinctive relationship to the body” (75). The connection between the body and culture among Black communities in Colombia persisted through resistance, maintained by oral traditions, music, and dance forms like *bullerengue*.

In the video, the first choreographies through the rhythm of *bullerengue* by the Grupo Kumbé’s dancers take center stage. The dancers are depicted with traditional Colombian clothes; the female dancers are wearing long white dresses, and the men are wearing beige

suits. The women's long white dresses carry a symbolic association with the bullerengue dance, signifying the initiation of female puberty, which was integral to the origins of this traditional genre. Afro-Colombian choreographer Delia Zapata Olivella explains, "That is why it is associated with 'Yemayá,' the goddess of the sea, fertility, and motherhood, the mother of all the orishas in Yoruba culture. Later, men were allowed to take part in it" (43).⁶ The inclusion of white dresses as part of the folkloric dance ritual in the music video evokes a connection to African diaspora spirituality and highlights how cultural knowledge and hybrid rituals have been passed down through generations.

The initial choreography in the music video serves as a visual commentary on race and gender tensions in Colombia, exposing the nation's asymmetric system through the dancers' performance. The male dancers are wearing a shirt with a strip across the chest with the colors of the Colombian flag: yellow, blue, and red. They also hold a *sombrero vueltiao*, a traditional Colombian hat, and one of the national symbols of the country. This detail in their attire suggests national pride and connection with the nation, while the choreography captures some of the tensions related to race and gender. As the dancers enter the visual frame from different angles, they form two distinct lines, separated by gender. The wide shot in the video allows the audience to perceive that while they are dancing to the rhythm of the drums, the line of men intersects with the line of women forming a cross. The Catholic symbolism of the cross evokes colonial religious power. However, this cross disintegrates while they are dancing to the rhythm of *bullerengue*. The disintegration of the cross can be interpreted as a way for Afro-Colombians to reclaim their identity and a reinterpretation of cultural and religious symbols. Thus, the song becomes a way of resistance creating new forms of spirituality through the maroon music of *bullerengue*.

In a close-up shot, the female dancers emerge from behind, revealing their heads and arms. They are connected in a horizontal hug, forming a line in front of the men. Through the women's arms, the male dancers become visible while each is holding a *sombrero vueltiao* in their right hand to cover their faces. This choreographic gesture in the video can be interpreted as a sign of shame or guilt due to actions or mistakes from the past. The act of covering their faces aligns with the lyrics of the song and conveys the message of the narrative voice:

Mírame a la cara cuando me hables (Look me in the face when you talk to me)

Y no me digas nada si no quieres (And do not say anything if you do not want to)

Pero, no me falles; me duele (But, do not fail me; it hurts me)

Contrasting the lyrics with the images in the video, the toxic love affair can be interpreted as a metaphor for the relationship between Black women and their homeland. The male dancers take a symbolic position that represents Colombia as a nation; bearing in mind that they have the Colombian flag embedded in their clothes. In this interpretation, the cause of the disappointments of the narrative voice is the homeland, which in Spanish is *patria*—coming from the Latin word *pater*, meaning father. Here, the lover in the song symbolizes the homeland, which has failed to recognize its Black women as equal or first-class citizens.

This stanza encapsulates the universal quest to affirm human dignity, whether in the context of a lover, family member, community, or an entire country. The verse, “Look me in the face when you talk to me” can be interpreted as a request from the Black female voice seeking recognition from her nation. In patriarchal societies, women, especially Women of Color are not fully seen or heard, and their voices are silenced. This verse takes the form of protest against the oppressive social system questioning gender coloniality. María Lugones argues that the coloniality of gender is a colonial imposition, especially for Women of Color, who are victims of multiple dominations amplified by the intersectionality of race/class/sexuality/gender. Lugones states that “for women, colonization was a dual process of racial inferiority and gender subordination” (34).⁷ The intersectionality of the Black narrative voice presents a multiple negation due to her gender, race, and class. However, through the power of her music, Pimienta subverts the hegemonic dynamics of coloniality by demanding recognition as a subject and that her self-worth is valued.

The poetic voice creates a space of agency by seeking a negotiation to be acknowledged as a subject. Her demands emphasize the absence of a reciprocal dialogue, as implied in the verses: “And do not say anything if you do not want to/ But, do not fail me; it hurts me.” They highlight the emotional labor that Black women often carry in their relationship with the nation and society. The paradoxical relationship between the nation and the Black woman’s voice materialized in the chorus as a claim by repeating three times: “That thing you do/ is not love. Pimienta’s voice serves as a conduit to articulate and condemn the actions of her native country towards Afro-Colombians. According to data reported by DANE (2019), 38% of the *Palenquero* population and 40% of the Black population in Colombia reported to have experiencing some form of deprivation.⁸ The department of Bolívar, where Palenque is located and where much of the Black population resides, has limited resources. The 2021 report, “*Viabilidad fiscal territorial: Departamento de Bolívar*”, (Territorial fiscal viability: Department of Bolívar), states that in 2020, the monetary poverty rate in the department stood at 52.7%, significantly higher than the national average of 42% (1).⁹ These disparities highlight

the lack of inclusion and resources for the African diaspora and Black women, further exacerbating racial and gender tensions in Colombia.

However, at the end of the video, the dancers and Pimienta change out of their traditional clothing and appear in everyday attire. This gesture highlights that the Afro-Colombian community should not be recognized solely as an exotic object but as a multifaceted subject that is an integral part of the nation. This visual shift at the end of the video leads to a reinterpretation of the meaning of the chorus, “That thing you do/ is not love.” This verse now takes on a deeper significance, becoming a cry for liberation from the historical constraints of racial and gender standards. Towards the end of the music video, there is a notable close-up shot featuring the Afro-Colombian female dancers dressed in contemporary clothing, arranged in a line in front of a green building. The composition of this shot resembles a beauty pageant lineup, with the dancers looking directly at the camera as if they were making sure the audience was acknowledging their existence.

After this scene, Pimienta and the dancers transition to a club setting in Palenque, where they dance to the rhythm of champeta, a musical genre that emerged in the 1970s within the Black communities of Cartagena. The Black women dancers engage with the rhythm of champeta, harnessing the erotic as a source of creative and harmonious power. This use of the erotic aligns with Audre Lorde’s concept, where she defines the erotic as a potent force encompassing energy and identity. Lorde’s assertion that “the power of the erotic is that creative energy, the knowledge, and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). Here erotic serves as the capacity to embrace joy and liberation while rejecting normative power dynamics. Through the lens of the erotic, the dancers and Pimienta reclaim their history, ancestral knowledge, and spirituality within the transformative medium of music and dance. This approach rejects normative power dynamics and instead embraces a holistic and empowering expression of cultural identity and self-affirmation.

The video ends with the image of the main square of San Basilio de Palenque, showcasing the statue of Benkos Biohó with his fist raised. Then, Pimienta appears blurry in front of the statue, symbolically connecting the present and the past through the maroon leader. The song and video collectively serve as a celebration of Black women, facilitating a reconceptualization of race, gender, and female beauty within the national discourse of Colombia. By positioning Pimienta and the Black female dancers at the forefront as empowered subjects, the video challenges traditional norms and stereotypes, asserting the agency and visibility of Afro-Colombian women. Furthermore, the song transcends its musical

form to become a tool for preserving memories and spatial practices specific to San Basilio de Palenque. It creates a sonic homeplace that articulates both old and new cycles of historic pain and love, offering possibilities for healing and collective empowerment. This celebration of Afro-Colombian culture, identity, and sisterhood is also reflected in the song “Pelo Cucú,” (Nappy Hair) which serves as a site of resistance and reparations for Black women.

“Pelo cucú” a Sonic Space of Black Sisterhood

The song “Pelo cucú” (“Nappy Hair”) articulates the anti-Blackness and symbolic violence in society through the rejection of natural hair among Black women. The song highlights how female pain can be transformed into a celebration through the connection of female ancestors and sisterhood. *Pelo cucú* is a term commonly used on the Colombian coast, which carries a derogatory connotation, referring to the hair of individuals of African descent as “bad hair.” Recorded in the streets of San Basilio de Palenque, the song does not have a music video. Still, it features *las cantadoras* from the folkloric musical group Raíces: Emelia Reyes Salgado “La Burgos,” Teresa Reyes Salgado, and Doris García. The song serves as a sonic homeplace of resistance, crafted and maintained by Afro-Colombian women. It provides a nurturing space for Black individuals to flourish and grow while nurturing their spirits. Through the oral tradition of *bullerengue*, it confronts societal prejudices and celebrates the beauty and resilience of Black identity.

The sonic aesthetic of “Pelo Cucú” opens possibilities for Black women’s healing and reparation of the imagination by echoing the rhythms and rites of Palenque through the role of the *cantadoras*, and by incorporating the sound of drums as poetic and ancestral elements. This is the only song of the album where Pimienta uses linguistic features from the region by incorporating Palenque’s pronunciation of certain words and phrases, such as: “*lo vo,*” (I’ll go) “*pa’ podé,*” (be able), and “*vamo’ mujel,*” (let’s go, woman). By incorporating the Palenque dialect into the song, Pimienta and the *cantadoras* articulate and affirm their Afro-Colombian identity and traditions. The use of the Palenque dialect serves a dual purpose; first it reflects on the connection between Pimienta and the *cantadoras* with their African roots. Second, it celebrates their heritage, specifically through the cultural significance of their hair. This linguistic choice echoes and emphasizes the Afro-Colombian oral tradition of the *cantadoras* as leaders in their communities, promoting Black women’s leadership and amplifying their voices to a broader audience.

In the Colombian coastal region, women assume leadership roles within their communities through music as *cantadoras*, using their voices collectively during funerals, religious rites, and celebrations. This communal musical practice not only showcases their

vocal talents but also contributes to the cohesion of community networks and transmitting knowledge. *Cantadoras* “improvises, harmonizes, restating melodies, utilizing microvariations in rhythmic emphasis, and inserting timbral effects like falsetto yodels” (Birenbaum Quintero 47). Their improvisational skills transform into compositions and poems that convey coded and metaphorical messages; narrating stories passed down from generation to generation.

In the region, *Cantadoras* use collaborative practices involving both young and elderly women to evoke and communicate their experiences through songs accompanied by rhythmic drumming. This form of musical expression extends to spiritual practices observed in rituals like *lumbalú*, where the *cantadoras*’ voices play a central role in invoking ancestral connections and communal solidarity. The collaborative nature of *cantadoras*’ performances underscores the continuity of cultural traditions and the importance of collective memory within Afro-Colombian communities. Through their musical storytelling, they contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge while offering a platform for spiritual expression and community bonding.

In “Pelo cucú,” the rhythmic pulse of the drums marks the beat in four distinct counts, indicating that it is a *bullerengue*. The drums play a central role, serving as the rhythmic core that guides the intonation of the lyrics and directs the improvisations of the *cantadoras*. Within this sonic ritual, the lead singer typically assumes the role of the “*entonadora*” (*intoner*) initiating the transition between the song’s stanzas. The other *cantadoras* act as responders, contributing to the chorus. The song begins with the falsetto “le-le-le-le-le-le” combining the voices of the *cantadoras* with Pimienta. It is followed by the sounds of the drums, maracas, and the voice of the *cantadoras* in the chorus: “*tengo mi pelo cucú*” (I have my nappy hair). Pimienta, positioning herself as the *entonadora*. She initiates the first verse, from the perspective of a Black girl who is voicing her trauma of being discriminated against for her physical appearance based on the texture of her curly hair:

Solita cargo mi cruz (cucú, cucú) (I carry my cross by myself)

Por tener pelo cucú (cucú, cucú) (For having my nappy hair)

Las puertas se me cierran (Doors are closing on me)

No me vuelvas a fregar (cucú, cucú) (Don’t bug me again)

The verse “I carry my cross by myself” presents the imagery of a Black woman bearing her cross alone encapsulating the individual burden carried by females to navigate microaggressions and instances of racial abuse stemming from societal prejudices against their natural hair. “Pelo cucú” draws inspiration from Lido Pimienta’s personal experiences during

her childhood and adolescence in Colombia. In an interview with the *Sudaka Podcast*, the artist reveals that, while attending a school in Barranquilla, she was the only Black student, and she faced discrimination due to her race. Pimienta recounts an incident where two classmates cut off a lock of her hair, stating: “We cut your hair to put it under a microscope and to understand why your hair is like this” (Narváez). This act of discrimination becomes the symbolic cross to which the narrative voice alludes, and it reflects on the impact of discriminatory practices that challenge beauty standards rooted in white and Eurocentric perspectives. This personal experience underscores the deeper societal issues surrounding racism and colorism in Colombia, particularly in educational settings. By narrating her experiences through music, Pimienta sheds light on the emotional and psychological toll of such discriminatory acts while reclaiming agency and pride in her identity as an Afro-descendant woman.

Beyond skin color, hair is recognized as one of the physical attributes used for racial categorization. Hair holds deep cultural, political, and social significance, serving as a prominent marker of race and gender. Its significance is intertwined with Africa, rituals, and aesthetics, serving as crucial elements in the construction of identity narratives. The verse “Doors are closing on me” reflects how social prejudices related to race and gender often result in limiting opportunities for Black women. These distinctions determine which bodies are valued and which are not rooted in historical colonial hierarchies. Ingrid Banks highlights that “what is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy” (Banks, 2). As a result, white bodies are deemed “beautiful” and acceptable, while Black bodies, particularly those with natural curly hair, are viewed as the opposite. Hair plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions of femininity, Blackness, and beauty, exerting influence on both individual self-perception and public attitudes through social interactions. Hegemonic social structures consider natural curly hair as a presentation that does not align with the standards of “professionalism” and beauty contests.

In Colombia, the National Beauty Contest implicitly upholds certain rules regarding body visibility, where the ideal beauty is associated with the hair and skin color of white women. During the national beauty contest in Cartagena, which determines Miss Colombia, women from Palenque are perceived as “the Women of Color.” According to Elisabeth Cunin, “the palenquera is perceived as the woman of ‘race’ or African woman, a strong, independent woman, lazily walking the streets of Cartagena to sell the fruit she carries in her basin (188).¹⁰ This reduction of Black women to a narrow stereotype confines them within racialized spaces that exclude them from being crowned Miss Colombia. National narratives, rooted in

asymmetric hierarchies since colonization, perpetuate the exclusion of Black women from the conventional notion of beauty. The societal rejection of curly hair and Black physical features may contribute to the internalization of anti-Blackness, where Eurocentric beauty standards are embraced as the norm. This exclusion reflects deeply established systemic racism that marginalizes Afro-descendant women and reinforces discriminatory practices based on racialized beauty norms.

The dialectic essence of the song is encapsulated in the verses; “*mi mamá quiere casar*”/” “*Pa’ mejorar la raza*” (“My mother wants me to get married”/” “To improve the race”) reflecting on the anti-Black sentiment in Latin America and the concept of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening. The aftermath of the colonial system in the region left the ideologies of *blanqueamiento*, a legacy of racial prejudice through social, political, and economic practices. These policies dominated the “ideal” prototype of national identity and promoted monocultural mestizaje which was based on the exclusive mixture between Spanish and Indigenous peoples excluding Afro-descendants (Muteba Rahier 2). *Blanqueamiento* refers to a complex process of competing claims and attributions about identity. Peter Wade explains that it “is part of the forces that act to dilute and disperse blackness and black culture (298). This whitening process entails adopting and assimilating attitudes, forms, and models associated with the status of “white,” while rejecting attributes associated with “Black” to occupy a valued social position.

The song highlights the societal pressure placed on Black women to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards and to participate in a process aimed at lightening the race. The notion of improving race through marriage reflects historical ideologies of racial hierarchy and colorism, where whiteness is idealized and pursued as a means of social advancement. During the colonial period, *blanqueamiento* was forcefully imposed through the sexual exploitation of Afro-descendant and Indigenous women by white colonizers. In contemporary times, whitening takes on various forms, including biological practices such as interracial relationships and physical alterations to the body like hair straightening.

In the song, the practice of whitening materializes through a biological practice, as the mother of the narrative voice expresses her desire to marry her daughter to a white man, referred to as “*Niño blanco, ojito azul*” (The white boy with blue eyes). The mother’s intention is rooted in her desire for future generations to have lighter and less visibly Black physical appearances. The narrative voice, from the mother’s perspective, suggests that interracial marriage serves to escape Blackness: “*Y ya nunca tener más (cucú, cucú)*”/ “*Ya no más pelo cucú, cucú*” (And never again have nappy hair). Consequently, women in the role of

life-givers take on the burden of “improving the racial lineage” of the family by marrying a white man and reproducing children with physical characteristics that distance them from Blackness.

On the other hand, whitening also manifests itself in the physical transformation of the body through aesthetic processes like Black women straightening their hair. This process materializes as painful and traumatic in the stanza:

Mi pelo lo vo' a estirar (le-le-le-le-le-le-le) (I'm going to straighten my hair)

Pa podé' ir a la fiesta (le-le-le-le-le-le-le) (So I can go to the party)

Mi oreja se me quemó (cucú, cucú) (My ear got burned)

La frente también llevó (cucú, cucú) (My forehead got the heat too)

The Black narrative voice illustrates how straightening her hair is a way to negotiate her presence in social spaces, enabling participation in events like parties and celebrations. However, this process carries physical pain and a profound message of societal judgment regarding the desirability of natural hair. Colombian beauty standards, tied to significant social and religious occasions like first communions and *quinceañeras* often include hair straightening as a ritualistic part of aesthetic preparation. Pimienta's lyrics shed light on how these rituals contribute to the early internalization of anti-Blackness among young girls. In an interview, the singer mentions: “You become this perfect lady when you get your hair straightened for the first time. Strike one: You look, Black. You got that Black blood in you... Don't be in the sun, straighten your hair, and put on this white dress for your first communion. You got to look beautiful for the priests” (Fernández). This commentary underscores the painful and discriminatory nature of conforming to white ideals, revealing the emotional and physical scars left by such practices within the experiences of the African diaspora.

Nevertheless, the transformation depicted in “Pelo Cucú” represents a journey from trauma and pain to a celebration of Black female hair, beauty, and identity. The final stanza through the voices of the *cantadoras* subverts the negative connotations associated with the physical characteristic of *pelo cucú*, presenting it as a cause of celebration. The final verses by the *cantadoras* subvert the denial of the physical characteristic of curly hair and manifest itself as a celebration that makes it possible for the reparation of the imagination to live outside white beauty standards. The *cantadoras* take on the role of living ancestors transmitting knowledge to a new generation responding with a rhetoric of resistance:

El cráneo me está doliendo/ No me jales el cabello (My skull hurts/ Don't pull my hair)

Cucú cu/ Vamo' mujel'/ Dale duro a ese tamboo' (Let's go woman/ hit that drum hard)

Que se oiga en la Guajira/

(Let it be heard in Guajira:)

Tengo mi pelo cucú

(I have my nappy hair)

The *cantadoras* articulate the pain caused by straightening their hair and signify its conclusion by declaring: “Don’t pull my hair” which can be interpreted as an acceptance of their natural hair. The final verse, “I have my nappy hair” serves to reclaim the value of their natural hair as beautiful and celebrates their racial identity. Additionally, the drums become part of the female celebration through the upbeat of their rhythm and as the *cantadora* is shouting “Hit that drum hard”. The drum takes on a transatlantic meaning to the diaspora, culture, and African ancestors that form part of the *cantadoras* and Pimienta’s identity. The symbolism of the drum resonates with the message of Black female pride: “Let it be heard in Guajira/ I have my nappy hair.” These verses show the mobility and importance of oral tradition in creating a message that transcends geographies, emphasizing the appreciation and empowerment of Black women’s natural hair and identity.

“Pelo cucú” channels oral traditions, musical narratives, and cultural contributions of San Basilio de Palenque weaving them into contemporary conversations. The song becomes a sonic home of resistance and reparations through sisterhood practices between the *cantadoras* and Pimienta by defending their race and physical characteristics and fostering Black female agency. This song not only celebrates Black natural hair but also empowers Black women by reclaiming their identity and expressing their Black pride and resilience within the Afro-Colombian context.

Conclusion

Lido Pimienta’s album *Miss Colombia* contributes to the conversation on Black geographies that have historically been marginalized by national and social practices. The album transcends to become a celebration of the African diaspora by drawing from the Afro-descendant sonic imagination of Palenque San Basilio. Pimienta’s music becomes a sonic home of resistance and reparations by invoking Palenque’s oral traditions through the sounds of *bullerengue* and the voices of *cantadoras*. The album serves as a political tool, providing agency for Afro-Colombian women through increased audibility and visibility. It acts as a platform for Black women to (re)claim spaces where they have been historically denied or silenced. The visuals, music, and dances of the album exposes an alternative reality to the country’s history challenging Colombian race, gender, and beauty standards by incorporating and highlighting Black women’s history, culture, and rituals linked to ancestral spirituality.

Notes

- 1.- “Crea una especie de ‘cimarronaje’ intelectual, de prácticas sociales y de la construcción de pensamiento propio de acuerdo a experiencias concretas.” All translations throughout the text are mine.
- 2.- “El descendiente legítimo de los lumbalúes con que los negros del Palenque de San Basilio despedían a los muertos.”
- 3.- Information taken from Pimienta’s website; <https://lidopimienta.com/about/>
- 4.- “Agradezco porque a mi generación nos has ayudado a recobrar la esperanza.” Taken from Lido Pimienta’s *Instagram*, posted on April 4, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb8O7UtOoHq/>
- 5.- Dancers from Grupo Kumbé that appear in the music video “Eso que tú haces”: Denia Beatriz Piñeres Herrera, Esther Cecilia Piñeres Herrera, Ana Isabel Altamar Casseres, Jennifer Barco Burgos, Inilida María Cassiani Casseres, Yocelyn Mendoza Herrera Yeritza, Lucía Pautt Bolívar, Tania Margarita Almeida, Junco Steven Manuel Orta Muñoz, Cristean José Peña Collante, Luis Alberto Herrera Padilla, Brayán José Mendoza Herrera, Eder Manuel Caceres Salgado, Eder Yousetf Pacocha Ruiz, Moises Cardona Herrera, and Dewins de Jesús Jiménez Jiménez. Names were taken from the information of “Eso que tú haces” YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2azy1D-yyWc>
- 6.- “Por eso se asocia con “Yemayá,” diosa del mar, de la fertilidad, de la maternidad, la madre de todos los orichas en la cultura yoruba. Posteriormente se les permitió a los varones tomar parte de ella.”
- 7.- “Para las mujeres la colonización fue un proceso dual de inferiorización racial y subordinación de género.”
- 8.- Data from the *Comisión de la Verdad* website, “El racismo y la discriminación intensificaron la violencia en contra del pueblo negro.” <https://web.comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/reconocimiento-verdad-pueblo-negro-racismo-discriminacion-intensificaron-violencia>
- 9.- Data from “Viabilidad fiscal territorial - junio 2021: Departamento de Bolívar.” Dirección general de apoyo fiscal-Ministerio de Hacienda y Crédito Público. https://www.carf.gov.co/webcenter/portal/EntidadesdeOrdenTerritorial/pages_viabilidadfisca territorial/viabilidadfiscal2021
- 10.- “La palenquera es percibida como la mujer “de raza” o mujer africana, mujer fuerte, independiente, recorriendo indolentemente las calles de Cartagena para vender las frutas que lleva en su palangana.”

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TRADUCCIÓN-TRANSLATION



*Detalle de la obra "Dualidad"**

* Lana teñida con añil y grana cochinilla y tejida a mano en telar de cintura. 60 cms x 200 cms En el universo mesoamericano, el color constituye un complejo sistema de comunicación visual por el que se transmiten ideas, valores y significados. En este sentido, el azul y el rojo se conciben como dos tonalidades opuestas y complementarias que, en su conjunto, evocan el ideal precolombino del equilibrio cósmico. De este modo, el azul se vincula al mundo nocturno, a lo húmedo, a lo frío, al agua, el cielo y el mundo masculino. El rojo de la grana tendría, por su parte, una asociación directa a la sangre y el sacrificio, la menstruación, el vientre femenino, el sol, la fecundidad y lo caliente. En Mesoamérica, el azul no puede entenderse sin el rojo (y viceversa), pues de forma conjunta, constituyen una totalidad simbólica. En algún punto, el azul termina siendo rojo y el rojo, azul, como el ciclo vital de la noche y el día, la vida y la muerte, lo masculino y lo femenino, etc. A esto se suma el simbolismo cromático del maíz en el mundo indígena (abundante en tonalidades azules y rojas), sus colores como referente estético y la enunciación de términos aplicables de forma indiferenciada a tejidos y mazorcas, lo que nos permite advertir que el arte textil se relaciona intrínsecamente con las prácticas agrícolas asociadas a la milpa.

Chocolates in the Snow: Lamija's Story¹

Kimberly Moreira*
Independent Scholar

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In March 1998, I learned that I had been assigned to the Balkans.-I was ranked sergeant or *staabsunteroffizier* of the German Army, and we were going to Bosnia as part of the Stabilization Forces (SFOR), an international group under the protection of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

I arrived in Bosnia in November 1998 with the Stabilization Forces. The objective of our troops was to maintain peace and control the designated areas. My unit, in particular, was in charge of a few kilometers north-west of Sarajevo. We had to make an appearance, let people know that we were there. We tried to engage in conversations using the few words in Serbo-Croatian that we had learned during training. Sometimes we spoke English, although it was not very useful due to the majority of Bosnians not knowing how to speak English or German. I say German because some refugees who had been living in Germany were now back. But there were times when we needed a translator to help us understand everyday issues, both when dealing with individuals and with local institutions. For example, we received reports of minefields or lack of infrastructure in the hospitals. Our task was to assess the different situations and collaborate as much as possible in order to reduce the tension among the civil groups. In addition, we were in permanent contact with the International Police Task Force (IPTF), which was tasked with overseeing and restructuring local police forces to promote respect for human rights. We patrolled our camp in Sarajevo, but we also had to protect the other barracks erected by NATO in the surrounding areas.

On December 24, 1998, Christmas Eve. We had to patrol the streets, and we carried with us a huge box full of chocolates and candies. In those days we had received packages from our families, and the truth is that they had sent us too many things. It occurred to one of the

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members of our platoon that we could take the sweets and deliver them to the children we encountered during the patrol. It was a good idea, although not free of obstacles. Christmas is a Christian tradition and most of the people living in the area were Muslims. Maybe someone would feel offended. Also, it was the time of Ramadan, and that is a period of fasting. But in the end, we decided to distribute the chocolates: after all, children are children and they would definitely like the sweets.

We arrived at one of the villages in the afternoon. In the courtyard of a school, a group of boys played soccer on a snow-covered field. We got out of our armored vehicle with the packages of chocolate. The boys were shy in the beginning. Not that they were afraid—it was more like they were evaluating the situation. Then one of our soldiers took the ball and started playing with them. We were making passes and kicking the ball for a while before offering, again, the chocolates. Little by little more boys and girls approached us. Then, the sweets began to disappear from the boxes at an astonishing rate.

There was a girl away from all the noise that caught my attention. She would have been a little over ten years old. She didn't take any chocolates. She simply watched from the sidelines, set apart from the group's ruckus. I interpreted her behavior as a mixture of shyness and modesty, as if she didn't think she deserved any gift. I don't know why, but it occurred to me that I should give her a special gift. I returned to the car and chose a box of our best chocolate. Then, I walked straight towards her. She took it without the glimmer of a smile. In the blink of an eye, the next thing you know one of the boys had already snatched the box from her hands. The girl offered no resistance. Wasn't even afraid. She remained there, standing, with a neutral expression engraved on her face. I had already identified the boy, he was younger and smaller than her, the most roguish and hyperactive of the group. I reacted quickly, ran after him and caught him before he fled. I took him by the collar of his jacket, grabbed the box and told him—using my index finger as a didactic tool—that what he had done was wrong. When I let him go, he ran out to join the others for more chocolate rations. I turned to the girl and again I handed her the package. She then smiled at me. However, it was not just that, it was the whole gesture: tilting her head and pulling her chin towards her chest as she interlaced her fingers. That sincere and particular way of thanking me meant a lot to me. Do you know what I thought? Maybe she had gotten used to having things taken away from her. Now, she appreciated that someone was interested in defending her.

My colleagues and I left that place minutes later. A few days after this event, one of the soldiers of the squad gave me some photos. We appeared with the children playing soccer and distributing the sweets. In the last picture, the one that had been taken from our vehicle, I

discovered the girl with the chocolates—smiling, clutching her gift with her right hand, saying goodbye with the others.

Back in Germany I used to look at those photographs. I thought about that girl, and I wondered if everything would turn out okay for her. Would she still live in her country? Would she have migrated to another place like so many of her countrymen? I wanted to imagine that Lamija was a successful and accomplished woman. A happy woman. Because, as you well know, her name is Lamija. In a while, I'll tell you again about all those adventures I went through to find out her name.

I was in Bosnia until March 22, 1999. If I had decided to stay in the army, I would have been promoted to an officer, but it was not my intention to be a soldier for the rest of my days. So, I left the army and registered for university classes in Trier to study Applied Geography.

I returned to Bosnia in 2014, fifteen years after serving as a sergeant for SFOR and the German army. My good friend Torsten, one of the soldiers in my platoon, also traveled with me. We always had a plan to return to Sarajevo. Since we became familiar with the city and especially its surroundings during the winter, we decided that it would be a good experience to explore it in the summer, but now as tourists. We were curious to discover if something had changed. It was a trip full of emotions, and I apologize for the war metaphor, but we were bombarded with memories. However, I will start at the beginning. We rented a car for a couple of days. We wanted to follow some of the routes that we had taken in our armored vehicles fifteen years earlier.

Prior to our departure from Sarajevo, I told Torsten about the photos of the village, since he was not present for the distribution of the sweets in 1998. He agreed to come with me. In fact, he thought it was a good idea to go back to the site. “Hopefully, we could run into some people from the pictures”, he said. While driving, Torsten wanted to know more about the photographs, so I confessed that I was curious about the girl with the chocolates. Of course, I expected her to be well. The truth, however, was that I was afraid of discovering otherwise. It was a very strange feeling. I had, in fact, barely seen her once, and that was already fifteen years ago, but I felt it almost as if I were her relative. Torsten and I also talked, honestly, about the difficulties of achieving our mission. It was difficult to predict what the reactions of the village residents might be. On the one hand, he and I were a couple of foreigners, out of nowhere, who were going to ask questions and, on top of that, showing and sharing pictures of children. On the other hand, we had always lived with the doubt of what they, the Bosnians, really thought of the troops of SFOR and NATO. Maybe many came to see us as an occupation force. In any case, we decided to start our inquiries with caution.

We parked in front of the patio that had once hosted that soccer game in the snow. We got out of the car and I, holding the photos, tried to orient myself. It was not easy because the houses around us had been renovated. A woman—less than forty years old—was washing clothes on the patio of her house with two small children. She looked at us curiously. In the end, she came to ask us, in Bosnian, whether she could help us. We resorted to different communication strategies; I even spoke to her in Czech, having taken lessons a year before. Czech is a Slavic language, and that knowledge ended up serving us a little. Finally, we handed her the photographs. She looked through them and when she reached that last one, she pointed to the girl with the chocolates and exclaimed, “Lamija!”. It was an expression of amazement, covering her mouth with her left hand, and uncovering it quickly, repeating “Lamija!”. The girl with the chocolates now had a name. I swear I felt my legs were failing me. The woman turned and pointed to the river. Thanks to my poor Czech I understood that in one of those three buildings, on the opposite side of the stream, lived the parents of Lamija. We thanked the woman and headed in that direction.

After a short walk we stopped at the riverbank and, not far ahead, we saw a small bridge. We were about to continue our march when a somewhat older man, sitting on the terrace of a bar to our left, began to shout something to us. I replied that we did not understand his language. Then he began to speak in a hesitant German—in all honesty, his pronunciation and vocabulary were rather weak— asking us where we were from and what we were doing there. In the end, he invited us to the terrace with an arm gesture. A little later we were all seated together. Torsten and I were happy to find someone even though he spoke little German. This man was a native of the village, but he was only visiting. For some time, he had been living in southern Germany. In fact, in front of the bar, he had parked his old car, which sported a Munich license plate. Although he told us that he had spent several years in Bavaria, the truth is that his handling of the language left a lot to be desired. We explained to him that we had been NATO soldiers, showing him the photographs and trying to clarify what the woman had told us: that Lamija’s parents lived in a house on the other side of the village. When the waiter, a man of no more than thirty years old, came over to serve us some Turkish coffee, the man speaking the hesitant German conferred with him, showing him the photos. Then the images began to circulate throughout the café and the rest of the customers began to chat with each other, pointing to the photos. Torsten and I became restless, watching the people around us talk animatedly, while we didn’t understand what was happening. In the end, when the photos landed back on our table, the waiter made a call from his cell phone. Then, the man who was a worker in Munich explained that the other customers had recognized some of the faces in the

photographs and that the waiter was now trying to contact all these people. In fact, our new friend also started making a call and, before someone answered from the other side of the phone, he told us that he had dialed Lamija's father's number. I was nervous again, now for a different reason. My questions about the life of the girl with the chocolates and her future were going to be revealed.

Suddenly, a boy entered the terrace and came directly to our table. It had been a long time, but I recognized him right away. He was one of the children in our photos. He introduced himself as Adil and, although he did not speak English or German, he was very expressive and laughed a lot looking at the images. With enthusiastic gestures he made us understand that he had grown a lot since our last meeting. He asked many questions and had comments, and the man from Munich tried to translate his words as best he could. So, among other details of his life, we learned that Adil had celebrated his 23rd birthday recently.

I was concentrating on that conversation when another young man approached our table. Torsten told me later that he had arrived with a girl his age—I didn't notice her; my chair wasn't facing the entrance—and that girl also appeared in one of the images. He told me that the girl stayed for a short time at the bar, looking at the photos at the other tables that were circulating. I didn't manage to notice her, but I did greet her friend: it was the same rascal who had taken the chocolates from Lamija's hands and had tried to flee with them. He was not that small anymore. He had grown a lot. I thought that, in the event of a fight, it would be better to have him on our side.

At one point, I noticed a man looking at us from the other side of the street. Something about his demeanor made him appear curious and shy at the same time. After discovering him, the man next to us shouted to him, asking him to come up. We made a space for him, and after taking a seat, Torsten and I learned that he was Lamija's father. We shook hands with affection and showed him the photos. Thanks to a translation from the man who was living in Munich, we learned that Lamija had married, had two children and now lived in a village about 19 miles northwest of Sarajevo. He also told us that she works in the public sector, in an administrative position, and that during her vacations she goes to Austria to visit a relative of her husband.

I was relieved to hear that Lamija was fine. I'll tell you the truth, I felt happy. Sometimes you experience joy when fortune knocks on the door of strangers. By supporting a soccer team, for example, we make those victories our own. Although experiencing the well-being of others in your own flesh is an irrational feeling, it does not stop it from being sincere. Lamija was fine, and that meant a lot to me. The father left us his daughter's phone number, so that we could call her at any time. "My daughter speaks English," he specified. I kept that piece

of paper as a treasure, although I didn't know if I would ever use it. As you well know, however, I couldn't resist the temptation and ended up calling her a few weeks later. She and I met in Hamburg. Of course, whenever you want, we can talk about these meetings. So many things have happened since that summer of 2014.

Notes

1.- This excerpt is adapted from a larger piece of the novel *El olor de las flores quemadas* (The Aroma of Burnt Flowers; CCE Benjamín Carrión, 2019).

Chocolates en la nieve: la historia de Lamija¹

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Supe en marzo de 1998 que me habían destinado a los Balcanes, pero el viaje no tuvo lugar sino hasta noviembre. Yo tenía el rango de sargento o *staabsunteroffizier* del ejército alemán, e íbamos a Bosnia como parte de las Fuerzas de Estabilización (SFOR), un grupo internacional bajo el paraguas de la OTAN.

Llegué a Bosnia en noviembre de 1998. El objetivo de nuestras tropas era mantener la paz y controlar las áreas designadas. Mi unidad, en específico, estaba a cargo de un puñado de kilómetros al noroeste de Sarajevo. Debíamos hacer acto de presencia, que la gente se enterase de que estábamos ahí. Así que intentamos entablar conversaciones usando las pocas palabras en serbocroata aprendidas durante el entrenamiento. A veces recurríamos al inglés, aunque no era muy útil porque la mayoría de los bosnios no lo hablaba, o al alemán, porque algunos refugiados que habían vivido en Alemania ahora estaban de vuelta. Había ocasiones en que necesitábamos de algún traductor para entender todos esos problemas potenciales, los conflictos que podrían surgir tanto en la vida cotidiana. Por ejemplo, recibíamos reportes de campos minados o de falta de infraestructura en los hospitales. Nuestra tarea era evaluar las distintas situaciones y colaborar en lo posible para que bajase la tensión entre los grupos civiles. Además, nos encontrábamos en permanente contacto con la Fuerza Internacional de Policía (IPTF). Patrullábamos nuestro campamento en Sarajevo, pero también debíamos proteger los otros cuarteles levantados por la OTAN en los alrededores.

Los eventos que quiero narrar ocurrieron el 24 de diciembre de 1998, vísperas de Navidad. Teníamos que patrullar y llevábamos con nosotros una enorme caja llena de chocolates y caramelos. En esos días habíamos recibido paquetes de nuestras familias, y la verdad es que nos habían enviado demasiadas cosas. A uno de los integrantes de nuestro pelotón se le ocurrió que podríamos recolectar dulces y entregarlos a los niños que encontráramos durante el patrullaje. Era una buena idea, aunque no libre de obstáculos. Navidad es una tradición cristiana y la mayoría de habitantes en la zona eran musulmanes. Tal

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vez alguien podía sentirse ofendido. Además, era la época de Ramadán, y ése es un período de ayuno. Pero al final decidimos repartir los chocolates: al fin y al cabo, los niños son niños y seguro les gustaban los dulces.

Después del mediodía llegamos a una de las aldeas. Un grupo de chicos, en el patio de una escuelita, jugaba al fútbol en una cancha cubierta de nieve. Bajamos de nuestro vehículo blindado con los paquetes de chocolates. Los chicos se mostraron reservados al principio. No es que tuvieran miedo, más bien fue como que estuvieran evaluando la situación. Entonces uno de nuestros soldados tomó la pelota y empezó a jugar con ellos. Estuvimos realizando pases y pateando el balón un rato antes de ofrecerles, de nuevo, los chocolates. De a poco más chicos y chicas se aproximaron a nosotros. Entonces los dulces comenzaron a desaparecer de las cajas a una velocidad pasmosa.

Había una muchacha alejada de todo este barullo que llamó mi atención. Tendría algo más de diez años. No había tomado un solo chocolate. Simplemente miraba la escena sin animarse a formar parte de la algarabía. Interpreté su comportamiento como una mezcla de timidez y modestia, como si no se creyera merecedora de ningún regalo. No sé por qué, pero se me ocurrió que debía entregarle un obsequio especial. Volví al vehículo y elegí una cajita de nuestro mejor chocolate; luego caminé directo hacia ella. La tomó sin apenas sonreír. Y al siguiente segundo, rápido como una ráfaga, uno de los chicos ya le había arrebatado la cajita de las manos. La chica no ofreció resistencia alguna. Tampoco se asustó. Permaneció allí, de pie, con esa expresión neutra grabada en el rostro. Yo ya había identificado al chico, era más joven y pequeño que ella, el más bribón e hiperactivo del grupo. Reaccioné rápido, corrí tras él y lo atrapé antes de que huyera. Lo tomé del cuello de la chaqueta, le quité la caja y le dije —utilizando mi índice a modo de instrumento didáctico— que lo que había hecho estaba mal. Cuando lo solté, salió corriendo para reunirse con los demás y recibir otras raciones de chocolate. Me volví hacia la chica y de nuevo le alcancé el paquete. Entonces me sonrió. Pero no fue solo eso, fue el gesto todo: inclinando la cabeza y atrayendo la barbilla hacia su torso mientras entrelazaba sus manos. Esa forma tan sincera y particular de agradecerme significó mucho para mí. Pensé que quizás ella se había acostumbrado a que le quitaran lo que era suyo. Que ahora apreciaba que alguien se interesara por su suerte y que saliera en su defensa.

Mis compañeros y yo dejamos aquel lugar minutos más tarde. Y días después uno de los miembros del pelotón me entregó algunas fotos. Allí aparecíamos con los niños jugando al fútbol y distribuyendo los dulces. En la última instantánea, la que había sido tomada desde nuestro vehículo, descubrí a la chica de los chocolates: sonriente, aferrando con la diestra su obsequio, nos decía adiós con la otra mano.

Ya de vuelta en Alemania solía mirar esas fotografías. Entonces pensaba en aquella chica y me preguntaba si todo iría bien. ¿Seguiría viviendo en su país? ¿Habría migrado a otro sitio como tantos de sus compatriotas? Quise imaginarme que Lamija era una mujer realizada y exitosa. Feliz. Porque, como bien sabes, se llama Lamija. En un rato te cuento de nuevo todas esas peripecias que pasé para enterarme de su nombre.

Estuve en Bosnia hasta el 22 de marzo de 1999. De haberme quedado en el ejército, habría sido promovido a oficial, pero no era mi intención ser soldado el resto de mis días, así que me registré en los estudios universitarios de Geografía Aplicada en Tréveris.

Volví a Bosnia en el 2014, quince años después de servir como sargento para la SFOR y el ejército alemán. Viajó también mi buen amigo Torsten, uno de los soldados de mi pelotón. Siempre tuvimos el plan de regresar a Sarajevo. Dado que llegamos a conocer la ciudad y especialmente sus alrededores durante el invierno, decidimos que sería una buena experiencia explorarla en verano, ahora como cualquier turista. Teníamos curiosidad por descubrir si algo había cambiado. Alquilamos un auto por un par de días: queríamos seguir algunas de las rutas tomada por nuestros vehículos blindados quince años antes.

Previa a nuestra salida de Sarajevo, le conté a Torsten sobre las fotos de la aldea, pues él no estuvo presente en el reparto de los dulces de 1998. Le pareció buena idea acompañarme al sitio. A lo mejor hasta encontrábamos a algunas de las personas de las fotos. Mientras conducía, Torsten quiso saber más sobre las fotografías, entonces le confesé que me causaba curiosidad la suerte de aquella chica de los chocolates. Desde luego, confiaba en que se encontrara bien. Sin embargo, sentía miedo de descubrir lo contrario. Era una sensación muy extraña. Yo, en verdad, apenas la había visto una vez, y de eso hacía ya quince años, pero la sentía casi como si fuera un familiar. Torsten y yo también discutimos, honestamente, sobre las dificultades de lograr nuestro cometido. Era complicado predecir la reacción de los habitantes de la aldea. Por un lado, él y yo éramos un par de extranjeros, salidos de la nada, que iban a hacer preguntas y, encima, hacían circular fotos de niños. Por otra parte, siempre nos quedó la duda de lo que ellos, los bosnios, de verdad pensaban de las tropas de SFOR y de la OTAN. Tal vez muchos llegaron a vernos como una fuerza de ocupación. Por todo eso decidimos empezar nuestras indagaciones con cautela.

Nos estacionamos frente al patio que alguna vez albergó aquel partido de fútbol sobre la nieve. Salimos del auto y yo, sosteniendo las fotos, intenté ubicarme. No era fácil porque las casas a nuestro alrededor habían sido renovadas. Una mujer —habrá tenido unos cuarenta años—, que estaba lavando ropa en el patio de su casa junto a dos niños pequeños, nos miraba con curiosidad. Al final se acercó para preguntarnos en bosnio si podía ayudarnos. Recurrimos

a distintas estrategias de comunicación; yo incluso le hablé en checo, pues había tomado lecciones un año antes. El checo es un idioma eslavo, y esos conocimientos terminaron por servirnos un poco. Por último, le pasamos las fotografías. Ella las vio y al llegar a la última, señaló a la chica de los chocolates y dijo “¡Lamija!”. Fue una expresión de asombro, llevándose la mano izquierda a la boca, y al dejarla caer repitió “¡Lamija!”. La muchacha de los chocolates ahora tenía un nombre. Sentí que me fallaban las piernas. La mujer se volteó y señaló al río. Gracias a mi paupérrimo checo entendí que, en una de esas tres construcciones, al lado opuesto de la corriente, vivían los padres de Lamija. Agradecemos a la mujer y enfilamos en aquella dirección.

Después de una corta caminata nos detuvimos a la orilla del río y, no muy lejos, divisamos un pequeño puente. Estábamos a punto de reemprender la marcha cuando un hombre algo mayor, sentado en la terraza de un bar a nuestra izquierda, se puso a gritarnos algo. Le respondí que no entendíamos su idioma. Entonces comenzó a hablar en un alemán dubitativo, preguntándonos qué hacíamos ahí. Al final nos invitó a la terraza con un movimiento de su brazo. Un poco después estábamos sentados todos juntos, Torsten y yo felices de encontrar a alguien que hablara aunque fuera un poco de alemán. Este hombre era oriundo de la aldea, pero estaba solo de visita. Desde hacía algún tiempo vivía en el sur de Alemania. De hecho, frente al bar, había estacionado su viejo coche que lucía una placa de Múnich. Y aunque nos dijo que había pasado varios años en Baviera, lo cierto es que su manejo del idioma dejaba bastante que desear. Le explicamos que habíamos sido soldados de la OTAN, mostrándole entonces las fotografías y tratando de aclararle lo que la mujer nos había dicho: que los padres de Lamija habitaban una casa al otro lado de la aldea. Cuando el camarero, un hombre de no más de treinta años, se acercó a servirnos unos cafecitos turcos, el hombre del alemán dubitativo conferenció con él, mostrándole las fotos. Luego las imágenes circularon por todo el café y el resto de clientes comenzaron a charlar entre sí, señalando las fotos. Torsten y yo nos pusimos inquietos, observando a la gente a nuestro alrededor hablar con cierta euforia, y nosotros sin entender lo que ocurría. Al final, cuando las fotos aterrizaron de vuelta en nuestra mesa, el camarero hizo una llamada desde su celular. Entonces el hombre de Múnich nos explicó que los otros clientes habían reconocido algunas caras de las fotografías y el camarero ahora intentaba contactar a toda esa gente. De hecho, nuestro nuevo amigo también se puso a hacer una llamada y, antes de que alguien le contestara del otro lado del auricular, nos dijo que había marcado el número del padre de Lamija. Otra vez me puse nervioso, ahora por una razón diferente. Mis preguntas sobre la vida de la chica de los chocolates y su futuro iban a ser despejadas.

De pronto un muchacho entró a la terraza y se acercó directamente a nuestra mesa. Había pasado mucho tiempo, pero lo reconocí enseguida. Era uno de los niños de nuestras fotos. Se presentó como Adil y aunque no hablaba ni inglés ni alemán, era muy expresivo y se reía mucho mirando las imágenes. Con gestos entusiastas nos hizo entender que había crecido mucho desde nuestro último encuentro. Hizo muchas preguntas y comentarios y el hombre de Múnich tradujo sus palabras lo mejor que pudo. Así, entre otros detalles de su vida, nos enteramos de que Adil había tenido su cumpleaños número 23 hacía poco.

Yo estaba concentrado en esa conversación cuando otro joven hubo de aproximarse a nuestra mesa. Torsten me contaría más tarde que había llegado con una chica de su edad —yo no pude fijarme en ella, mi silla no daba de frente a la entrada—, y que esa chica también aparecía en una de las imágenes. Me contaron que la muchacha se quedó muy poco tiempo en el bar, mirando las fotos de las otras mesas. Saludé a su amigo, que era el mismo bribón que había tomado los chocolates de las manos de Lamija. Ahora ya no era tan pequeño. Había crecido mucho. Pensé que, en caso de una pelea, sería mejor tenerlo de nuestro lado.

En cierto momento noté a un hombre que nos miraba con disimulo desde el otro lado de la calle. Parecía curioso y tímido a la vez. El hombre junto a nosotros le gritó, pidiéndole que subiera. Le hicimos un espacio y, tras tomar asiento, Torsten y yo nos enteramos de que era el padre de Lamija. Nos dimos la mano con afecto y le mostramos las fotos. Gracias a la traducción del hombre de Múnich, nos enteramos de que Lamija se había casado, que tenía dos niños y que vivía en un pueblo a unos 30 kilómetros al noroeste de Sarajevo. También nos contó que trabajaba en el sector público, en algún puesto administrativo, y que esos días estaba de vacaciones en Austria, visitando a un pariente de su esposo.

Sentí alivio al escuchar que Lamija estaba bien. Aunque experimentar el bienestar de otros en tu propia carne es una sensación irracional, no por eso deja de ser sincera. El padre nos dejó el número de teléfono de su hija para que la llamáramos en cualquier momento. Mi hija habla inglés, especificó.

Guardé ese papelito como un tesoro, aunque no sabía si habría de usarlo alguna vez. Pero bien sabes que no resistí la tentación y terminé por llamarla unas semanas más tarde. Y también sabes que ella y yo nos encontramos en Hamburgo. Claro, cuando quieras podemos hablar nuevamente sobre esos encuentros. Tantas cosas han pasado desde aquel verano del 2014.

Notas

1.- Fragmento adaptado de *El olor de las flores quemadas* (Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, 2019). Premio Nacional de Literatura Miguel Riofrío.

SECCIÓN LITERARIA-LITERATURE



Añil, tinte natural utilizado en la obra

Fecha de caducidad

Daniela Becerra Romo*
Investigadora independiente

Las madrugadas se acurrucan entre las sábanas
La alarma afónica después de tantos años de gritar
Caos suspendido en el recuerdo
Mamá que vamos a llegar tarde
No hay más tropel de pasos ante el amanecer
El transporte escolar lleva alumnos que no conoceré
La prisa envejeció
La casa se hace más grande
Le sucede a todas, lamento
Sola a la mesa, me oxido
Ya nadie pide permiso
Una cana flota en la sopa fría

Eternidad consumida

Hemos agotado el futuro
El para siempre nos elude
Deseo entumecido
labios resecos y anécdotas que se repiten
Mi frecuencia cardíaca es de 60 y la tuya de 100
Te congelas de noche y yo sudando aviento las cobijas
Escamas de piel se me desprenden
Tus canas sobre la almohada
Mis ronquidos quiebran el silencio
Años más tarde recuperamos las ilusiones
Tenemos la fórmula para que el amor se extienda
Nunca fuimos tan felices como ahora
soñamos ya en
habitaciones separadas

* Daniela Becerra Romo se graduó con una tesis sobre la participación de las mujeres en la literatura mexicana. Ha publicado ficción y no ficción en Literal Magazine, Nagari, Escritoras Mexicanas, Reforma, El Financiero, Harper's Bazaar y Elle, entre otros medios. Editó Alcanzar el vuelo. Responsabilidad social en las empresas, publicado por Cemefi. En pandemia, puso su escritura al servicio de una organización social y escribió decenas de semblanzas de gente en necesidad. Publicó los libros colectivos Palabras entrelazadas y Calladas palabras bajo el sello de Ediciones Mastodonte. Ha participado en la Antología de un cuerpo (Escritoras peligrosas) y Mujeres del mundo uníos. Antología poética (La Parada poética). Es coeditora de la publicación digital Anfibias Literarias.

El estruendo de la vejez

Ojos nublados. Las cataratas desenfocan recuerdos.

Ya casi no se puede ir a ningún sitio.

¿Desaparecen los deseos o solo se callan?

Las conversaciones se diluyen.

¡Mamá, hay que ajustar el volumen de los audífonos!

Las manos tiemblan, el café se desparrama.

El sonido

de la porcelana

contra el

piso blanco de la cocina.

El frío duele

El hogar es hoy un rayo de sol y una cajita de píldoras

El arrullo de una televisión encendida

¡Mamá, no tomaste las medicinas!

Olvidar para que los hijos recuerden

La voz pausada para que ellos escuchen.

Y cuando solo quede una alternativa,
ruido.

desaparecer haciendo mucho

FEMINISTAS UNIDAS Creative Writing Award
Call for 2024 submissions, winning work:

Nombrar el cosmos

Tina Escaja*
Universidad de Vermont

Well-behaved women seldom make history.
Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Cuidado, cuidado. Esa mujer lleva el coño en la boca
Gloria Fuertes

Las chicas buenas no hacen historia,
las malas
nombran, obturan, circunnavegan,
señalan con el dedo y se lo meten en la nariz,
a ver qué encuentran.

Luego descubren la función del radio
y las llaman putas, como a Curie.
O inventan poemas a los mendigos
y las llaman putas, como a Alfonsina.
O esculpen dioses y los fornican
y las mata el marido, como a Agustini.
U oscilan por el universo
y las difaman, como a Tereshkova.
Las chicas buenas no hacen historia,
las malas
nombran.

Prefiero
como la Fuertes
no ser modosa,
obediente, pacata, Virgen,

y enunciar.

* Tina Escaja, también conocida como Alm@ Pérez, ejerce la cátedra de Literatura y Cultura Iberoamericanas en la Universidad de Vermont con el rango de Profesora Distinguida de Español y Estudios de Género. Ha publicado numerosos artículos y volúmenes de crítica literaria sobre género, tecnología y poesía en Iberoamérica. Considerada pionera en la literatura electrónica en castellano, sus obras de creación trascienden con frecuencia el formato en papel e integran proyectos que involucran variantes multimedia, robótica y de realidad aumentada que han sido expuestos en galerías y museos internacionales. En la actualidad, Escaja es Correspondiente de la Real Academia Española y Numeraria de la Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española. Parte de su material creativo puede experimentarse en www.tinaescaja.com. Publicaciones previas de estos dos poemas: 13 Lunas 13. Madrid: Torremozas, 2011, and 13 lunas 13 / 13 moons 13. (traducción de Kristin Dykstra). Nueva York Poetry Press, 2022.

Ritual del silencio

La mujer aprenda en silencio, con toda sujeción.
1 Timoteo 2:11

Que callen las mujeres en las Iglesias,
que su mancha no manche, que el pecado de su sangre
se esconda, oprima, enmascare.
Que no oficie, el flujo sacro no altere, el cuerpo y roce de Cristo,
el poder de consagrar.
Si da a luz a una niña, purgue sesenta y seis días la madre;
si niño, treinta y tres sean.
Que su sangre vaginal no embrutezca el paraíso, la tierra de la casa, habitáculo o mezquita.
Que su innata inmundicia
la aparte del culto,
de la lengua sacra, del Corán, la Torá.
Que el altar no encienda,
el carnero no inmole,
ritualmente impura, culpable,
pútrida, enferma, nociva, amenaza,
trans
formación, elixir, herejía,
sortilegio y marea,
quiromante,
aureola,
catarsis,
bruja.

Lunación, secreción, creación,

luna.

RESEÑAS-BOOKS REVIEWS



Miguel Ángel Sosme, autor de la obra

Elena Deanda-Camacho. *Ofensiva a los oídos piadosos: obscenidad y censura en la poesía española y novohispana del siglo XVIII*. Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2022. 272 pp. ISBN: 9788491922773.

Ofensiva a los oídos piadosos es un fascinante, riguroso y provocador estudio sobre las poéticas y políticas de la obscenidad y la censura en España y Nueva España durante el siglo XVIII. De manera magistral, Elena Deanda-Camacho examina la escritura de poetas y censores para hacer visibles las violencias explícitas e implícitas de género, incluyendo la misoginia y la violencia sexual. Si en el siglo XVIII los poetas, lectores y censores se citaban para denigrar el cuerpo femenino, *Ofensiva* emplaza a estos actores para develar sus violencias. Deanda-Camacho hace emerger de esos discursos masculinos los cuerpos femeninos violados, asediados por figuras fálicas, estigmatizados y reducidos a los genitales y las funciones sexuales.

El prólogo y el capítulo 1 desarrollan una teoría crítica alrededor de la paradójica complementariedad entre la obscenidad y la censura, así como entre imágenes literarias y artísticas consideradas poéticas y obscenas, eróticas y pornográficas. En diálogo con teóricos como Bourdieu, Bataille, Foucault, Gramsci y Rancière, Deanda-Camacho explica que el antagonismo entre la obscenidad y la censura radica en la capacidad de la primera de amenazar simbólicamente, con estrategias estéticas, el *status quo* que los censores buscan mantener. Sin embargo, la censura y la obscenidad tienen también una relación de “complicidad”, pues ambas “refuerzan la hegemonía patriarcal” (17). Para desentrañar esta ambigua relación, la autora superpone dos formas discursivas: la política (que en principio atañe a la censura inquisitorial) y la poética (que correspondería a la escritura de la poesía erótica y pornográfica). Deanda-Camacho demuestra cómo ambas gramáticas se entretajan formando nuevas categorías de análisis: la poética de la censura y la obscenidad, así como la política de la censura y la obscenidad.

Para el análisis de la “poética de la obscenidad,” Deanda-Camacho se centra en la representación del sexo no doméstico y no reproductivo: el sexo prostibulario (capítulos 2 y 3); el sexo clerical y del vulgo (capítulo 4), y el sexo erótico *vis à vis* el pornográfico (capítulo 5). *Ofensiva* ofrece un pertinente análisis de la relación entre pornografía, en tanto comercialización de la representación del acto sexual, y la prostitución, como comercialización del acto sexual y el orgasmo. En el Capítulo 2, la autora retoma los conceptos de “imperio genital” y “tiranía del orgasmo” de Bruckner y Finkielkraut para estudiar de manera crítico-teórica dos poemas satíricos sobre la guerra entre genitales masculinos (“carajos”) y femeninos (“coños”): *Carajicomedia* (1519) y el *Arte de Putear* (c. 1770-1774). A partir del estudio de la

Carajicomedia, Deanda-Camacho establece las coordenadas que definen la poética de la obscenidad: la pornotopía, es decir, la cartografía de los burdeles en el espacio urbano a partir de los recorridos que el carajo hace en búsqueda de los prostíbulos; el censo prostibulario, que implica un nombramiento y enumeración de las prostitutas que el carajo conoce; y la guerra de los sexos, que termina en una suerte de batalla entre multitud de carajos y coños y una inundación seminal y orgiástica.

Por otro lado, la “poética de la censura” es un discurso que depende lingüística y afectivamente de la “poética de la obscenidad” que busca censurar. Deanda-Camacho advierte que la “poética de la censura,” aunque puede parecer crítica literaria, generalmente se abandona en la manifestación de la ira y el disgusto con expresiones que resultan más obscenas que los mismos poemas. La autora incorpora aproximaciones teóricas de Kristeva y Douglas para analizar, por ejemplo, cómo el mapa urbano porno-centrado que recrea *Carajicomedia* termina siendo leído por el censor como un mapa inmundo: un espacio habitado por mujeres que, al tiempo que se desean, se repugnan y se representan con metáforas escatológicas. Siguiendo a J. L. Austin, la autora explica que el censor termina afectado por los efectos “ilocutivos” y “perlocutivos” de la poética obscena, esto es, los efectos durante su locución y los efectos al recordar la obscenidad leída. Además, Deanda-Camacho revela cómo la “poética de la obscenidad” deviene en “poética de la censura” al examinar, por ejemplo, las *Décimas a las prostitutas de México* (1782-1785) en las que se manifiesta un “exceso demográfico prostibulario” (122) y se propone la eliminación de la prostitución. La autora señala que la voz poética de *Décimas* nombra y enumera alrededor de cien prostitutas, a la vez que invisibiliza las redes económicas y sociales a las que pertenecen.

Finalmente, Deanda-Camacho explica que la “política de la censura,” determinada por la moral cristiana inquisitorial, se vale de la retroactividad (todo escrito del pasado es susceptible de ser censurado), la teatralidad (la obscenidad genera escándalo y su censura debe ser ejemplarizante), y la arbitrariedad (el censor juzga con parámetros subjetivos). Un claro ejemplo de la acción retroactiva sería la censura de *La Celestina* en 1792, trescientos años después de su libre circulación. Además, la autora señala el papel paradójico que cumplieron los índices de libros censurados; listas que alentaron la soterrada conservación y difusión de obras prohibidas. En contraste, la “política de la obscenidad” estaría orientada a la subversión de valores o estructuras hegemónicas. Sin embargo, Deanda-Camacho demuestra que estas políticas continúan promoviendo la subordinación de las mujeres cuando examina obras como *El arte de putear* y su representación de hombres que buscan prostíbulos no sólo para tener sexo sino para convertirse en proxenetas. Frente a esta amenaza de despojo y subordinación,

Deanda-Camacho resalta la proliferación de obras de alcahuetas y prostitutas durante la modernidad temprana que configuraron diferentes capitales de intercambio: capital simbólico y cultural (conocimiento que se transmite generacionalmente), capital erótico y sexual (belleza, juventud, maestría en el acto sexual), capital económico (intercambio de sexo por dinero), y capital cultural (red solidaria entre prostitutas y celestinas).

A partir de la exploración de mundos poéticos invadidos por metáforas y vulgaridades para nombrar genitales y actos sexuales, Elena Deanda-Camacho propone, explica y amplía una serie de términos crítico-teóricos indispensables para los estudios sobre pornología, obscenidad y censura. *Ofensiva a los oídos piadosos* ofrece además un riguroso análisis sobre prostitución, redes comunitarias femeninas y sus capitales, que provoca reflexiones urgentes sobre temas centrales para los debates feministas contemporáneos.

Paola Uparela
University of Florida

Andrea García González. *Calla y olvida. Violencias, conflicto vasco y la escucha vulnerable como propuesta feminista*. Prólogo de Joseba Zulaika. Epílogo de Mari Luz Esteban. Katakarak Liburuak, 2023. 183 pp. ISBN: 9788416946884.

Lo primero que resalta de este libro que Andrea García González (Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia y Universidad de Granada, España) ha escrito con mucho cuidado y desde las más profundas entrañas, es su formato. Es una obra pequeña, ligera y con una portada que desde el minuto cero antes de ni siquiera ojear sus páginas sacude a quien se ha aventurado a echarle un vistazo rápido para aliviar esa primera curiosidad lectora tan conocida por quienes amamos los libros. El color de la cubierta es, indiscutiblemente el rojo, tonalidad de la sangre no solo de aquella que brota al recibir el impacto de un disparo o de una bomba, en la que pensamos, o al menos a mí me pasa al leer en el título de este trabajo “conflicto vasco,” sino también a esa otra sangre, símbolo de la vida, que nos nutre y que recorre el cuerpo de todos los seres humanos que en este preciso momento estamos respirando y que también visualizamos con esa otra parte final del subtítulo: “propuesta feminista.”

Es que si algo define este trabajo *Calla y olvida* es que está escrito desde y a partir del cuerpo y no de una manera metafóricamente correcta feminista sino que la autora ha dado un lugar en su escritura para que sus entrañas hablen y también dialoguen con ese “yo.” Así la autora guía a su público lector a lo largo de las menos de doscientas páginas que componen esta obra. Además, García González ha dejado un espacio en la escritura a la presencia testimonial y corporal de sus interlocutoras -gracias a quienes ha elaborado este libro- para ser y estar dentro de su obra. Entre todas estas voces de mujeres me quedo con la de Axun (73-

78), por la profundidad de la experiencia que comparte y porque su reflexión final “calla y olvida,” palabras que le dijo su madre, da origen al título de este libro y porque esta acción imperativa resuena profundamente conmigo.

Aunque he descrito la portada casi como si fuera de un solo color rojizo sangre, hay otro detalle que llama poderosamente la atención y es cómo contrasta el negro y el blanco para incluir su título. De esta manera se activa nuestra memoria visual y nos lleva a los grafitis que han acompañado al conflicto vasco en muchas ciudades no solo de esta zona del Estado español sino de toda la geografía peninsular, pero lo diferente aquí respecto a esas expresiones grafiteras en las calles es que desde el primer momento la referencia visual de esta portada señala a las mujeres como las protagonistas de ese *Calla y olvida*. Honestamente, a quién yo recordé inmediatamente con esta portada es a la poliédrica activista Yoyes (M.^a Dolores González Katarain, 1954-1986), y nos dice García González que su diario, *Yoyes, desde su ventana* (Alberdania; 2009) le acompañó a lo largo del trabajo de campo gracias al cual pudo elaborar *Calla y olvida* (172). García González ha dado un giro de 180 grados a este dogma imperativo al publicar este libro ya que a lo largo de sus páginas se habla y se recuerda. Eso sí escuchando de una manera diferente, a través de lo que define como “escucha vulnerable” que es la “propuesta para abordar las violencias y zarandear las dicotomías (...) que se propone también como sentido de lectura” (51 y 52-53).

Este libro, *Calla y olvida*, interesa tanto a las personas de la academia como aquellas con curiosidad por adentrarse en el complejo “conflicto vasco” sobre todo después del cese definitivo de la actividad armada de ETA en el año 2011 (23). A lo largo de los cuatro capítulos, “0. Puntos de inicio” (23-54), “1. *Heme Gaude*-Aquí estamos” (55-126), “2. Por una escucha vulnerable” (127-168), más el capítulo final que ejerce como una especie de conclusiones-agradecimientos, “Quiénes me motivan a escribir” (169-174) nos acercamos a las mujeres que García González entrevistó y con quienes compartió cotidianidad. Este trabajo, *Calla y olvida* es uno de los primeros relacionados con el “conflicto vasco” donde es la vivencia y la supervivencia a través de un cuerpo y un sentir femenino quienes toman la primera palabra para así ni callar ni dejar que algo se olvide.

Pero para mí este libro trata mucho más que del “conflicto vasco” y todas las violencias que se pusieron en juego allí. Este más lo relaciono con que García González presenta a las nietas de las mujeres que vivieron la Guerra Civil española (1936-1939), las abuelas de toda esa generación de mujeres que nacimos entre los años setenta y ochenta del siglo XX, mirando de frente otra vez a cómo las mujeres lidiamos con la irremediable falta de consenso entre organismos políticos patriarcales que usan y abusan de la violencia para imponer su visión. Y

en *Calla y olvida* son las mujeres las que recorren kilómetros interminables para visitar al hermano, al marido, al amigo o a la hermana que están privadas de libertad, igual que esas otras mujeres hicieron en la larga Dictadura de Francisco Franco (1939-1975), solo que gracias a este libro, su vivencia ya queda, ya está registrada, ya nos sirve para mirar esa genealogía femenina y poner en esas mujeres anónimas un recuerdo, una memoria, nuestra memoria histórica que surge cuando llega la aparente Paz. Como subraya García González: “Lo que no se nombra no sólo no existe, sino que lo que no se nombra evita la posibilidad de identificar lo que acontece” (96).

Como nietas de las mujeres que vivieron, sufrieron y sobrevivieron las consecuencias de la Guerra Civil española, Andrea García González inicia su libro hablando de cómo para ella es tan importante esta zona del Estado español, su yaya era de Donostia, pero pudo tomar uno de los barcos que iban a la actual Rusia para alejar a la infancia-adolescencia de las consecuencias de esta guerra. Años después su yaya regresó, pero ya no a vivir a esta zona, pero sí lo hará su nieta más tarde, para encontrar la manera de comprender, entender y dar voz a la vivencia de esas mujeres que han tenido que vivir pese al “conflicto vasco” y otras violencias anteriores. En el trabajo de campo que García González ha hecho además de poner en práctica esa “escucha vulnerable” también ha dado un lugar importante y privilegiado al silencio. Silencio que interpreta más que como un vacío como un vaso comunicante con la respiración que quien calla toma para seguir adelante tanto con lo que cuenta como con la vida misma. Esta idea de dejar un espacio para la respiración la toma de la pensadora feminista Luce Irigaray y le sirve como motor para conocer desde el cuerpo y las entrañas (161). Así dando un espacio para la respiración y escuchar con vulnerabilidad es, según la propia García González, que la “imaginación y la apertura colapsan cuando ahogamos la inspiración de la otra” (161) por eso *Calla y olvida* coloca a quien se acerca a leer este libro a los dos lados de una manifestación, en esos lugares que a ambos lados siempre ocupan y han ocupado tantas mujeres.

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Sharon Keefe Ugalde. *Ophelia. Shakespeare and Gender in Contemporary Spain*. U of Wales P, 2020. 272 pp. ISBN: 9781786835987.

En *Ophelia. Shakespeare and Gender in Contemporary Spain* Sharon Keefe Ugalde analiza magistralmente para una audiencia internacional las abundantes y originales adaptaciones literarias, teatrales y artísticas que del mito de Ofelia se han realizado en España. El libro, dividido en seis capítulos, se encuentra organizado en torno a diversas formas de

producción cultural: poesía, narrativa, teatro, pintura y fotografía. Aunque la mayoría de estas obras aparecen en español, también podemos encontrar variaciones originales en gallego, principalmente en la poesía de Xohana Torres y Marta Dacosta, y en catalán en la obra del dramaturgo Manuel Molina y de artistas visuales como Eugenia Balcells y Joan Foncuberta. Según Ugalde, los autores y artistas visuales estudiados se acercan a este mito desde múltiples perspectivas feministas y de género para desafiar y subvertir las jerarquías impuestas por el patriarcado.

En el primer capítulo, titulado “Breaking Silence: Ophelia in the Lyric Tradition of Spain and the Pioneer Innovations of Blanca de los Ríos”, Ugalde nos ofrece una visión histórica general de las representaciones canónicas de Ofelia en la poesía. En España desde mediados del siglo XIX hasta las primeras décadas del siglo XX, las representaciones poéticas del mito refuerzan una imagen de Ofelia controlada por la mirada masculina y carente de agencia. Una de las innovaciones pioneras más relevantes es la llevada a cabo por Blanca de los Ríos en “Cantos de Ofelia” (1881), ya que al permitirle hablar en primera persona Ofelia recupera su voz.

En el segundo capítulo, “Talking Back: Ophelia in Turn-of-the Millennium Poetry”, Ugalde comenta tres miradas prominentes que de este mito emergen desde la Transición democrática hasta el nuevo milenio. En primer lugar, las mujeres poetas reconocen que la belleza tradicional de Ofelia enmascara la ruina psicológica de la mujer carente de agencia. En segundo lugar, de su cuerpo muerto en el agua surgen visiones de paradigmas culturales no jerárquicos caracterizados por la fluidez, la permeabilidad, la renovación y el renacimiento. En tercer lugar, frente a la pureza tradicional de Ofelia se enfatiza el placer sexual del cuerpo femenino.

En el tercer capítulo, “The Myth of Ophelia in the Narratives of Clara Janés and Menchu Gutiérrez”, Ugalde destaca cómo incluso antes de la publicación de *La voz de Ofelia* (2005), este mito aparece de manera prominente en las experiencias vitales y en la producción literaria de Janés. Si bien la figura de Ofelia no destaca tanto en la obra de Gutiérrez, desempeña un papel central en la novela *Diseción de una tormenta* (2005), donde se reitera el motivo de la locura y asistimos a la inesperada transformación del personaje en un emblema de abyección. Para recrear a Ofelia ambas autoras alteran tanto los elementos narrativos, estructurales y artísticos, como ideológicos del mito tradicional.

El cuarto capítulo, “Ophelia Takes Centre Stage”, gira en torno a obras teatrales de tres dramaturgos peninsulares que ilustran nuevas aproximaciones al mito de Ofelia. En opinión de Ugalde, en *Helénica: Poemas para “El Público”* (1996), Margarita Borjas refleja la rápida

transformación de los papeles de género durante la Transición política en España. En *Una Ofelia sin Hamlet* (1993), cuya originalidad radica en que la locura del personaje se debe a su represión sexual y a su dependencia económica y emocional, Eduardo Quiles confronta a la audiencia con las consecuencias psicológicas de la desigualdad de género. Aunque en *Una altra Ofèlia* (2001) Manuel Molins se centra en la tragedia personal de Ofelia, la protagonista, víctima del poder patriarcal y de la corrupción política, se siente incapaz de ir más allá del reconocimiento de la necesidad de cambio.

En el quinto capítulo, “From Madwoman to Cyborg: Marina Núñez’s Ophelias”, Ugalde nos muestra cómo aunque Núñez se inspira en el legado del personaje, crea nuevas imágenes inestables y futurísticas para desafiar ciertos conceptos como el de la diferencia. Para socavar las representaciones canónicas del mito, Núñez se centra en la locura de Ofelia en la fase inicial de su producción artística de 1992 a 1999, mientras que los motivos de sirena y de ninfa aparecen en la segunda fase de su obra realizada desde el 2000 hasta el 2014. Asimismo, el año 2000 marca la aparición de Ofelias atadas a cables o como cibernéticos para explorar identidades inestables. Las adaptaciones de esta artista son radicales, ya que el cuerpo de Ofelia emerge distorsionado y desfigurado.

En el sexto capítulo, “Ophelia in Front of the Lens”, la fotografía aparece como un campo vibrante y diverso para las adaptaciones del mito de Ofelia. Así lo demuestran las obras de artistas como Eugènia Balcells, Joan Foncuberta, Alex Francés, Carmela García, Rocío Verdejo y Leila Amat Ortega, que son analizadas minuciosamente para ilustrar la evolución del personaje y la subversión de las narrativas patriarcales existentes en torno a dicho mito. Finalmente, en el epílogo, “Ophelia: Refigurations in the Arts, Reiterations in the Fashion Industry”, Ugalde enfatiza que a pesar de su transformación en el mundo de las artes no deberíamos ser indiferentes a otros contextos como el de la industria de la moda internacional, donde el destino tradicional del personaje de Ofelia de debilidad y dependencia continúa siendo perpetuado.

En suma, *Ophelia. Shakespeare and Gender in Contemporary Spain* es un imprescindible y valioso trabajo académico. Haciendo uso de una excelente documentación, Ugalde demuestra a través de las obras analizadas en este volumen que en España desde la Transición democrática hasta el nuevo milenio múltiples autores y artistas visuales desafían el orden normativo y proponen alternativas al mito de Ofelia denunciando su falta de agencia, reclamando su sexualidad y abogando por la fluidez de género.

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María del Mar López-Cabrales and María R. Matz, eds. *Carmen Boulosa. In Between Brooklyn and Coyoacán*. Vernon P., 2024. 153 pp. ISBN: 978648899072.

This compilation of critical essays edited by María del Mar López-Cabrales and María R. Matz includes an interview with Carmen Boulosa from November of 2021 and the English version of a 2019 piece in which the Mexican author imagines an epic that would be woven throughout many centuries of women protagonists. This book offers a panorama of the work by Boulosa from a variety of critical perspectives that complement one another. The voice of Boulosa as she weighs upon issues concerning both her own writing and the female epic adds to the depth and beauty of the volume. This volume will serve as a compelling introduction and roadmap for new readers of Boulosa and will engage literary scholars of diverse interests.

The introduction presents an overview of the essays in accessible language and recounts Carmen Boulosa's literary career. In Chapter 1, "Voices against Empire," Michael Paul Abeyta analyzes the decolonizing functions of Boulosa's novels *La otra mano de Lepanto* and *Texas: La Gran Ladronería en el Lejano Norte*, showing how the novelist focuses on experiences of subjects who are expelled, dispossessed, and who suffer and resist in various ways. Especially appealing is his elucidation of how—in their most clearly intertextual passages—these novels surpass their models in their ability to represent marginalized perspectives. In open contrast with Abeyta's emphasis on the anticolonial character of the author's writings, Chapter 2, Emily Hind's "Boulosa, Driver's License, and the Energy Gratitude Test," argues that many of the works by Boulosa are articulated from a position of privilege, and, more specifically, "petro-privilege." Hind examines seven of Boulosa's works of fiction as well as her essay collection *Cuando me volví mortal* to show that many of the narrative voices in these works convey a "crisis-centered" discourse that fails to challenge the unequal and oppressive social order. She therefore questions whether the "hegemonic oil" that in part finances the Mexican state should go towards awarding literary prizes to an author who displays such "petro-privilege" and "driver's-license" status as Boulosa. As alternative to the latter's complicit discourse, Hind champions a form of literary criticism that would develop "alternative heuristics": an example is her own "energo-tude" test, designed to measure "energy attitudes" in literary texts that win literary prizes. While Hind's focus on energy, work, and leisure in this essay is illuminating, the "energo-tude" test as a one-size-fits-all instrument of criticism calls for cautious use.

In Chapter 3, "The Decolonial Option in Carmen Boulosa's *Llanto. Novelas imposibles*," Assia Mohssine shows how Boulosa wrestles with fragmentary and contradictory accounts of the fall of Tenochtitlan in her attempt to write about the Aztec emperor Moctezuma.

Mohssine argues that the poetic word, represented in the novel by the elusive element of the wind, is capable of alluding to the epistemic alterity from which, according to Walter Dignolo, it is possible to articulate a decolonizing grammar. Ericka H. Parra Téllez, in Chapter 4, “Symbolic Violence,” examines selected theatre pieces to argue that Boullosa’s take on female stereotypes opens new avenues for questioning and subversion in their social context. In the virgin/witch binary, she contends, the figure of the cook represents the appropriation by women of both discourse and creative power.

Returning the focus to Boullosa’s narrative, Matz’s study in Chapter 5, “*Las paredes hablan* a Crossroad between Time and Memory,” discerns the elements that allow the novelist to construct a circular story told from the present time and from the concrete reality of the stones that make a house, “Casa Espiritu”—which is the theater of an unhappy heterosexual love story that in turn represents the history of Mexico. Chapter 6, “The Scar of Writing Pleasure in *El libro de Ana*,” extends the analysis of Boullosa’s narrative into one of her later novels and convincingly illustrates how in this text, female pleasure and the act of writing are framed by prohibition and revolutionary power, as well as danger; these lines are inseparable, María Inés Canto argues, and overlapping like the tissue of a scar. The last critical essay of the collection wonderfully closes the varied and powerful insights in the volume and prepares the reader for the enjoyment of the interview by the editors with Boullosa, followed by the memorable “Épica mía/ My Epic.”

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Ana Luengo. *Mi bien esquivo*. Ediciones Carena, 2023. 300 pp. ISBN: 9788419136978.

“Yo quería que el tiempo se congelara en aquellas noches en las que compartíamos una amistad tan íntima, aunque ella estuviera dormida y ni se enterara de que yo la observaba desde mi insomnio y desde mi deseo sin nombre” (54). Esto pensaba la protagonista de *Mi bien esquivo* cuando, siendo adolescente, dormía con una amiga de la que se había enamorado en secreto. “Mi deseo sin nombre”, decía.

Este es el epicentro de la novela de Ana Luengo: el conflicto de una joven española de finales del siglo XX cuyos deseos no solo no se ajustaban a la tiranía de la heteronormatividad, sino que ni siquiera tenían nombre. Afortunadamente, hoy estamos familiarizados con términos que expresan deseos sexuales más allá de la heterosexualidad como gay, lésbico, bisexual o asexual. En realidad, en la época en que se sitúa la novela estos términos ya existían, pero seguían formando parte de círculos activistas y académicos, sin haber logrado penetrar en las

casas, en las escuelas y en la calle. De ahí que, aunque esos deseos ya hubieran sido nombrados antes, no era fácil encontrarlos.

La novela de Ana Luengo es un ejercicio de introspección que transcurre en varios espacios geográfico-emocionales: la Tarragona de una infancia y adolescencia en plena transición democrática que, a pesar de su aparente libertad y progresismo, estaba marcada por los aprendizajes de la negación y la docilidad; la Barcelona de los primeros gestos de rebeldía, violencia, amor, autoodio y fuga; el gris y lluvioso Hamburgo de la madurez con sus renunciaciones y derrotas; y, finalmente, un breve episodio en San Francisco lleno de promesas de sol y futuro.

Este mapa emocional en la novela permite explorar a la autora dos formas de otredad. La primera, más breve y evidente, es la de ser un extranjero en otro país. La segunda, sin embargo, es el hilo conductor de la novela. A pesar de compartir rituales, experiencias y lenguas comunes -en este caso el catalán y el castellano- con sus congéneres en su propia tierra, la protagonista se siente expulsada de la comunidad por no encajar en las coordenadas normativas de las identidades de género y sus deseos sexuales. O, mejor dicho, que para no sentirse expulsada, tenía que pretender ser lo que no era, o al menos no todo lo que era. Como consecuencia, no solo se convertía en una extranjera en su propia tierra, sino de sí misma.

En *Mi bien esquivo* la autora explora cómo siendo niña tuvo que matar a Miguel, el niño que habitaba, para convertirse en la niña, luego adolescente, y luego mujer, que todo el mundo esperaba. En ese proceso, también se vio empujada a matar y despreciar sus propios deseos sexuales más íntimos. Socialmente, solo era legítima su atracción por los hombres, por lo que su deseo por las mujeres debía ser suprimido, extirpado, destruido. En esta batalla agónica entre el yo deseante y la sociedad colonizadora, apareció Violeta, una mujer enérgica, poderosa y, en principio, con menos miedos.

La relación de amor intermitente, a distancia, prolongada a lo largo de los años, entre la protagonista y Violeta permite a la autora explorar la sexualidad más íntima entre dos mujeres. La descripción abierta y gozosa del sexo entre las dos amantes, junto a los fragmentos introspectivos, muestran la versatilidad y habilidad en la escritura de Ana Luengo. Los discursos heteropatriarcales han situado siempre la fuerza, la energía y la virilidad en el falo masculino. Basta leer los pasajes de *Mi bien esquivo* sobre la sexualidad entre aquellas dos mujeres para darse cuenta de la falacia de este mito.

El contrapunto en la novela de la sexualidad dichosa con Violeta son las experiencias que tiene la protagonista con varios hombres. Estas escenas son también estremecedoras, pero por las razones contrarias a los encuentros con Violeta. Sus miembros erectos unas veces son

cuchillos agresores y otras, simplemente, meros músculos de descarga. Cuerpos egoístas en busca de una satisfacción propia que deja a su contraparte llena de vacío, tristeza y amargura.

Dicho todo esto, quiero destacar otro aspecto que, aunque menor, destaca particularmente de la escritura de Ana Luengo. Me refiero a su particular atención a los sentidos. En muchas de sus escenas son recurrentes sus referencias al olor de los cuerpos, de las vaginas, de los penes; al aliento de las bocas; a la textura de las pieles. Toda esta experiencia sensorial transpira a lo largo de la novela, como si los personajes exhuman humores de gozo, de cansancio y de miedo.

Mi bien esquivo es una novela que, una vez se comienza a leer, es difícil de abandonar. La voz en primera persona de su protagonista atrapa al lector desde un primer momento por su honestidad, por su vulnerabilidad, por su capacidad de introspección. Con pulso firme nos adentra en su intimidad y nos abraza con su relato envolvente. Este libro es en parte biográfico y en parte ficción, explica la autora. Nos habla de un viaje personal a lo largo de cuatro décadas a partir de una colección de fotografías. Pero, en esta época del *selfie*, Ana Luengo no cae en la trampa de construir una narrativa autorreferencial y aislada. Todo lo contrario, nos habla de ella para hablar de los límites y las potenciales de lo colectivo. De cuerpos y deseos aislados, encerrados, que buscan transgredir barreras, que buscan abrazos, construir nuevos afectos y futuros.

Un goce de lectura.

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Jesus Montaña, and Regan Postma-Montaña. *Tactics of Hope in Latinx Children's and Young Adult Literature*. U of New Mexico P, 2022. 202 pp. ISBN: 9780826363831.

Kelli D. Zaytoun. *Shapeshifting Subjects: Gloria Anzaldúa's Naguala and Border Arte*. U of Illinois P, 2022. 198 pp. ISBN: 9780252086519.

The two books under review, *Tactics of Hope in Latinx Children's and Young Adult Literature* by Jesús Montaña and Regan Postma-Montaña, and *Shapeshifting Subjects: Gloria Anzaldúa's Naguala and Border Arte* by Kelli D. Zaytoun, each make invaluable contributions to our understanding of Gloria Anzaldúa's legacy and its resonance across different fields. While Montaña and Postma-Montaña focus on how Latinx children's and young adult literature serves as a vehicle for resistance, healing, and empowerment, Zaytoun delves deeply into Anzaldúa's theoretical innovations, particularly *la naguala*, to explore transformative identity, decolonial praxis, and relational subjectivity.

Chapter one of Kelli Zaytoun’s *Shapeshifting Subjects* highlights the necessity of engaging with Anzaldúa’s entire body of work to fully comprehend her efforts to transcend binary and static Western constructions of identity. Central to this transformation is Anzaldúa’s later development of *la naguala*, a shapeshifting, creatively dreamlike consciousness that bridges time and space while embodying a profound empathy that merges the self with its surroundings. Through *la naguala*, Anzaldúa redefines identity and subjectivity, forging creative connections between human and non-human matter that ultimately strengthen the individual. Zaytoun argues that *la naguala* dismantles traditional Western dualisms, offering a vision of subjectivity that challenges Enlightenment-based humanism. By rooting *la naguala* in Mesoamerican metaphysics and Indigenous ontologies, Zaytoun underscores how Anzaldúa’s theories resist reductive, rationalist frameworks. Tracing Anzaldúa’s evolving vision of transformational self-work, coalition-building, and social justice activism from her early writings to her final essays, Zaytoun centers the concept of *conocimiento* and the essay “now let us shift” in her analysis. In foregrounding *la naguala*, she highlights the essential role of Indigenous influences in Anzaldúa’s work, demonstrating how this concept transcends rational epistemologies to embrace a holistic and interconnected worldview.

Building on *la naguala*’s contributions to post humanist discourse, chapter two explores its decolonial potential. Zaytoun examines Anzaldúa’s engagement with Mesoamerican shamanism, critiquing colonialist biases and inaccuracies in Western interpretations of shamanic practices. She also addresses critiques of Anzaldúa’s work, particularly those arguing that her writings do not go far enough in dismantling Western hegemonic structures of patriarchy and coloniality. Revisiting Anzaldúa’s concept of “new tribalism,” Zaytoun explores her vision of a mobilized social identity capable of uniting subordinated communities in collective action. Additionally, Zaytoun analyzes recurring motifs in Anzaldúa’s works, including La Chingada, Tlazolteótl, Coatlicue, the serpent, and the eagle, as consistent elements of a textual *conocimiento* that embodies shapeshifting transformation aimed at disarticulating coloniality.

Chapter three brings Anzaldúa’s *la naguala* consciousness into dialogue with the works of Arab American and Arab Canadian women writers. While these writers have long found Anzaldúa’s concepts of borderlands and mestiza consciousness useful for representing their own experiences, their specific identity locations make their processes of transformation more complex. By focusing on these writers’ unique contributions to expansive selfhood and post-oppositional identity politics, Zaytoun uncovers *subjects-in-the-making* that bridge time and space, blur the boundaries between subjects and objects, which connects with *la naguala*

consciousness as a form of inclusive relationality. The chapter concludes with the assertion that, “despite difficult barriers even among themselves as women of colors... moving beyond oppositional thinking and strategies is critical to finding common ground.”

Chapter four traces the evolution of Anzaldúa’s understanding of writing as an act of reclaiming the dispersed or lost pieces of the self and soul. By analyzing texts such as “Tilli, Tlapalli/The Path of Red and Black Ink” (*Borderlands*), “La Prieta” (*This Bridge Called My Back*), and “Let Us Be Healing the Wound” (*Light in the Dark*), Zaytoun positions Anzaldúa’s decolonial praxis as rooted not only in Indigenous thought, but motivated by the trauma of the “colonial wound.” Recognizing that Anzaldúa’s subjectivity is shaped by loss and trauma, even transgenerational memory, Zaytoun identifies her artistic response as a praxis that initiates subjective and decolonial agency. She aligns this praxis with Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez’s distinction between aesthetics and *aesthesis*, the latter defined as a movement from an embodied consciousness of the colonial wound toward healing.

Zaytoun’s *Shapeshifting Subjects* offers a compelling exploration of Anzaldúa’s later work, grounding her theoretical contributions in Indigenous ontologies and highlighting their potential to challenge Western dualisms and coloniality. By focusing on *la naguala* as a dynamic, empathetic, and transformational consciousness, Zaytoun enriches ongoing scholarly discussions on decoloniality, posthumanism, and interconnectivity. Her engagement with Arab American and Arab Canadian women writers further situates Anzaldúa’s work in a transnational dialogue, showcasing its relevance across cultural and geopolitical borders.

In contrast, *Tactics of Hope* examines how Anzaldúa’s concepts of *conocimiento*, *nepantla*, and *autohistorias* are embedded in children’s and young adult literature, providing young readers with tools to navigate and resist systemic injustices. Chapter one explores the young protagonists of *Side by Side/Lado a lado: the Story of Dolores Huerta y Cesar Chavez/La historia de Dolores Huerta y César Chávez* (2010), *Tomás and the Library Lady* (1997) and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), all of them real characters who would become activist leaders. The chapter introduces the term “conocimiento mirrors” to illustrate how these books, while serving as mirrors that allow children to see themselves and envision their life possibilities, also facilitate the transition from *desconocimiento*—rooted in U.S. policies and practices—to *conocimiento*. Aligned with Anzaldúa’s framework this *conocimiento* not only equips readers with tools to resist oppression but also fosters healing from the wounds inflicted by it and promotes both individual and collective growth.

Chapter two examines how the narrative and poetic voices in *Under the Mesquite* (2011) and *They Call Me Güero* (2018) embody Anzaldúa’s concept of *nepantla*, the interstitial

borderland, to challenge and dismantle divisions between “us” and “them.” These voices transform the brokenness of the border’s open wound into a space of belonging where awareness, interconnectivity, and healing unfold. By interpreting these stories as part of the ongoing process of revisioning and rearticulating the U.S.-Mexico border, readers encounter seeds of new knowledge, making the reading experience profoundly transformative.

While Anzaldúa’s approach to writing as a means of capturing “the stories of loss and recovery, exile and homecoming” is central to chapter three, the concept of “cultural wealth” enriches the discussion by emphasizing the intergenerational transmission of knowledge about conquest, segregation, assimilation, and resistance. Two novels, *Maximilian and the Mystery of the Guardian Angel: A Bilingual Lucha Libre Thriller* (2011) and *Summer of the Mariposas* (2012), demonstrate how the complex cultural networks of Latino and Latina diasporic youth navigate the journey from loss and disinheritance to agency. By centering their cultural wealth, the protagonists reclaim their identities and actively challenge assimilationist policies and practices.

Rooted in Anzaldúa’s call to “rise up in testimony,” chapter four examines the experiences of deportation through the eyes of Latino and Latina children and young adults. By analyzing the novels *Efrén Divided* (2020), *Land of Cranes* (2020), and *From North to South/Del norte al sur* (2013)—each shaped by the author’s experiences—the chapter highlights how these narratives serve as counter-stories. According to Montaña and Postma-Montaña, these testimonies foreground reparative strategies that challenge the dominant discourse on race and belonging, which lies at the core of deportation policies targeting Latino communities in the United States.

Chapter five focuses on what Anzaldúa terms *autohistorias*. This concept refers to the artist’s storytelling, which weaves individual experiences and cultural history together. At its core, *autohistorias* represent a way of creating and reclaiming history—an act of inventing and narrating collective stories shaped by lived experiences and unique perspectives through the medium of art. By reading *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) and *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* (2014) as *autohistorias*, Montaña and Postma-Montaña demonstrate how this form of writing brings healing and empowerment to characters who embody the soul of the artist and the *pueblo*. Additionally, it offers readers a deeper understanding of the process of self-inscription undertaken by border artists.

In *Tactics of Hope*, Jesús Montaña and Regan Postma-Montaña offer a thought-provoking analysis of how children’s and young adult literature can serve as a site of resistance, healing, and empowerment for Latina and Latino communities. Grounded in Gloria Anzaldúa’s

transformative concepts, the book navigates the terrain of *conocimiento*, *nepantla*, and *autohistorias*, showcasing how these frameworks illuminate literature as a mirror for self-recognition and a catalyst for collective liberation. Each chapter underscores the potential of storytelling to disrupt oppressive narratives, foster resilience, and cultivate a sense of belonging for both protagonists and readers. By amplifying the voices of Latina and Latino children and youth, Montañó and Postma-Montañó highlight the enduring power of stories to mend wounds, challenge injustices, and inspire new ways of imagining identities, communities, and possibilities that move beyond the wound.

Taken together, these works affirm Anzaldúa’s enduring influence as a visionary thinker whose theories and practices continue to shape multiple disciplines, including border studies, children’s literature, and decolonial thought. Both books underscore the power of storytelling—not only as a form of testimony and resistance but also as a tool for imagining more inclusive, relational, and transformative futures. By bridging the personal and the collective, the literary and the political, both *Tactics of Hope* and *Shapeshifting Subjects* remind us that Anzaldúa’s legacy is not static but ever evolving, providing pathways for understanding and enacting justice in a fractured world. Together, they serve as a call to engage with her work as a framework for healing, coalition-building, and reshaping the boundaries of identity and belonging.

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Ana I. Simón-Alegre and Lou Charnon-Deutsch, eds. *Queer Women in Modern Spanish Literature: Activism, Sexuality, and the Otherness of the “Chicas Raras.”* Routledge, 2022. 166 pp. ISBN: 9780367563530.

Ana I. Simón-Alegre and Lou Charnon-Deutsch’s volume *Queer Women in Modern Spanish Literature: Activism, Sexuality, and the Otherness of the “Chicas Raras”* (2022) is an invaluable contribution that examines the writings of queer women writers during difficult moments in Spanish society under the dictatorship of Franco. According to the editors, in spite of the journalist Mariano de Cavia’s discontent, his complaint “has to do a lot with the inspiration for this edited volume” (1). Composed of eight chapters, this analysis explores the life and works of diverse Spanish women authors whose writings shed light on gender inequality, female subjectivity, religion, social justice and the Spanish educational system. In their exploration of queer identity, the scholars included the identities and writings of women whose works have historically been marginalized from the Spanish literary canon during the nineteenth and twentieth century. As Simón-Alegre and Charnon-Deutsch reiterate, the main

objective of this volume is “to explore how the idea of ‘queerness’ played an important role in the personal lives and social activism of these writers, as well as in the unconventional and nonconformist characters they created in their work” (preface).

In their introductory chapter, the editors outline how the language used to discuss these “other women”, or “per accidents!,” as Caviar would dub them, belies the male writer’s own discomfort with the fact that women had access to the newsrooms, going so far as to suggest that they were so impossible to avoid that “they can be found even in your soup.” He compared this group of women to anarchist groups, and he could not stand that “by 1892 they were publishing newspapers to persuade the Spanish public that it was time for men and women to have equal access and opportunities to thrive in society” (3). These were women born in the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from “raras” to queer ones (using the editors’ term), who gained visibility and notoriety and lived their lives without having to hide. In the words of Simón-Alegre and Charnon-Deutsch, the concept of “queer women” and “queer girls” is especially useful for investigating the evolution of women’s writing and sexual identity during the period of Spain’s fitful transition to modernity. It is very important to take into account that all the essays appearing in this volume use a queer methodology which focuses on women’s increased agency, mobility and interaction, and this approach “allows us to decode both the friendship between women and their sexual desire by mining their literary productions and their essays for a deeper understanding of how they related to each other, whether or not sexual attraction was explicit” (7). All the studies included in this volume are organized considering the methodological concept of “queer women,” following the model Natasha Hurley proposed “for analyzing fiction before the publication of openly gay and lesbian narratives in the twentieth century” (4) and following, as well, “a recent trend in Hispanic studies that acknowledges the transactional relations between private lives and literary production (5).

The opening chapter is Aurélie Vialette’s essay entitled “Nineteenth-Century Women Activists: Concepción Arenal’s Cross- Dressing,” eloquently outlines the diverse tactics that Concepción Arenal employed to overcome the barriers restricting women’s education. Arenal, like other women writers, resorted to dressing in a more feminine manner despite her queer form of dress, in order to gain entry into elite public spaces dominated by men during the nineteenth century. She became a direct agent of transformation of gender norms by challenging them. As Vialette goes on to note, “the consequences of being a woman who cross-dressed to act publicly in the nineteenth century were many. Women were not only segregated from public matters, but there was also a whole social structure that imposed the construction

of women as specific subjects, legally, politically, domestically, socially, and economically” (19-20).

This goes hand in hand with the second chapter of the volume, “Women Moved by the Spirit: Spiritism and Early Feminism in Spain,” by Lou Charnon-Deutsch, which traces the activism of Amalia Domingo Soler who embraced spiritism as a way of life that she believed would have beneficial effects on the lives of women. In spite of their sexual identity, queer women writers also developed belief systems that sought out the spirit world as a form of solace and personal connection to themselves. As the author claims in her essay, “important gifts that Domingo Soler and her Spiritist followers offered women were consolation, an alternative way to think of life and death, and ways to cope with the lurching vicissitudes of family life that she acknowledged often did not go well for some of the women she mentions in her stories and anecdotes” (37).

In the third contribution to the volume, “Queer Literary Friendships in Salons: Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer, Carmen de Burgos, and Others,” Ana Simón-Alegre, one of the editors of this book, delves into the relationship between two very important figures of the nineteenth-century literary scene in Spain, Carmen de Burgos and Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer. According to the author of this paper, the literary salons were seen as performative spaces which she interprets “as places for performative gender practices” (55). Exploring the meeting spaces where social, professional, and personal concerns intersected helps to define this continuum as a kind of repository of feelings that configured feminine desires. Simón-Alegre also analyzes the dark side of how Gimeno and Burgos’s interactions were interwoven with jealousy, envy, and resentment.

In her chapter called “Concha de Albornoz: Exception, Dandy, and Character,” Isabel Murcia Estrada, claims that Concha de Albornoz is among the “queerest of the queer” not just because she was a closeted lesbian (12) but also because of her immense popularity. In the words of Murcia Estrada, Albornoz “transformed into a literary character” (97), and her abstraction was multiplied. She was an intellectual who dedicated her life to the study and teaching of Spanish literature, whose work, as a commentator and critic of the creations of her friends, has vanished due to its intangibility. Elena Fortún is the Spanish woman writer discussed in the following two chapters. Nuria Capdevila-Argüelles’s sixth essay of this volume, peers into the closet from which Fortún created Celia, the “chica rara” or “queer girl” featured in a series of books beloved by generations of Spanish women, while Elena Lindholm’s chapter, “Celia, Elena Fortún’s Queer New Girl,” is about the power of Elena Fortún’s Celia stories to promote best practices in women’s education. Lindholm compares the

character Celia with Leonor Serrano's young character Diana, and shows how Fortún managed to create a literary portrait of the unbounded possibilities for self-determination through Celia's play and fantasy (13).

The seventh chapter of this volume offers Nora Lynn Gardner's vision and analysis about a character called Andrea who represents a "chica rara" ("queer girl") par excellence. Andrea is the narrator of Carmen Laforet's Premio Nadal-winning novel *Nada* (*Nothing*, published by Destino Press in 1945) and, as Lynn Gardner explains through her essay, Carmen Martín Gaité heralds Andrea as "less of a leading lady and more of an introverted and secretive listener defined by her "marginalidad de personaje casi inexistente" ("almost nonexistent marginality of character" 99). In *Nada*, Andrea hollows out abjection (Kristeva's term) through cleverly coded narrative. As the author states, Andrea distances herself by narrating all that she sees without implicating herself in the crises and passions she relates (146). Her acknowledgment of this process is only capitulated a few times, in the form of "horrified laughter," one of the true expressions of abject knowledge that bubbles up unsuspectingly "as fascinated as it is frightened."

Finally, the last chapter entitled "Trickster Women: Exploring Gender Identity and Sexuality with Txus García and Hannah Gadsby", by Beth Bernstein, dissects the fluid gender and sexual identities of these two artists. This author invites us to empathize with women who identify themselves as gender-nonbinary queer women "who do not conform to the traditional gender roles of their communities [...] and in spite of the social shaming they suffered, Bernstein shows how the two have courageously spoken up in defense of their nonconformity.

Queer Women in Modern Spanish Literature: Activism, Sexuality, and the Otherness of the "Chicas Raras" is an enriching volume which pays special attention to activism, sexuality of diverse Spanish and Hispanic women writers and the subject of homosexuality in Spanish literature. Undoubtedly, this volume is, and will be, an invaluable source for academics, researchers and people interested in this field.

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