

THE CONTEMPORARY BODY OF MEXICAN MASCULINITIES

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Abstract: This dissertation thematizes masculinity in Mexico's post-NAFTA configurations of subjectivities and bodies, and in the geocultural politics of race and gender in order to analyze how male identities are produced and reified within these intersecting structures of oppression. It encompasses questions of resistance, gender categories established by nationalism and late capitalism, and modern/colonial power relations.

I explore cinematic and literary engagements with maleness in order to demonstrate how collusion between neoliberal economic interests and the state's established political and cultural framework of power conceals the deployment of gendered concepts of citizenship and subjectivity as a mechanism to exercise control over Mexican bodies. I conceptualize this process in terms of a violent colonial strategy of subjection which coerces men to internalize normative codes of masculinity based on essentialist categories of race, sexuality, biological sex, and space. I address relevant scholarly debates in postcolonial studies and discussions of neoliberalism's impact on culture, politics and identity.

In my first chapter, I examine patriotic male performances in northern Mexico as portrayed in the novels *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* (2002) and *El ejército iluminado* (2006) by David Toscana. I posit that through their efforts to overcome U.S. imperialism northern males in these texts are revealed as dominated subjects for whom national masculinity is a failing model for resistance. My second chapter analyzes how Carlos Reygadas's film *Batalla en el cielo* (2005) illustrates the disciplinary function of nationalist gender clichés through allusions to Mexican Golden Age cinema. I argue that the film's concern with revealing contradictions

between idealized gender performances and actual conditions of Mexican males questions masculinity as a source of agency for brown bodies. Next, my chapter on Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza* (1994) explores the effects of globalized male ethics as manifested in the mortification of masculine bodies. I show how the failure of the narrator's strategies of subverting gender politics reflects the ineffectiveness of feminist conceptions of the ethics of care as the foundation for challenging the conditions of oppression and suffering in non-Western spaces. My final chapter demonstrates how Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and Carlos Cuarón's *Rudo y Cursi* (2008) produce an intertextual farce directed at the gender codes of *mexicanidad* by depicting the disposability of impoverished bodies and by highlighting how the models of masculinity linked to narco culture have become the only viable form of identity for Mexican males under globalization.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Samanta Ordóñez Robles is originally from Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán, México. She completed her B.A. with Honors at the Universidad de Veracruz with a concentration in Lenguas y Literaturas Hispánicas in 2004. She also graduated from an M.A. program in Comparative Literature at the University of Western Ontario in 2008. At Cornell University, she finished her Ph.D. in the Department of Romance Studies with a minor in Film and Video Studies. She is currently Assistant Professor of Romance Studies at Wake Forest University

Para mi mamá, hermano y Patrick.

Y en especial en memoria de mi papá, Pascual Ordóñez Cruz.

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INTRODUCTION

The night of September 26th 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico, forty three students from Ayotzinapa's Normal School disappeared. According to Francisco Goldman's report in *The New Yorker*, "On September 27th, the body of [a] student turned up. His eyes were torn out and the facial skin was ripped away from his skull: the signature of a Mexican organized-crime assassination." The sources that Goldman consulted revealed that students were traveling from the rural town of Ayotzinapa to the city of Iguala in order to set up a roadblock on a highway and raise money for their annual march to Mexico City on October 2nd. That students from rural areas in Mexico participate in leftist activism, such as joining the massive demonstrations to commemorate the massacre of hundreds of student protesters in Tlatelolco on October 2nd, 1968, during Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's presidency, is not surprising. However, that they were intercepted by police forces and masked men dressed in black who killed six people and wounded 26 more, while they were travelling, is. Goldman reported that the police and a handful of unidentified men transferred the kidnapped students over to *sicarios* associated with Guerreros Unidos, a criminal narco-organization that operates in the state of Guerrero.¹

The cooperation between police and members of Guererro Unidos is striking considering that in 2006 former President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa declared "la guerra contra el narcotráfico" [a war on drug-trafficking]. While it is debatable whether or not Calderón's actions ever constituted something that could be accurately called a "war," the fact is that organized crime has gained power and control over most aspects of the social, economic, and political

¹ The disappearance of the students has caused a massive uproar nationally and internationally. Hundreds of demonstrations and marches have been occurring all across Mexico for months since the disappearance. In Europe and U.S. there have also been many public expressions of outrage at the violent disappearance of the students. Here at Cornell University, students organized a protest march followed a symbolic burial ceremony, as well as a public seminar to discuss the terrible events in Mexico.

structures of Mexico, structures that were previously the domain of the state, and their most visible tactic has been violence inflicted on the bodies of their enemies. This politics of fear has become increasingly prevalent as more mass graves filled with mutilated and tortured corpses are uncovered. The ubiquity of the dead points to a shift that has been captured by writer Ernesto Díezmartínez in “We Ate Something that Went Down Wrong” (“Algo se comió que le hizo daño”), where he explains that it is no longer possible to imagine that the lives lost in drug violence are those of men who willingly risked taking a bite of the prohibited meals of the narco economy. Rather the abundance of corpses signals that *all* aspects of life in Mexico have been touched by organized crime.

How can we begin to understand this shift of power? Given the history of the state’s careful management and construction of its national apparatus of control, especially after the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, and the Mexican Revolution (1910), it is intriguing that the scaffolding designed, defended, and supported by the central government appears to be coming apart. Two of the conceptual components that have been consubstantial with the modern Mexican state are the *mestizo* male body and the performative codes of an inherently Mexican masculinity. That is, the men who most directly embody the state’s official ideology of *mexicanidad* are the same who are being brutally tortured and murdered by members of criminal gangs, who also manifest the signs of masculinity disseminated by the Mexican state, including the capacity to form masculine homosocial bonds and participate in structures of power configured to perpetuate male supremacy.

As a point of entry for an analysis of the structural changes in Mexico’s order of power during the last two decades and their unbearably violent effects, this project examines representations of masculinity in recent fiction and cinema. I position my inquiries against the

socio-economic background of the implementation of NAFTA (1994), arguing that the expansion of neoliberal markets in Mexico has affected the power structures directly related to the masculine body. In my investigation, the intersection between neoliberalism and the Mexican state's established system of power exposes masculinity as a complex instrument of oppression.

I engage with recent efforts in the field of Mexican gender studies that contest ontological definitions of "el hombre mexicano" (the Mexican male) as they analyze and conceptualize representations of Mexican masculinity in cultural productions. But I offer a new approach by framing masculinity in terms that transcend national boundaries and by contextualizing it within the spatial and gender politics of modern/colonial networks of power. This allows me to illustrate the extent to which the global colonizing system of racial hierarchies is crystallized in Mexico as a nationalist canon of gendered ideals and values designed to (de)legitimize bodies.

This dissertation argues that male resistance to subjugation is problematically anchored in the officially sanctioned definitions of masculinity because biologically male bodies in Mexico have internalized a national cultural ideology that conceives maleness as consubstantial with the state and the modes of subjectivity produced through it. In my studies of David Toscana's novels, Carlos Reygadas's films, Mario Bellatin's fiction, and Alfonso Cuarón's and Carlos Cuarón's movies, I explore four distinct types of prescribed normative male gender performance: the patriotic body, the melodramatic body, the moral body, and the global body. By highlighting the common root between male subjectivity and subjugation under nationalist and neoliberal regimes, I show how the texts posit masculine superiority as an identity impossible to achieve for bodies marked by the colonial difference. I conclude my dissertation with a discussion of Teresa Margolles's installations, whose oblique references to the absent bodies metonymically point to the modes of abjection that are violently shaping male identities.

My approach to masculinity builds upon Victor Seidler's recognition that masculinity has been not only consubstantial to modernity, but also an invisible form of power (4). As he explains, masculinity becomes inseparable from broader mechanisms of modern social and political power "because society has taken as its self-conception since Enlightenment a version of itself as a 'rational' society, and because reason is taken to be the exclusive property of men" (3). Moreover, according to Seidler, since the Enlightenment, Europe and North America "institutionalize a relationship between reason, science, progress and masculinity" (14). And he further adds that "these identifications became the cornerstone of what we have inherited as the 'modern world'" (14).

The configuration of Mexican codes of masculinity in the post-revolutionary era responded to the integration of the state with the modern network of power governed from Europe and the United States. Thus, in order to be considered Mexican citizens, male bodies needed to perform the gender codes that conformed to the state's hegemonic understanding of masculinity. For this reason, "hegemonic masculinity" is a concept that I often address in this study. Within European and North American theory of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is a term that is associated with the work of R.W. Connell.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt in "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," the idea of hegemonic masculinity was first formulated in 1980 in order to study the making of masculinities and corporeal experiences in sociological research on Australian high school males. However, since then it has been in used in different contexts and disciplines. The authors explain that "hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (832). For this, reason, the authors assert, "Hegemonic masculinity was ...

normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (832). The spread of the concept into research on Latin America, explain Connell and Messerschmidt, has shown that there is not only one dominant form of masculinity, but rather variations based on differences of class and culture, among other aspects. Furthermore, this research has illustrated how men do not simply try to adhere to idealized performances of masculinity, but that they often “negotiate” an approach to normative models (835).

My study builds on Connell’s understanding of hegemonic masculinity as I focus on cultural productions that depict the Mexican state’s systems of power exercised on male bodies. Specifically, I address the body’s subordination to codes of masculinity inherent to the cultural ideology of *mexicanidad*, but I am also attentive to how the national gender order intersects with broader systems of global power rooted in colonial relationships and Eurocentric concepts of subjectivity. There is a massive bibliography of scholarly work dealing with the implicitly masculine model of Mexican subjectivity, and the authors who I am most engaged with are those who take a direct approach to the politics of gender in the national context and the representation of maleness in cultural discourse, including Robert McKee Irwin and his landmark text *Mexican Masculinities* (2003) and Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba, whose *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity* (2010) makes a significant contribution to the field.²

Irwin analyzes constructions of masculinity and nationhood in literary works produced between Mexico’s independence and 1960, and he begins from the premise that concepts of

² I have avoided making extensive reference to texts which concentrate on ontological questions of Mexican *being* or those which address the national identity in psychological or behavioral terms, such as *La raza cósmica* (1925) by José Vasconcelos, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) by Octavio Paz, and *Análisis del ser mexicano* (1952) by Emilio Uranga.

masculinity and male sexuality have been largely transparent in research on Mexican literature, which has led to some significant gaps in the understanding of their role in shaping national discourses of identity.³ Irwin argues that there cannot be only one definition of masculinity since the codes and signifiers that determine it are constantly shifting due to their imbrication with other key components of national identity, such as race and class. As Irwin traces the literary history of homosocial bonding, he also examines alternative pathways of homosociality, such as homosexuality (xii-xiii). Irwin's analysis also posits a distinction between maleness and masculinity; for him, maleness refers to "a set of physical characteristics shared by men"; and he defines masculinity as "indicative of a collection of behaviors that men may or may not exhibit (but that, perhaps, they ought to)" (xvii). In a similar vein, I differentiate between the biologically male body and the performance of masculinity, defined by Judith Butler as a stylized repetition of acts sustained through a network of power that naturalizes sex/gender, and thus the body (*Bodies that Matter* 7). I also follow Irwin's definition of Mexican masculinity as configured by the shifts of power that the nation has gone through; that is to say, as a set of codes that is not stable, but rather shaped by the forces of history.

Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba also defines masculinity as permeable to historical processes inherent to the narrative of the nation and modernity (1). He develops an understanding of masculinity "as a gender category [that] is culturally produced not only as a perceived entity but also as a device for perception"; and for this reason, Domínguez Ruvalcaba explains, masculinity "is a means by which we can know the peculiarities of a nation's culture" (1). He further explains that Mexican culture and its masculinity are defined by colonial and

³ Irwin's purpose is to address shifting and often contradictory constructions of Mexican masculinity. In order to achieve this goal examines not only high literary culture, but also a broader range of texts, such as "newspapers, broadsheets, pop literature, and scientific (and pseudoscientific) studies ... of criminology and psychology" (xv).

postcolonial history (2). His main object of analysis in *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity* is not so much the nuances of how imperialism affects gender politics, but rather he focuses on the contradictions presented through modernity which propose sensuality, but provoke violence (2).

Domínguez Ruvalcaba states that “representation of masculinity is an allegory of the nation, but this allegory must be conceived only through paradoxes” (2). In order to analyze how masculinity is formed within the intersections of these paradoxes, his book examines historical moments in which hegemonic masculinity was thrown into question. His corpus includes cultural productions from the Porfiriato up to the early years of the twenty-first century. His study deals with Mexican males who are sensualized and emasculated in order to show the main features of hegemonic masculinity, since “the masculine is known by what it rejects” (3). Other areas of exclusion that Domínguez Ruvalcaba addresses are those of homosexuality and misogyny, which he posits are the cornerstones of one of hegemonic masculinity’s key mechanisms: homosocial bonding (4). Ultimately, Domínguez Ruvalcaba’s book tries to illuminate how hegemonic masculinity as a dominant structure perpetuates violent exclusions of non-normative bodies (6).

I build my arguments on Domínguez Ruvalcaba’s key position that the gender category of Mexican masculinity promotes violence. But as distinct from Domínguez Ruvalcaba’s and Irwin’s excellent studies, my dissertation does not address cultural artefacts or texts produced during the formation of Mexican modernity. I am interested in analyzing masculinity in the context of processes of globalization as well as the surge of brutality directed against Mexican male bodies during the last two decades. For this reason my corpus encompasses art, literature and film produced after 1990, a period which has been defined by the opening up of Mexico to the politics of neoliberalism and by the cruel realities of narco violence.

Similar to Domínguez Ruvalcaba, I also consider masculinity an important element of the legacy of colonization that still configures Mexican society. I am interested in studying contemporary masculinity in terms of its continuities with the colonial order, but I also examine the interaction between hegemonic gender codes constructed through the ideology of *mexicanidad* and the effects of neoliberalism on Mexico's gender system in order to unravel how these two elements contribute to the processes of violence affecting the masculine body. My understanding of the continuing legacy of the colonial order derives from Anibal Quijano's definition of the "coloniality of power."

In "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" Quijano explains that the economic model inaugurated with the conquest of Mexico continues to be present in different guises within the nation-state as well as in the global order. Quijano further asserts that the economic circuit configured by Europeans had race as its very center (170). It was through a racial hierarchy that some bodies were considered colonizers and rational, while others were classified as colonized and irrational. The designation of the peoples of the Americas as lacking in reason facilitated the colonial network of power's appropriation of colonized bodies, labor, lands, and resources. Quijano argues that this model—*la colonialidad del poder*—has continued to develop and configures the framework of the global matrix that formed the present political context.

Given that contemporary masculinity is rooted in modernity and the globalized coloniality of power, gender must be understood as an integral component of the development of an asymmetric geopolitical order. In this regard, Connell in "Masculinities and Globalization" explains that the inequality of the global economy is linked to the inequality of gender, particularly of masculinity. Taking from Wallerstein the idea that "modern society was historically produced ... by the economic expansion of European states from the fifteenth

century,” Connell argues that “imperialism was, from the start, a gendered process” (8). My inquiries on masculinity rest to a certain extent on Connell’s contributions; however, my perspective on Mexican masculinity in the context of the asymmetrical power dynamics of modernity and globalization does not take as a point of departure the European Enlightenment and conquest of the Mexico. Rather, I aim to advance an understanding of how masculinity participates in the constitution of national identity after the Mexican-American War and after the Mexican Revolution. As I show in my first chapter, the war with the U.S. marks the initiation of a paradigm of unequal transnational relations configured primarily along the axis of the country’s northern border. In this sense, the geopolitical order under which the nation-state consolidated itself necessarily became a crucial factor in the construction of national codes of masculinity. The post-revolutionary state, for its part, developed a model of masculinity which was designed in consonance with the cultural ideology of *mexicanidad* and effectively disseminated across diverse mediums such as murals, cinema, and literature.

My dissertation, then, looks at articulations of masculinity in globalized Mexico. More than identifying signifiers that reveal masculine codes of global masculinity, I examine how the asymmetrical structure of globalization affects the hegemonic gender codes established by the Mexican state. And, more importantly, I look at the effects of both Mexican masculinity and globalization on the body, particularly with regard to the brutal violence that has come to define the social reality of a significant part of the population. Even though I use the terms “globalization” and “global order” to refer broadly to the contemporary transnational political context in which the nation-state is neither the only nor the most important factor in economic and other frameworks of power, the more common term used by most critics and cultural

researchers in Mexico is neoliberalism.⁴ I develop an understanding of neoliberalism that builds on the definition and criticism that James Cypher and Raúl Delgado Wise offer in *Mexico's Economic Dilemma: The Developmental Failure of Neoliberalism* (2010). Cypher and Delgado explain that neoliberalism was consummated in Mexico through NAFTA, the free trade agreement between Mexico, the United States and Canada. Ideally, as they put it, the unconstrained market should have benefited society in all three member countries (8). However, the economists argue that the trade agreement is asymmetrical and hinders Mexican society on multiple levels, not only due to the failure to install a social security net, but also to the lack of regulation on foreign corporations who lowered wages across the country (170).

As the post-revolutionary Mexican state configured itself on the twin ideals of masculinity and modernity, my study looks at how the apparent weakening of the state in the context of neoliberalism has affected gender politics, particularly the established codes of masculinity. The absence of socio-economic safeguards in Mexico coheres with the principles of coloniality and directly benefits capitalism by facilitating access to male bodies and their labor. My reading of the selected corpus of cultural productions posits that the forces of extreme capitalism produce a different dynamic of exclusion from that of modernity as described by Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba. Neoliberalism does not operate on the dynamics of center-periphery; exclusion and violence are now in effect throughout the republic, as evidenced by the ever accumulating numbers of murdered corpses.

Neoliberalism also had a direct impact on film production, as noted by Ignacio Sánchez Prado when he writes that “The paradigms of filmmaking that radically altered Mexican cinema

⁴ In his introduction to *Screening Neoliberalism*, Ignacio Sánchez Prado points out that “While ‘neoliberalism’ is not a term widely used in the United States to describe the brand of free-market reforms designed after the economic ideas of Milton Friedman and others, and implemented on a global scale since at least the 1970s, the word is employed as common currency in Mexico to refer to these reforms” (7).

after 1988 are the consequences of deep transformations in the material practices of producing and consuming cinema, triggered by changes in the very idea of the role of culture in society developed under neoliberalism” (6). Besides bringing the middle class back to the cinema, the other important structural change that Sánchez Prado highlights is filmmakers’ detachment from the ideology that shaped national cinema, particularly between 1935 and 1955, i.e., the ideology of *mexicanidad*. Like Sánchez Prado, I also take into account the politics of production of Mexican film and its impact on the aesthetics of cinema. However, I focus on analyzing how neoliberalism influences representations of masculinity. As opposed to Sánchez Prado, I posit that the ideology as well as the gender codes of *mexicanidad* are still integrated into Mexican cinema, albeit not as dominant ideology that has to be disseminated, but rather as an inherent part of Mexican society and its cultural practices.

My analysis also examines how Mexican cinema is participating in a transnational circuit of independent films and international co-productions. My interest lies in questioning the place that national cinema occupies in global film markets. I specifically highlight ways in which the Mexican nation is represented to an international or transnational audience, and how this affects cinematic performances of masculinity and *mexicanidad*. An important element of this analysis is film genre. My approach to film takes into account how genre conventions influence the depiction of the nation as well as masculinity. Some of the genres that I analyze, such as the road movie and the sports film, have been developed mostly in Hollywood. However, I also look at the conventions and gender codes of Mexican melodrama, not only because they are present in one of the films I examine, *Battle in Heaven* (2005) by Carlos Reygadas, but also because the melodramas circulated by the state during the Golden Age of cinema were crucial in the formation masculine gender codes. My discussion of melodrama draws insights from prominent

scholars such as Ana M. López and Peter Brooks, as well as the significant contributions of Sergio de la Mora's book *Cinemachismo* (2006).

De la Mora examines three different genres and a subgenre of Mexican cinema—the revolutionary melodrama, the *cabaretera*, the musical, and the picaresque *fichera*—in order to bring to the fore the ideological threads embedded in Mexican culture, and particularly those connected to gender, sex, and machismo. De la Mora writes, “What I mean by the term *cinemachismo* is to identify the particular self-conscious form of national masculinity and patriarchal ideology articulated via the cinema and also vigorously promoted by the post-revolutionary State as official ideology” (2). In addition to elucidating the main codes of masculinity, de la Mora also analyzes the role of the audience, since he is interested in illustrating how Mexican cinema and its gender politics become a site of negotiation and contestation. He argues that “gendered and sexualized national ideologies both accommodate and marginalize ‘normative’ as well as ‘non-normative’ subjectivities” (3). Thus, de la Mora claims that there is a space for homosexuality in Mexican culture, but one that is full of contradictions (4).

In order to bring to the fore the queer appropriation of masculinity made by the spectators, de la Mora examines key figures of masculinity in Mexican cinema, such as Pedro Infante. His line of investigation does not address work that has been done in the United States and European film studies on masculinity since the signifying and performative codes and intentions of Mexican cinema are very different (10). With a similar approach, my dissertation takes up the ideas developed by de la Mora in relation to Pedro Infante, one of Mexican cinema's biggest male stars, but does not dwell on theories of masculinity that take shape outside of the field of Mexican studies.

Moreover, like de la Mora, I also endorse the notion that “Cinema is a meaning-making technology and as such plays a crucial role in constructing gender” (6). This assertion is particularly relevant in relation to Mexican cinema, where through the image of Pedro Infante—as well as other film stars—the ideal Mexican (macho) male is created. However, as de la Mora cautions, “the hold that the stereotype of the Mexican macho exerts does not mean that notions of manhood and manliness are ahistorical, unchanging, monolithic, and uncontested” (9). Drawing from this idea, my analysis also considers how the codes of Mexican masculinity change over time, but I concentrate on those codes which are represented in the texts as hegemonic.

By examining different categories of corporeal masculinity—that is, the patriotic body, melodramatic body, moral body, and global body—I emphasize the various hegemonic discourses and ideologies of gender which comprise masculinity as a system of oppression affecting biologically male bodies. Nonetheless, my analysis is not intended to reiterate the point, clearly demonstrated by both Irwin and Domínguez Ruvalcaba, that discourses of Mexican masculinity are not stable throughout history and shift in accordance with changes in the power structures that define the nation-state. Rather than trying to identify newly prevalent codes of masculinity in contemporary Mexico, my objective is to address how neoliberalism has affected existing gender politics and how its mechanisms of power take hold, particularly those which produce extreme forms of violence.

My first chapter focuses on how the spatial politics of northern Mexico participate in the articulation of gender identity in David Toscana’s *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* (2002) and *El ejército iluminado* (2006). In my reading, these novels uncover the mechanisms of a paradigm of power, which I call the border paradigm, whose origins lie in the cultural memory of Mexico’s

1846-48 war with the United States. The male characters living under the border paradigm are politically positioned as both excluded and colonized, a status attributed to biological inferiority which therefore hinders their intelligibility as Mexican male subjects. Both novels feature border males who, in their efforts to overcome inferiorization, engage in violent behaviors which mimic an anti-imperialist performance of the patriotic male body. I demonstrate that in Toscana's fiction the failed patriotic performance of border males points to a discrepancy between their biologically sexed bodies and the cultural codes of masculinity, revealing their attempts to achieve Mexican male identity as illusory. Toscana's narratives, I argue, show how resistance from a position of hegemonic masculinity and patriotism functions as an oppressive model of gender subjectification.

The second chapter examines gender politics in Mexico City under NAFTA and the neoliberal economic regime of globalization as they are articulated throughout Carlos Reygadas's film *Batalla en el cielo* (2005). I postulate that the film's depictions of the characters, their daily lived experiences, gestures, corporeal expressions, and spoken phrases allude to the popular melodramas of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (1935-55). The films of this formative period in post-revolutionary Mexico constituted a powerful ideological tool used by the state to teach brown men how to be modern citizens. Through my exploration of the protagonist's quotidian performances of melodramatic clichés linked to dominant national gender codes, I advance an argument concerning how his corporeal contradictions reveal an underlying ideology that views brown male bodies as inadequate for modernity and in constant need of state supervision and discipline. I show that melodramatic codes comprise a shared language, but one which functions to the detriment of poor and negatively racialized men. Under neoliberalism and the state's established regime of cultural nationalism, melodramatic language

forms a key component of a coercive system through which impoverished males are exploited and controlled. The confluence of violence and subjugation within the Mexican state and neoliberal politics impedes the formation of a collective voice, which the film implicitly posits as necessary to begin challenging oppression.

The analysis of Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza* that comprises my third chapter focuses on the mortification of bodies through the masculinist ethics of globalization. I sustain that the effects of the gendered systems of politics and morality of global capitalism on territories marked by the colonial difference manifest themselves as violent practices of expulsion and elimination. My reading shows that in this dystopian text, the rhetoric and discourses of nation and citizenship have been suspended in order to explore possibilities for the formation of communal relationships beyond the narratives promoted by the state, and in an environment of precarity and death. In assembling an experimental community of terminally ill men in his salon, the biologically male transvestite narrator actively and consciously performs a transgendered politics grounded in an ethics of care. Yet, I contend, his efforts to subvert the systemic conditions of oppression and suffering are inherently limited by an inability to transcend the gendered parameters of morality in his relations with others. This failure to create a self-determining community through a feminized ethical turn reveals how non-European bodies are fundamentally excluded from the gender politics that establishes a categorical distinction between masculine morality and feminine ethics of care. I hold that this exclusion promotes the politics of death and annihilation that define the effects of globalization in non-Western territories.

The fourth and final chapter discusses the articulation of new Mexican masculinities linked to the politics of globalization in *Y tu mamá también* (2001), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, and *Rudo y Cursi* (2008), directed by his brother Carlos Cuarón. By analyzing the genre

conventions of both films, the road movie and the sports parody, I argue that the participation of the films in a transnational cinema circuit facilitates the formation of global masculinities. Moreover, these two films examined side-by-side illustrate a correspondence between the disposability of Mexican bodies under globalized capitalism and the apparent success of narco models of masculinity. Among the new masculinities that the films delineate, organized crime is presented as a paradigm that successfully combines hegemonic gender codes configured by the ideology of *mexicanidad* with agency in a global network of power. However, other successful models of transnational masculinity are articulated as inherent to Western, white bodies, such as the male codes of a global spectator, and the star persona of the actors featured in both films: Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna.

1. MASCULINITY UNDER THE PARADIGM OF THE BORDER IN *DUELO POR MIGUEL PRUNEDA* AND *EL EJÉRCITO ILUMINADO* BY DAVID TOSCANA

1.1 Introduction

In Mexican author David Toscana's novel, *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* [*Mourning for Miguel Pruneda*], the title character points to the corpse of his neighbor José Viredagay, which is lying in a bathtub full of formaldehyde solution, and declares "Somos esa verguita arrugada caduca minúscula que ya no sirve ni para mear [We are that wrinkled, expired, miniscule little dick that can't even piss anymore]" (87). With these words, Pruneda defines himself, his neighbor, the citizens of Monterrey, and Mexican man in general. Within his assertion, Mexican identity is undifferentiated from masculinity, and by the same gesture, the link between the biologically male body and masculinity as a gender category is naturalized. Even more importantly, in this sentence Toscana confronts the reader with a Mexican male subject defined as impotent, useless, and obsolete, adjectives whose antonyms are crucial conceptual components of modern masculinity.

What seems to emerge from these associations between nation, masculinity, body, and history in Toscana's narratives of northern Mexico is a fundamental concern with re-examining their interrelationships from a de-centered perspective which challenges official discourses by putting forward an account of how spatial politics participate in the articulation of power, gender, and subjectivity. This is a conceptual thread which runs through Toscana's entire body of work. Along these lines, Miguel Rodríguez in his book, *El norte: Una experiencia contemporánea en la narrativa Mexicana* argues that in Toscana's fiction "lejos de acercarse a la historia oficial, los diferentes narradores de las novelas achican su visión para presentar elementos del imaginario social que se contraponen, a veces de manera irónica, a la visión centralista y nacionalista de la

historia [far from aligning themselves with official history, the narrators of the novels narrow their perspective in order to present elements of the social imaginary that are counterposed—sometimes ironically so—to the nationalist and centralist vision of history]” (72). Even though Rodríguez is referring to Toscana’s work published prior to 2002, the same set of relations between the social imaginary and official or centralized national history holds true for *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado* [*The Enlightened Army*]. The particular aspects of the social imaginary that are the focus of both novels have to do with historical events associated with the northern region of the country, namely, the defeat of Monterrey during the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-48 and the redrawing of the U.S.-Mexico border in 1848.

In these novels, Toscana articulates how this social imaginary is shaped by a paradigm of power, which I am calling the paradigm of the border, that configures the domination of space in terms of gender, creating implications for politics and subjectivity. My readings of Toscana’s *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado* are concerned with exploring the cultural imaginary that is formulated within the paradigm of the border. I look at how asymmetrical relations of power are intrinsically constituted in terms of space, gender (particularly masculinity), and politics (nation, state, the juridical order). Throughout my inquiry I concentrate on the masculine subject and on masculinity as a gender category.

One of the most significant ways in which Toscana’s work reveals the intricacy of the configurations of power that surround the characters is through the author’s use of the clichés of patriotism, masculinity, and modernity, which are found in all of the author’s novels but are especially prominent in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado*. The use of clichés in the novel functions as kind of colonial mimicry as defined by Homi Bhabha in “Of Mimicry

and Man.”⁵ In this article, Bhabha explains that the excess of mimicry emerges through a condition of ambivalence wherein individuals are comprised as “*subject[s] of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 86). In Toscana’s novel’s, this ambivalence is disclosed through clichés related to the politics of the paradigm of the border which lies at the center of his fiction. I suggest that it serves to delineate the position of the male characters as both excluded and colonized. This opens up another series of questions that I will be addressing throughout these pages: How does the network of power which has marginalized and colonized these men sustain—or fail to sustain—gender and subjectivity? How does the spatial politics inherent to the paradigm of the border accommodate itself to the global order of modernity/coloniality? How does this redefine the construction of gender and subjectivity?

I situate my analysis of Toscana’s *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado* within the context of the critical discussion concerning Toscana’s narratives in relation to space, as well as with the idea of failure. Examples of characters who struggle in vain to achieve masculine subjectivity appear even in one of Toscana’s earliest fictional works, *Las Bicicletas* (1992). Other texts whose principal narrative threads also connect to the exploration of this type of failure include *Santa María del circo* (1998), *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado* (2009).⁶ It has been generally recognized that failure is a recurrent theme throughout all of his publications, and for this reason, Toscana’s fiction has been labeled as “a literature of

⁵ Bhabha argues that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86).

⁶ In the novel *Las bicicletas* (1992) the character Sebastián Oribe lacks the part of his body that determines his maleness, which leads his son Julián to come up with the idea of murdering a priest in order to recover his masculine self, a scheme which he is unable to carry out. As a result, Julián is condemned always to be incomplete as a man, just like his father. Another example is presented in *Santa María del circo*, published in 1998. Hércules, the circus strongman, finds himself in physical decline. Not only does he fail to maintain the ideal male body, but this inadequacy drives him to take up the role of prostitute in the new community formed by the circus performers.

failure” in academic discussions.⁷ Other themes frequently noted by his critics include: space, the nation, the grotesque, humor, heroes, and the Mexican-American War (1846-48). Revising the label placed on Toscana’s oeuvre, I posit masculinity as a necessary complement to the notion of failure. Considering the growing critical bibliography on Toscana’s fiction and the wide range of themes that it spans, I will refer only to articles related specifically to *El ejército iluminado* and *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*.⁸

Mirian Pino’s article on *El ejército iluminado* explores the poetics of dispossession and failure in the northern region of Mexico and in its conflictual relations with the U.S. She concentrates on ideas of collective memory in connection to failure and argues that in the novel the desire to rewrite history fails in reality but is achieved through art and imagination. Even though a framework similar to Pino’s appears to be suggested in my exploration of Toscana’s novels—that is, in my focus on failure and the border as a site of conflict—my reading of *El ejército iluminado* and *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* is less optimistic. I find failure to be assumed and taken for granted, the purpose of both of these novels being precisely the exploration of this failure rather than an attempt to redeem it. However, throughout my reading I point to important differences among characters in their engagements with failure that emerge in their performances and understandings of politics, history, and revolution.

Taking a somewhat different perspective, Michael Abeyta in “El humor, la burla de la modernidad y la economía del libro en la narrativa de Toscana” pursues an exploration of the use of parody, irony, and humor in Toscana’s fiction, including *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado*. While I agree with Abeyta’s perspective on the critical dimension that parody

⁷ Toscana himself emphasizes his interest in this theme, for example, in an interview by Pablo Brescia and Scott Bennett. Furthermore, the interviewers make specific mention of failure as a recurring concern for Toscana in their introduction to the interview.

⁸ There have been at least two PhD theses, one MA thesis, and a plethora of articles written on Toscana’s fiction.

and humor take on in Toscana's narratives, his analysis does not proceed much farther than identifying examples of derisory elements in the texts, whereas I concentrate on forging an understanding of consequences and implications of these features in relation to the paradigm of the border. I also suggest that certain forms of parodic performance and mimicry articulate a discourse of political resistance.

Themes of resistance and struggle against exclusion and colonization are prominent in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado*. Both novels feature a male figure who engages in violence as part of a nationalist, anti-imperialist effort to recover the territory ceded to the U.S. in 1848. It is with this history of defeat in mind that José Viredagay kills an American professor in the city of Monterrey in 1956 in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*. Viredagay's neighbor, Miguel Pruneda, engages in his own struggle, but this one is aimed at reintegrating himself into a capitalist system from which he has been symbolically excluded, gesturing toward assimilation as a way of resisting economic failure. In *El ejército iluminado*, Matus, a history teacher and marathoner obsessed with the infamous war of 1848, forms an army of students with mental disabilities called "Los iluminados" (which can be translated as The Enlightened Ones). In the equally infamous year of 1968, the army of Iluminados and their general Matus, travel out of the city of Monterrey to a site they imagine to be the Alamo. The adventure ends, however, with the shooting of two Mexicans whom the Iluminados perceive as gringos.

My readings of both novels concentrate on the male characters. I am interested in looking at the links between their subjectivity and their subversive activities; that is, how does the configuration of their subjectivity shape their subversive ideologies and actions? How is failure framed within this problematic? How does gender, particularly masculinity, participate in their nationalist, anti-imperialist consciousness and praxis?

In contrast to these male figures, I suggest that the Iluminados as a group embody a different kind of resistance, one that is marked by the lack of a stable identity. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I explore comparisons between the different resistances in Toscana's fiction as they are framed by the paradigm of the border, masculinity, subjectivity, and the ambivalence produced by mimicry.

1.2 The Gendered Paradigm of the Border

Anibal Quijano in "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America" argues that America was constituted as the first space/time of a new model of power. He identifies two historical processes as the fundamental axes of this model of power: race, and the control of labor through its resources and products (2-3), where the supposed biological difference between the conquistadors and the conquered justified the binary opposition of racial superiority/inferiority as well as its derivations (such as civilized/barbarian, rational/irrational, human/subhuman). Quijano is referring to a paradigm of power, which he calls the coloniality of power, that was comprised as a result of the conquest of America in the 1500s, and that continues to be at play, although in different forms, through modernity and globalization.

In Toscana's *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado* the hierarchical articulation of societies fueled by the coloniality of power is addressed, but the matrix of this exploration is not centered on the 1500s, but on 1848. In Toscana's fiction there are echoes of the model of power activated in 16th century, but they are filtered through the paradigm of the border. The difference is not only one of labeling the conquerors, Spaniards and Americans (gringos), but of geopolitics. To treat both conquests as though they were of the same order would be to conflate and homogenize divergent historical processes and heterogeneous practices of colonization, as well as to render opaque the operations they have performed upon bodies,

both living and dead. The defeat of Mexico in 1848 and the loss of roughly half of its territory with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo prompted significant political changes, particularly increased nation-building efforts and the constitution of 1857, as well as a more evident political and economic intervention of the U.S. in Mexico. Orienting his narratives against this well-documented historico-political background, Toscana engages in an exploration of the scope of the aftermath of the 1848 war in relation to gender, subjectivity, and resistance as they take shape in the northern territory of Mexico. His novels also map out the (dis)connections between the border territory, the Mexican nation, the U.S., and the larger Western network of power.

Toscana situates his narratives within this context by pointing to the historical imaginary specific to the northern region of Mexico in relation to 1848. A key instance of this occurs when the title character of *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* recalls the moment in his childhood when he first encounters two conflicting narratives of the Mexican-American war:

Miguel había visitado el Obispado con el grupo de la escuela. El maestro les pidió que observarían la fachada del edificio. Ahí siguen las huellas de las balas que dispararon los gringos hace más de cien años ... Miguel permaneció de brazos cruzados en la escalinata ¿Para qué tanto alboroto por una derrota?, preguntó. El maestro lo miró entre molesto e intrigado; no es normal esa pregunta en un niño de su edad ... En el autobús, ya de vuelta a la escuela ... el maestro se inclinó para susurrarme: porque lucharon como héroes, por eso. [Miguel had visited the Obispado with his school group. The teacher asked them to observe the facade of the building. There remained signs of the gringos' gunfire from more than one hundred years ago. ... Miguel stayed with his arms crossed. Why make such a fuss over a defeat? he asked. The teacher regarded him with a mixture of annoyance

and intrigue; such a question is not normal in a boy his age. ... On the bus heading back to school, the teaching leaned over to whisper something to me: because they fought like heroes, that's why.]" (81-82).

In the teacher's response, the men of Monterrey are defined as patriotic martyrs, whereas in Pruneda's question they are marked by failure. The teacher's answer is not really coming from his critical historical awareness, but rather, it is suggested, out of the imagery of collective memory. What is implied by the teacher's version of this history is that, having answered the call of patriotic duty, the heroic men are integrated into the Mexican imagined community. By contrast, the emphasis on defeat defines the inhabitants of Monterrey in terms of inferiority, abandoning them to a relation of exclusion from the Mexican nation.

Another element of the border imaginary is highlighted by Matus, the high school history teacher in *El ejército iluminado*. Matus obsessively reviews the war between Mexico and the U.S., to the point that the entire purpose of the class becomes to debate the following question: Which country does Texas belong to? In response to his students' lack of interest, one day Matus steps into the classroom and excoriates their lack of patriotic vigor:

vende patrias; los jóvenes de hoy nacen derrotados ... incapaces de tomar un rifle si no es de juguete ... Arechavaleta, se puso de pie y dijo que ... bien hubieran hecho en poner la frontera no en el río Bravo, sino más abajo, al sur de Monterrey, y así seríamos gringos y los sueldos se pagarían en dólares y... no continuó porque Matus lo tomó de una oreja y lo echó del salón

[you turncoats; the youth of today is born defeated. ... Incapable of picking up a rifle unless it's a toy. ... Arechavaleta stood up and said that ... it would have been better to have placed the border not at the Río Bravo, but further down instead,

south of Monterrey, and that way we would be gringos and salaries would be paid in dollars and... He didn't finish because Matus took him by the ear and dragged him out of the classroom]" (18).

Here, responsibility for the inception of the asymmetrical relations of power fueled by the paradigm of the border is understood to lie with the failed defenders of Monterrey. Matus's perspective thus diverges from that of Pruneda's teacher's official and centralized narrative on the history of Monterrey. The young men whom Matus addresses in his class refuse to confront the burden of this history and, from Matus's perspective, allow themselves to be defined by their cowardice. The students aspire to separate themselves from the aftermath of 1848 by praising progress and finding a model in the U.S., thus challenging Matus's revisionist historicism.

Toscana presents the imagery of the paradigm of the border in terms of failure, exclusion, and colonization. I suggest these aspects are problematized in their articulation through the discourse of gender. The paradigm of 1848 is portrayed as the integration of a tightly woven network wherein masculinity, the politics of war, militarism, heroism, and national identity are embedded. In this regard, Viredagay, the character in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* who, like Matus, embraces the rhetoric of nationalism, makes the following remarks: "Septiembre de 1846, como me hubiera gustado participar ... faltó que alguien dijera por aquí no pasan, alguien que organizara, alguien con los huevos medianamente puestos. Tomar una ciudad es mucho más complicado que defenderla ... Y sin embargo Monterrey ... ni tres días resistió [September 1846, how I would've liked to take part. ... We needed someone who could have said there's no getting by us, someone who could have organized, someone with a decent set of balls. ... And Monterrey didn't even hold out three days]" (Toscana 59).

By making reference to male genitalia, Viredagay establishes the lack of patriotism in the biologically male body. This is a body that, not having successfully and bravely defended the nation, comes to inhabit an inferior sexual identity. The relevance of pursuing military values for the body, gender, and sexuality arises from their proximity to masculinity. In this respect, Joel Nagel in “Nation” explains: “Terms like honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist because they seem so thoroughly tied to the nation and to manhood” (402). However, in Toscana’s fiction the poor patriotic performance of the male figures of the border points to a discrepancy between their biologically gendered body and the performance of their masculinity, thereby complicating the terms of their very subjectivity. Along these lines, Judith Butler states that performativity is sustained through a network of power that naturalizes sex/gender, and thus the gendered body becomes the site at which the subject is constituted (*Bodies that Matter* 7). However, as I have already explained, the lack of patriotism that has marked the bodies of the male figures under the border paradigm severs the link between male body and masculinity (as well as superiority), eliminating the possibility of their intelligibility with a network of power, such as that of the Mexican nation. The irrevocably subordinate and defeated figure of the male from the north of Mexico contrasts sharply with the national narrative, where men are firmly in control of power because—according to the national and official narrative of the history of Mexico—they have overcome colonialism and foreign incursions since 1810 and established authoritative foundational myths for themselves and the nation.

Subjectivity under the border paradigm is, then, configured through Toscana’s narrative as liminal. The effort to overcome this positionality is centered on masculinity, which represents the ideal through which the male figures of the north would be able to belong to the Mexican

nation and at the same time overcome the inferiority ascribed to them by their colonial condition. In this sense, through its bellicose language and symbolism, as well as its references to gender, the discourse of defending the nation also becomes one of defending both biological maleness and men's status as individual, abstract, juridical subjects. Even more importantly, this positions the constructed discourse of biologically determined (natural) masculinity as the core axis of the asymmetrical networks of power (superiority/inferiority) within the border paradigm.

1.3 The Masculine Politics of Resistance: “Mexicanos al Grito de Guerra” [“Mexicans at the Battle Cry”]

In both *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado*, the characters are embedded in networks of signs that mark the national norm, in other words, neither Pruneda, Viredagay, nor Matus are indigenous. After Mexican independence and throughout the history of nation building, indigenous people have been subjected to processes and structures of internal colonialism.⁹ As part of the same process, they have also been orientalized and excluded from Mexico's project of modernization.¹⁰ However, it is precisely on the grounds of that which the nation seeks to suppress, i.e. language and a different epistemology, that indigenous groups continue to resist internal colonization and globalization, their ultimate goal being to create a more inclusive and decolonized definition of the nation.

For the male characters in Toscana's fiction, resistance becomes a necessary means of establishing their own subjectivities. Notwithstanding their unmarked features and the fact that their native language is Spanish, which positions them as part of the national norm, their diminished masculinity and liminality impels them to seek out venues of resistance in response

⁹ I use the phrase “internal colonialism” as it has been defined by Pablo González Casanova in his well-known article, “Internal Colonialism and National Development.”

¹⁰ See Aída Hernández Castillo “Feminismos Poscoloniales: Reflexiones desde el Sur del Río Bravo” (2008).

to the lack of power privileges they experience. However, differently from the indigenous people, whose resistance points to a margin/center dichotomy, the particular problematic of the northern male figures comes from the politics of the paradigm of the border, that is, it raises questions of how to resist from a liminal position between two centers of power, and how to confront their exclusion from the Mexican nation and their colonization by the U.S.

In Toscana's fiction, the male characters take up one of two forms of resistance: either a nationalist anti-imperialism or a struggle against inferiority that strives toward the ideals of neoliberal subjecthood. What is common between them is violence. Theirs is a resistance that ignores the implicit or explicit violence committed against others: racially or ethnically marked men, indigenous people, and women. Moreover, the resistance of the northern man fails to achieve his integration into the national narrative, fails in subverting his colonization, fails to consolidate his masculinity, and succeeds not only in perpetuating a network of power fueled by violence, but also in increasing the use of violence as a necessary measure. Paradoxically, the male figures under the border paradigm are both agents and victims of violent oppression.

In *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, violence explicitly appears as justified within the national narrative. José Viredagay, embracing a form of nationalist anti-imperialism, resists the emasculation that is perpetuated by the US through industrialism and progress by killing a gringo. Viredagay justifies his act of murder by asserting that the inadequacy of the inhabitants of Monterrey in executing the defense of their city in 1848 has diminished their sovereignty. However, he admits that it has also played a role in developing the economy of Monterrey. Imperialism has constituted Monterrey as an industrial city, although at the cost of having to labor in exploitation and subordination to U.S. commercial interests. In this respect, Viredagay points out: "Esta ciudad que se quiere erigir como motivo de orgullo para la nación, en verdad

fue su ruina; por cobardía, por traición, por ineptitud. Y ahora todo lo quiere resolver diciéndose progresista, industrial, trabajadora” [This city that wants to set itself up as the pride of the nation, was in fact its downfall; by cowardice, by treachery, by ineptitude. And now it wants to fix everything by calling itself progressive, industrial, hardworking] (*Duelo* 58).

In an effort to reverse this narrative of failure and re-integrate the city of Monterrey into the nation, Viredagay encourages the men of Monterrey to participate in what he considers a patriotic and symbolic act: “Cada mexicano deb[e] eliminar a un gringo, al menos cada regiomontano ... y cada veintuno de abril ... [tiene] ... que ser la fecha oficial para hacerlo, remember San Jacinto, hijos de su puta madre” [Every Mexican man must eliminate a gringo, at least every man from Monterrey, and every April 21st will be the official date on which to carry it out, remember San Jacinto, you sons of bitches] (86). On April 21st, 1956, don José Viredagay murders a gringo: “Identifican cadaver en el Obispado ... Se trata de Danny Anderson, un norteamericano de cuarenta y cuatro años, profesor de la Universidad de Kansas, casado y con dos hijos... La víctima habría sido asesinada con un objeto punzocortante de suficiente longitud para atravesarle el cuerpo. Una espada” [At the Obispado, a body has been identified as Danny Anderson, a U.S. citizen, forty-four years of age, professor at the University of Kansas, married with two children ... The victim appears to have been killed with a sharp object long enough to pass through the body. A sword] (*Duelo* 72-73).

With this act of violence, Viredagay intends to assert his patriotic love for the nation. Violence becomes the entry point into the national imagined community and its network of power that makes biologically male bodies intelligible as subjects and transforms them into its agents. Moreover, by integrating his murder into a patriotic narrative, Viredagay attempts to define patriotic violence as the primary means of executing justice, in this case, by killing a

gringo. Viredagay hopes to serve as an example for his countrymen to follow, since the restoration of their status as juridical subjects would help to restore the city's lost sovereignty.

Similarly, enacting violence under the banner of the Mexican nation becomes the principle strategy employed by Matus in *El ejército iluminado* to overcome the internal colonization that blinds the young people of Monterrey. Matus explains the source of his nationalist ideology in the following conversation with the principal of the high school where he teaches: “El director se pone de pie ... Sus ideas no van con los tiempos, no es correcto despertar a los alumnos inclinaciones a la violencia. No son mis ideas, dice Matus, están en el himno nacional, cada lunes les hacemos jurar que son soldados prestos a luchar contra el enemigo, yo lo único que les pido es que cumplan con su palabra” [The principal stands up ... Your ideas are outdated, it's not right to encourage the students to commit violence. They aren't my ideas, says Matus, they're in the national anthem, every Monday we make them swear they are soldiers ready to combat the enemy, the only thing I'm asking them to do is keep their word] (*Ejército* 24-25).

Matus fulfills his patriotic duty to the nation by forming an army comprised mainly of people with mental disabilities, known as “Iluminados,” with the purpose of marching to the Alamo to recuperate Texas for Mexico. The formation of this narrative also involves defining the role of women, as illustrated in the following question that the mother of Cerillo, an “Iluminado”, poses to Matus: “¿usted puede convertirmelo en un héroe?” [Can you turn him into a hero for me?] (*Ejército* 43). With this request, and also by instructing Matus to tell Cerillo that the gringos have abducted her, she positions herself in alignment with the official gender narrative of the Mexican nation. She calls for a biological defense of the national land,

promoting the ideology where every son is also a soldier, and mothers are the progenitors of citizens, morality, and patriotism.

Thus, Viredagay and Matus pursue a nationalist anti-imperialist resistance against colonization and exclusion through the enactment of national and patriotic ideologies, including the traditional roles that the nation has assigned to women. With these actions, they intend to alter the pedagogical element of national narratives that Homi Bhabha has identified. In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Nation,” Bhabha employs the notion of pedagogy in describing the temporal aspect of the production of the nation as narration, where past progress is fraught with atavistic apologies. The other element that participates in national narration is the performative. With this term, Bhabha describes the repetition of the national essence as that which comprises the identity of a community, and that makes it discernible from others.¹¹

With the intention of subverting the history of Monterrey that has given place to the exclusion and colonization of its inhabitants, Matus and Viredagay enact national clichés that compose the pedagogical and performative aspects of the nation’s narration. Masculinity appears imbricated in this process and it is presented as necessary for the national narrative to continue and progress. The pervasiveness of gender discourses in the nation and state sovereignty in Mexico can be traced to the formation of both.

In this regard, Robert Irwin argues in *Mexican Masculinities* that during Mexico’s national formation the imperative was to assert a masculine identity. Irwin explains that “Mexico could not regress to its colonial status as subjugated, morally and physically weak, even effeminate territory. In fact, there was a struggle throughout the nineteenth century to assert and

¹¹ See Homi Bhabha “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation” (1990).

sustain, through literature, an image of Mexico as virile” (1-2). Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba, in *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity*, not only agrees with Irwin but also points out how the assertion of Mexico’s virility has been expressed through different venues throughout the history of the nation. Domínguez Ruvalcaba further explains that masculinity as a thematic axis in Mexican culture posits male virility as the central organizing principle of Mexican society and history: “this is a gregarious world and a highly systematic structure that proposes a society organized to promote history as a male-centered narrative” (77).

The politics of masculinity continue to be at play under a globalized capitalist system. In this regard, Michael S. Kimmel asserts that,

although they appear to be gender-neutral, the institutional arrangements of [today’s] global society are equally gendered. The marketplace, multinational corporations and transnational geopolitical institutions (World Court, United Nations, EU) and their attendant ideological principles (economic rationality, liberal individualism) express a gendered logic. The ‘increasingly unregulated power of transnational corporations places strategic power in the hands of particular groups of men,’ while the language of globalization reminds gender neutral so that ‘the individual’ of neoliberal theory has in general the attributes and interests of a male entrepreneur (197).

It is in this context that some of the male figures in Toscana’s novels try to assimilate into the politics of capitalism as dictated by the U.S. in order to overcome their inferior masculinity.

Through the figures of Hugo Irbagoyen in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and Arechavaleta in *El ejército iluminado*, young people are presented as struggling for integration into the politics and ideology of neoliberalism and neo-imperialism. These two characters not only firmly adhere

to the logic of modernization and industrialization in their pursuit of professional status – Hugo is an engineer, while Arechavaleta becomes the manager of a textile factory – but also, in the case of Arechavaleta, by persuading his children to study English instead of French (Toscana *El ejército* 144), and in the case of Hugo by wearing a suit even when the weather is extremely hot (Toscana *Duelo* 18). In their performance of the codes that are promoted by the imaginary of imperialism in the border region, materialized in professional discipline, language, and attire, Hugo and Arechavaleta blindly believe in their validation as modern masculine subjects.

In contrast with these two characters, Miguel Pruneda, who also works for a corporation, confronts a growing consciousness of his internalized sense of inferiority. In this sense, Pruneda prefigures the fatal future of the young Hugo and Arechavaleta. Pruneda begins to perceive his own inferiority when he finds out that his boss has decided to recognize Pruneda's devotion to his job with a commemoration ceremony. His thirty years of salaried service are condensed into the following list of clichés: “lealtad [...] calidad, esfuerzo” [loyalty ... quality, effort] (Toscana 12). This ensemble of labels could be applied in almost any labor context, that is to say, they point to attributes that could describe almost anyone's work performance. Moreover, the nouns lack any sense of progression, intellect, or growth, and instead indicate repetitive and menial forms of labor.

Interestingly, the sense of inferiority that Pruneda begins to acknowledge resembles the aftereffects of the introduction of NAFTA in Mexico. James Cypher and Raúl Delgado examine the formation process of economic alliances between Mexico and the U.S. during the 90s by looking at the distribution of labor in Mexico. They point out that after the signing of NAFTA, Mexico officially entered into the global economy, and that this was followed by the creation of asymmetrical labor relations. They emphasize that in Mexico employment of professional labor,

including skilled and technical workers, is kept to a bare minimum, justifying in this way the discrepancy between the much higher U.S. salaries compared to those of Mexicans.

The subordinate and inferior participation of Mexico in the global and transnational economy is exemplified in Toscana's fiction in the figure of Miguel Pruneda, where the performance of menial labor not only dehumanizes him, but throws into question his gender privileges, and his very masculinity.

Pruneda tries to overcome this through assimilation to the colonizer. He embraces neo-imperialism as a way of resisting his categorization as sub-human and unmasculine. Pruneda thus aims to achieve recognition, validation, and individuality from the norm that is delineated by the U.S. imaginary in the north of Mexico. With this goal in mind, Pruneda tries to improve his physical appearance. He starts his training by following an exercise routine detailed in a pamphlet that he bought when he was about twenty years old. The mechanical repetition of exercises is different from that of his tasks at work because it is aimed at dominating the body. According to Victor Seidler in *Discovery Masculinities*, from a masculinist and capitalist perspective "the body is to be used as an instrument to serve our ends" (65). Seidler explains that this understanding of the body is linked to the Cartesian conceptualization of the body as a machine dominated by reason. Thus, through the assertion of reason, Pruneda aims to validate his subjectivity in a modern and capitalist network of power. The exercise pamphlet also offers Pruneda the path to unity between body and reason that coincides with the dominant logic within U.S. neo-imperialism. In this regard, Abeyta explains that in the pamphlet there is a cult of youthfulness that is in accord with modern and capitalist ideals, a fetishism central to mainstream U.S. culture (423). However, all of the projects of resistance that the characters of Toscana

embark upon are condemned to failure due to the unquestioned centrality of masculinity in this process.

As I have been framing it here, the question of masculinity is a focal point in Toscana's texts because of its fundamental connections with subjectivity, nationalism, neoliberalism, transnational economy, globalization, and imperialism. This account of masculinity is similar to that conceptualized by Seidler, who argues that masculinity has invisibly permeated Western thought, to such an extent that the identification of masculinity with reason and morality as an historical legacy acts as a catalyst for modernity (2-3). Contesting colonization with the values of masculinity maintains an identification with the norms that make the Mexican subject intelligible, but also, as Cypher and Delgado explain, with the norms that position the Mexican nation in a different temporality, one that situates Mexico always behind the progress of countries like the U.S. Thus, the modes of male resistance that, as portrayed in Toscana's novels, are complicit with the hegemonic conceptions of masculinity are condemned to the politics of perpetual failure.

1.4 The Failure of Masculinity

With the purpose of articulating a renewed national myth, one coming from the north of Mexico and one that establishes the roots of the nation in the second colonization (1848), that is, a national myth that liberates Mexico from U.S. imperialism, Viredagay posits himself as a model of the national hero. After killing the American professor, Viredagay is not arrested, but rather, responding to calls of justice coming from the U.S., the government of Monterrey arrests a random working-class man and puts him in jail for the crime. From Viredagay's perspective, the quick response of the justice system in Monterrey is another example of the north's loss of sovereignty under colonization, or in his own words: "la voluntad de esta ciudad por servir a los

gringos, ¿quiere un culpable, señor consul?, aquí lo tiene. Oh gracias, mucho bueno tener culpable? [Sic]” [The willingness of this city to serve the gringos. Would you like a culprit Mr. Consul? Here you are. Oh thank you. Very good to have a culprit] (*Duelo* 87).

Viredagay believes that this act of killing a gringo is heroic. However, not having been acknowledged as an official hero of Monterrey and of the Mexican nation, Viredagay asks his neighbor Horacio to preserve his body after his death. The act of preservation is intended to function as physical proof of Viredagay’s bravery. His idea is to convert his body into a sort of monument that would remind coming generations of the importance of killing gringos. This is how Viredagay’s corpse ends up submerged in formaldehyde solution in the bathtub of his apartment. In order to complement the national myth, Miguel Pruneda leaves a bag full of bones next to Viredagay’s bathtub and declares: “De acuerdo, hay que celebrar a don José, pero también a otros héroes que lucharon sin posibilidad de victoria. ... He aquí ... los restos de una quinceañera que nunca volvió a casa porque cayó en manos de la lasciva, en manos de alguien que canjeó su existencia por unos minutos de placer” [I agree that we should celebrate don José, but we should also honor other heroes who fought without any chance of victory. ... I have here the remains of a fifteen-year-old girl who never returned home as she fell into the lustful hands of someone who traded her existence for a few minutes of pleasure] (*Duelo* 163).

Pruneda invents this tale, the story of Irenita, after discovering a garbage bag full of bones in the city cemetery. Including Irenita in the renewed national myth aims to liberate the men of Monterrey from the memory of their role as those who fought against the enemy but ultimately failed. This inferior position of unsuccessful resistance is now reserved for women, while men stand as the ones who commit violence, like Viredagay and the gringos. In addition, this role keeps women within the binary male/female, where they occupy an inferior and

subordinate position. Moreover, through Pruneda's construction of Irenita – he assigns her a name, a history, and an identity – women are conceived as lacking independent subjectivity and agency.

The similarity between the renewed national myth as comprised in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and the official one, originating at the center, lies in the binary relation of male/female. Notwithstanding its proximity to the discursive axes that constitute the Mexican national myth, the one from the north reveals a difference. Viredagay's body and the bag full of bones are not only placed into an abject space, the bathroom, but their material existence is also made abject since the body of the hero who purports to represent a truly sovereign and masculine nation, is a discomposing corpse, and the “motherland” has been reduced to bones.¹²

For Julia Kristeva, the abject forms an integral part of the symbolic order, and yet, at the same time, it is also exiled and excluded from that order. Accordingly, the abject holds significance only in relation to that system of meaning through which it is defined by its exclusion (*Poderes de la perversión* 8). The exclusion of abject men and women under the paradigm of the border necessarily stands in relation to the sustained sexuality and subjectivity of the men and women that belong to the national norm and inhabit the center of power of the Mexican nation.

The male figures in the northern territory of Mexico who occupy an abject position represent that necessary exclusion which forms the masculine subjects of the norm, the male citizens of the Mexican nation. Under the paradigm of the border, these abject male figures are identified by their colonizers, the U.S., as lacking individuality, that is to say, as inferior human beings. This is depicted in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and also in *El ejército iluminado* when

¹² Fatherland is the direct translation of the Spanish word *patria*, a feminine noun. But “motherland” seems to work better in relation to Toscana's narrative.

Matus and Pruneda show awareness of being perceived by gringos as “el imbécil mexicano” (*Ejército* 203) or as “bárbaros” (*Duelo* 172).

It is through affirmation the barbarism of the male figures under the paradigm of the border that U.S. neocolonialism establishes the hegemonic rhetoric of ethics, and validates intervention to restore justice in the “barbarian territory” of northern Mexico, as when the U.S. Consul demands a culprit, ignoring Monterrey’s sovereignty. Moreover, the perception of the border territory as barbarian cannot but recall the nineteenth century discussion in Latin America on the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism. In this binary opposition, civilization is constructed in terms of nation building, sovereignty, and masculinity, and it marks the way to overcome barbarism. In Toscana’s narrative, it is precisely this inclusion within a framework of nation, sovereignty, and masculinity that is denied to the northern territory of Mexico, as well as its inhabitants.

In this barbarian/liminal/abject space under the border paradigm, violence is accentuated and modernity is represented as an unstoppable train that kills with impunity and that indisputably overpowers any form of resistance. For those who live under the paradigm of the border, modernity also disrupts and precludes all attempts to perform masculinity, either by acts of “heroism” or with dominance of the body through reason. In *El ejército iluminado*, Matus intends to overcome colonization and his inferior masculinity by running a marathon. The association of the marathon runner with masculinity, war, conquest, and modernity comes from a legend formed around the Battle of the Marathon in Greece (490 BC). This event has been codified as a decisive moment in the foundation of Western culture, since the Greeks defeated the Persians and stopped their invasion. According to the legend, the Athenian courier Phidippides ran between Sparta and Athens to warn about the approaching Persian forces, and

then from Marathon to Athens in full armor (a distance of 26 miles) to carry the news of the victory. Phidippides is said to have died of exhaustion after screaming: Rejoice (Nike)! We conquered!

In *El ejército iluminado*, Matus, wearing combat boots, runs a marathon in Monterrey simultaneously with the Olympic marathon taking place in Mexico City in the summer of 1968. Matus's objective is to achieve a double conquest: to finish the marathon, and to cross at the finish line that he defined as “esa frontera inalcanzable, absurda, y eternal ... el río Bravo” [that unreachable, absurd, and eternal border ... the Rio Bravo] (*Ejército* 223). Instead, he collides with a fast-moving train, which dismembers his body: “En las vías del tren, a unos pasos de ellos, yace un cuerpo cortado en tres o cuatro partes” [On the train tracks, a short distance away from them, lies a body cut into three or four pieces] (*Ejército* 10).

In this way, Matus defines the border not in geographical terms but as an unstable line that separates the national norm from the excluded, the colonizer from the colonized. The abject, barbarian bodies and beings that are placed on the inferior side of the border are defined as exploitable and disposable. This border, however, is also revealed as porous and malleable. This becomes apparent through Matus's statements on the place that the Mexican nation occupies within the modern network of power, as when he comments on the participation of Mexico in the Olympic games of 1968: “Como de costumbre, los gringos van a arrollar a sus rivales y de Nuevo harán ondear su bandera en la capital mexicana, igual que lo hizo su ejército en 1848 ... y los demás países habrán de conformarse con sitios del segundo para abajo, y México más en el fondo, allá donde se reparten las migajas” [Following custom, the gringos are going to crush their rivals and once again wave their flag in the Mexican capital, just as their army did in 1848

... and all the rest of the countries will have to be content with second place or less, and Mexico even further down, where they toss the scraps] (*Ejército* 35-36).

The border of the Mexican nation does not work to maintain sovereignty and masculinity, but to situate Mexico politically as an inferior, feminized country within the order of U.S. neo-imperialism. This inferiority positions Mexico at the bottom of the hierarchy of modern politics and economics, making it hard to locate when viewed from a superior perspective, as is suggested by the description of Matus from a European (French) point of view: “ese salvaje antillano o centroamericano o caribeño o dónde diablos queda México” [that damned savage Antillean, or Central American, or Caribbean, or wherever the hell Mexico is] (*Ejército* 50).

Mexico, then, is located in that unmapable space where civilization has not developed to the point of erasing the savage—it is an underdeveloped nation state outside the civilized space defined by its European and North American counterparts. This order is articulated in Toscana’s narrative as inherently linked to 1848. History, from this point of view, not only subverts national values and independence, but serves to accentuate the neocolonial hierarchy into which the nation is configured.

Within this framework, recovering masculinity would not be the means to achieve independence, but to rather perpetuate inferiorization, subordination, dependency, and violence. The Mexican male subject that emerges cannot but be a diminutive, ludicrous version of the modern male as comprised by Western networks of power (the U.S. and Europe). From this perspective, Viredagay’s and Matus’s deaths are symbols of the failure of masculinity, of the nation’s independence, and of its discourse of civilization and modernization.

Miguel Pruneda finds physical proof of the failure of masculinity in the diminutive genitals of Viredagay’s corpse. He also offers another reading of Viredagay’s actions, and

instead of considering him a hero, Pruneda exclaims the following: “Su valor radica ... en su pequeñez, en que demostró la inutilidad de todo, luchar o no luchar da lo mismo” [His courage stems from his small size, from the way he showed us the futility of everything, to fight or not to fight, it’s all the same] (87). With these words, Pruneda pessimistically expresses the failure of both masculinity and the biologically male body of the north of Mexico. By accepting the failure of masculinity, Pruneda reveals that he has gained a melancholic double consciousness. That is to say, he knows that his body as well as his gender identity are considered inferior, however, instead of continuing to look for paths of resistance, he accepts his failure. In this sense, Pruneda abides the networks that orchestrate the uneven transnational relationships of power rooted in the politics of masculinity that keep him in a position of inferiority.

As a possible alternative to this mournful perspective, the title of the novel, *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, could suggest a duel, where what has to be challenged are the entrenched practices of resistance based on conventional masculinity, but also the passivity and domestication that are always products of melancholic double consciousness. By disclosing the complex interrelations between gender binaries, the nation-state, and Western networks of power, Toscana’s narrative presents the possibility that the double sightedness resulting from double consciousness could lead the masculine figures of the north to engage in modes of resistance that escape from the axis of masculinity, or, in other words, to begin to conceive a decolonization of the border paradigm.

1.5 The Enlightened Resistance

While in his earlier novel, *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, Toscana explores the politics of resistance by looking at the binary structure of discourses of power, in *El ejército iluminado*

(2006), he examines a potential alternative mode of challenging neocoloniality through the non-essentialist resistance of the Iluminados.

In *El ejército iluminado*, Matus places himself at the head of an “army” formed by people with mental disabilities. As their leader, he trains them and introduces them to the values and mechanisms of the military as a national institution. However, the discipline and order of the army is quickly subverted by the disorder that results from the Iluminados’ attempts to realize the concept.

The Iluminados not only inscribe themselves into the institutions of the army by acting upon Matus’s words, but also by enacting clichés drawn from various divergent sources. As Abeyta points out, “muchas veces las nociones que tienen los iluminados sobre la guerra, la aventura y la ciencia militar las aprendieron de Matus, pero también de fórmulas y lugares comunes del cine y de la leyenda popular” [The ideas that the Iluminados have about warfare, adventure, and military tactics are often those they learned from Matus, but they are also informed by formulas and clichés from cinema and popular legend] (432). By not making hierarchical distinctions between the systems of meaning from which they draw military and nationalist clichés, the Iluminados point to their own lack of awareness regarding the politics that define those same hierarchies. Furthermore, the ease with which they stray from hegemonic discourses signals their detachment from the broader networks of meaning that grant those discourses the power of subjectification. Matus seems to be blind to the fact that the Iluminados’ lack of access to subjectivity and citizenship within the nation is precisely what allows them to participate (albeit ineffectively) in the project of recuperating the territory that Mexico lost in 1848.

Matus's insistence on his army's fidelity to patriotic male codes of behavior is what causes him to overlook the contradictions of these discourses that are disclosed by the Iluminados's ludic use of them. When Azucena, the only Iluminada, determines that she would make a suitable soldier after making a conceptual link between her biologically female body and Matus's military rhetoric of bravery, Matus himself overlooks the inherent contradiction between the Mexican patriotic discourse that establishes a natural link between biologically male bodies and nationalism: "Azucena va hacia [Matus] y lo toma del brazo. Si todos vamos dispuestos a derramar nuestra sangre, qué mejor que alguien instruida para derramarla cada mes. Matus respira profundamente, se siente feliz, eso es lo que necesita: gente decidida, con agallas, muy distinta a sus maricones alumnos que lo acusan con sus padres." [Azucena walks toward Matus and takes him by the arm. If we're all ready to shed our blood, who better than someone taught to shed it every month. Matus breathes deeply, feeling pleased, that's just what is needed: resolute people, with guts, totally different from those pansy students who report him to their parents] (*Ejército* 61).

Azucena reasons that to be a brave soldier means to symbolically realize the patriotic clichés woven into military and nationalist discourses and the links between body and performance. Matus, however, remains blind to the inherent contradiction between body and performance as disclosed by Azucena's logic, and he laments how his male students perform an inferior masculinity since they are not brave enough to reclaim their nation's lost territory, and with it, their sovereignty and masculinity. Matus's obsession with militaristic and patriotic male discourses draws him unknowingly into even more contradictions. Even though Matus accepts Azucena as part of his army, he does not consider her a full soldier because of her female body. Consequently, Azucena is excluded from going into the brothel where Matus takes the rest of the

male Iluminados. According to Matus, soldiers since Roman times have followed the tradition of leaving their womenfolk behind and satisfying their sexual needs elsewhere during a military campaign (83-84).

The difference between Matus and the Iluminados in terms of their usage and understanding of patriotic clichés lies in the correspondence, or lack of it, between body, discourse, and performance. Whereas for Matus, the biologically masculine body has to enact clichés, that is to say, it has to perform under the codes of Mexican patriotism in order to be a *real* male, the Iluminados show that the enactment of nationalist and gender clichés coming from hegemonic discourse consists of maintaining its internal logic in order to avoid disclosing its inherent paradoxes.

The Iluminados' ludic relationship to languages and discourses, and their ignorance of the political significance and effects of the words they quote is what permits the tangled threads of militaristic and nationalistic discourses to be exposed in their arbitrariness. At the end of their journey, the Iluminados arrive at what they believe to be the Alamo when they come across a structure that fits the description given to them by Matus: "una antigua casona de adobe, algo derruida por los años" [a big old adobe house, a little run down by the years] (110). Likewise, having absorbed the fact that the U.S. and Mexico are divided by a river, they believe themselves to be in enemy territory after crossing over a small stream. Once they have geographically established the border that divides the two nations, they engage in combat and fire their weapons at a pair of men sitting outside the house under the shade of a tree. Fat Comodoro, one of the Iluminados, manages to hit one of the men and in order to ensure that he is dead, Comodoro and Azucena venture outside of the Alamo. When they return, the following conversation takes place between them and Ubaldo, another of the Iluminados:

¿Qué ocurre?, los recibe Ubaldo en la puerta. Está herido, responde Azucena, y nos pidió agua ... Un momento, recapacita Ubaldo, ¿cómo saben que el desgraciado pidió agua? Porque se pasa repitiendo esa palabra. Entonces hay que consultar el diccionario, recuerden que él habla un dialecto ignoto ... ¿Están seguros de que no dijo egua, ogua? Pronunció muy claramente, afirma Azucena. Ubaldo resopla y comienza a buscar de nuevo, mas en cierto punto está seguro de que no hallará la palabra y opta por el engaño. Aquí está, dice, golpeando a media página con el índice, agua, agua, expresión insultativa de los países nórdicos que significa maldito gordo bastardo (Toscana 158-159).

[What happened? Asked Ubaldo as he met them at the door. He's hurt, replied Azucena, and he asked us for some water ... Wait a minute, said Ubaldo, rethinking the situation, how do you know that poor bastard asked for water? Because he kept repeating that word. Well then, we have to consult the dictionary, since, as you remember, he speaks an unknown dialect. Are you sure he didn't say weter, or woter? He spoke very clearly, Azucena affirmed. Ubaldo sighed and once again started to look in the dictionary, but at a certain point he was sure he wouldn't find the word and opted for deception. Here it is, he said, banging the middle of the page with his forefinger, water, water, derisive expression of Nordic countries meaning damned fat bastard].

This mistaken shooting of a Mexican rather than a gringo signals the discordant relationship between patriotic discourse and geography (national space). At the same time, it reveals the fallacy of national borders as the marker of sovereignty, as well as the fallacy of language as mode of establishing a distinction between national territories. Most importantly, the Iluminados'

error discloses the arbitrariness of patriotic discourse, borders and language. They unknowingly point to the absence of a stable referent in the ideology of nationalism, illustrating its lack of coherence and intrinsic paradoxes.

The Iluminados' adventure suggests that enacting masculine values dictated by the Mexican state is not sufficient to transform male bodies into subjects with the agency to re-write national history. The ease with which the Iluminados adapt the referent of patriotic and gender clichés, as well as their lack of hierarchical awareness when performing roles, signals their detachment from the discourses' capacity for subjectification. The fact that they cannot be subsumed into projects of resistance in any significant way reveals that resistance needs to be validated by the state and its discourses in order to be meaningfully defined.

1.6 Conclusion: Fat Comodoro as the History of Mexico

The failure of the soldiers under Matus's command lies on their incapacity to recognize themselves as subjugated beings. According to Matus, a lack of colonial consciousness is what allows the networks of power activated by the border paradigm to define his students as well as the Iluminados as inferior beings. When it comes to the Iluminados, their inferiority has been established through hegemonic ideas that run through the national education system, as illustrated in the following dialogue between Matus and Fat Comodoro:

Tienes que hacer ejercicio, dice Matus, o acabarás por reventar. Cuando yo tenía tu edad... Ya escuché ese cuento muchas veces, interrumpe Comodoro, pero la maestra nos dijo que jamás nadie tuvo nuestra edad, que la nuestra es otra edad, otro tiempo que sólo compartimos los iluminados. Así que no vuelva a recitarme lo que hizo de joven ni a decirme imbécil como anoche" [You have to exercise, said Matus, or you'll end up bursting. When I was your age ... I already heard that

story many times, interrupted Comodoro, but the teacher told us that nobody has ever been our age, that ours is another age, another time that only we Iluminados share. So don't go back to repeating what you did when you were young, and don't call me an imbecile like last night] (Toscana *El ejército* 16).

Comodoro knows that he cannot really be defined as an imbecile because in order to sustain such an identity, a subject needs to be embedded in a system of power that preserves him/her as such over time. Instead, the Iluminados are excluded from time, which prevents them from becoming modern subjects, since progressive and linear time is inherent to modernity. Thus, the Iluminados's exclusion is officially validated on the basis of their supposed biological inferiority. This puts them at the same level of Matus's students whose failure perform as brave patriotic males, according to Matus, equates to a biologically inferior male body. It is in this vein that Matus recognizes Fat Comodoro as the embodiment of the history of Mexico. This narrative of inferiority is what, for Matus, has defined the nation's historical essence. In this sense, Matus describes the history of Mexico enacted by Comodoro as the history that has embedded bodies in a narrative of subhuman inferiority:

El presente jamás da sustancia ni grandeza. El presente le parece simple y banal. ... El presente minimiza, puesto que ... los muchachos no se enlistan en el ejército porque mañana tienen examen de geografía ... La exigencia del presente nada tiene que ver con la historia, se dice Matus, y el gordo Comodoro es la historia de México en cuatro tomos, desde la caída de Technotitlán hasta nuestros días.

[The present provides neither substance nor grandeur. The present appears to him both simple and banal. ... The present makes you small, given that ... the young

men don't enlist in the army because tomorrow they have an exam in geography ... The demands of the present have nothing to do with history, Matus said to himself, and Fat Comodoro is the history of Mexico in four volumes, from the fall of Tenochtitlan up to the present day] (Toscana *El ejército* 201).

According to Matus's point of view, Fat Comodoro embodies the myriad contradictions that have imbued Mexican males: their adherence to a national narratives that determine that same biologically masculine body and figure as inferior. In this way, Matus emphasizes that Mexican history has developed as a discourse that constantly tries to negate the biological inferiority of its men. Comodoro's body as the history of Mexico in four volumes suggests the different gender discourses through which subjectivity has been constructed throughout the formation of the nation. This history is suggested to have begun with the arrival of the Spaniards (the fall of Teonochtitlan), where the debate on whether or not the indigenous were human was crucial in terms of subjectivity and gender. It is well known that the indigenous were granted the status of "human" only after the imposition of Catholicism and its Christian terms of subjectivity. And from that point on, the set of discourses that have prevailed through the history of Mexico as a way of overcoming a colonial subjectivity has been written in terms of maleness, independence, nationalism, modernity, and capitalism. That is to say, it has developed under the paradigm of western masculinity.

The male nationalist discourses in Toscana's novels are oppressive because they are imposed as discourses of subjectivity, but are impossible to attain. Toscana suggests that the history of the Mexican male subject embodied in the figure of Comodoro is one of failure since Comodoro died fighting in name of the national model of masculinity.

Through the use of clichés, Toscana reveals the oppressive and deceptive aspect of male discourses in Mexico, specifically along the northern border. Toscana's recourse to clichés is the main element that composes resistance – and failure – in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado*. In Toscana's works, the male characters imitate closely—at times verbatim—masculine, patriotic and imperialistic clichés. However, within the border paradigm the male figures' attempts to achieve a masculine identity are illusory. These characters draw their clichés from systems of meaning that are set up to dehumanize them. Thus, through their emulation of clichés, similarity is reduced to difference.

The emphasis on difference does not mean that these characters' performances are parodies. Parody, according to Hutcheon, suggests an intention to distinguish itself from the parodied text or system of meaning. Hutcheon defines parody as a “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (6). The involuntary critical distance that the performance of clichés produces in Toscana's narrative should not be confused with parody, especially its postmodern version. For this reason, the critique that the performance of clichés exposes is not an ironic inversion of the text parodied. Through the performance of clichés enacted by the masculine figures of the north, there appears a distorted reflection signaled as difference. This difference, as Homi Bhabha points out, describes that which “is almost the same, but not quite,” as well as being “partial” and “incomplete” (“Of Mimicry and Man” 127). This is a difference, then, that points back to the system of meaning from which the clichés are drawn, that is to say, to Mexican national ideology. As masculinity and nationality are discourses that have been articulated as natural, this pointing back is crucial because the difference signals a natural inferiority.

In conclusion, the novels of Toscana reveal resistance to colonization and exclusion as comprised by the border paradigm, as a resistance to the western network of power that acts as an oppressive model of subjectification. Through the male character of *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* and *El ejército iluminado*, Matus, Viredagay and Pruneda, Toscana posits that the normative discourse of masculinity as a way of resisting the western networks of power is not effective. In the same manner, in *El ejército iluminado* Toscana reveals that a resistance that is not validated by the state would be a failure. By disclosing the way in which subjectivity, gender, and politics are articulated within the border paradigm through the use of clichés and the intrinsic role of masculinity, and also by exploring paths of resistance to a history of discursively naturalized inferiority, Toscana's novels open up more questions. How would it be possible to resist asymmetrical networks of power and the history of naturalized inferiority? And how to do it without relying on, perpetuating, or imitating a definition of subjecthood and politics where masculinity is central in the system of meaning that comprises the border paradigm?

2. THE MELODRAMATIC CONTRADICTIONS OF BROWN MALE BODIES IN CARLOS REYGADAS'S *BATTLE IN HEAVEN*

2.1 Introduction: The Meanings of Melodrama

The clichés in Toscana's narratives, especially in *El ejército iluminado* and in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, reveal a discrepancy between nationalist, patriotic, masculine ideals and the grotesque and incomplete interpretations that the characters make of these celebrated values. This difference, or inadequate emulation, corresponds to the generalized failure of masculine subjects within the border paradigm and especially to the ineffectual attempt to articulate a contemporary narrative of resistance to both the Mexican nation and U.S. colonization.

The male characters' inability to embody the nation's codified models of gender identity prompts a critique of the foundations of the post-revolutionary Mexican state, specifically its coercive paradigm of hyper-masculinity. Toscana's characters engage in satirically fruitless efforts to follow the hegemonic version of maleness conceptualized from the center of the Mexican republic as the only viable means by which individuals may acquire visibility and status as citizen-subjects.

The particular social space of northern Mexico, where Toscana's narratives are set, is crucial in the configuration of asymmetrical networks of power activated through the border paradigm and the politics of perpetual masculine failure. However, the center of the Mexican republic is not exempt from these asymmetrical relations within the framework of gender and national narratives. In this chapter, through my reading of Carlos Reygadas's film *Battle in Heaven* (2005), I examine how masculinist national and patriotic politics sustain power dynamics that emanate from the center of the nation, Mexico City, in a globalized context.

Particularly, I look at the interactions of neoliberalism and *mexicanidad* as they configure the performance and subjectivity of the brown Mexican male body.

Battle in Heaven is composed of images of urban life in the sprawling metropolis of Mexico City. The most predominant visual motifs in the film include imagery of mobility and machinery, as exemplified in the shots of transportation systems, subway stations and trains, jammed expressways, and close-ups of engine parts. Rituals of nationhood and masculinity comprise another repeated motif, as we see formations of soldiers raising a huge Mexican flag, as well as televised soccer matches displaying the revelry of elated players and fans. A third recurring visual theme involves images associated with the Church, including shots of devoted pilgrims marching across the city, religious banners, and iconic portraits of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Jesus Christ. Taken together, these visible elements speak of the systems of power that organize daily life in Mexico City: modernity, the state, and religion. According to Ana López in her well-known essay, “Tears and Desire,” these are the three master narratives of Mexican society embedded in melodrama of Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema, which is usually defined as the period from about 1935 to 1955 (256).¹³ Mexican cinema of this era was an essential tool in forging an imagined national community as comprised by the post-revolutionary Mexican state, and it was particularly significant as a means for of disseminating modern hegemonic gender norms.

In accord with López’s schema, my reading of *Battle in Heaven* interprets the depiction of the characters, their quotidian experiences, gestures, corporal expressions, and spoken phrases as references to the formulas of Mexican melodramatic cinema. I posit that these melodramatic clichés in Reygadas’s film function as complex allusions to popular melodramas and their

¹³ López writes that “melodrama is deeply embedded in Mexican and Hispanic culture and intersects with the three master narratives of Mexican society: religion, nationalism and modernization” (256).

symbolic force which contributed greatly to the formation of masculine identity in Mexico. Reygadas engages with the legacy of maleness that can be traced to the melodramatic films of the Golden Age. As Sergio de la Mora argues, “cinema was instrumental in the invention of the Mexican macho: virile, brave, proud, sexually potent, and physically aggressive” (7).

According to de la Mora, the notion of male supremacy was strongly promoted by the post-revolutionary Mexican state, and it intended to establish machismo “as the distinctive component of national identity, ... rivaled only by the nation’s deep religiosity manifest in the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe” (7). This imposition of maleness over femininity correlates to Mexico’s transition to official secularism beginning in 1921. However, the new canon of nationalist tenets and rhetoric did not mean that the imagery and symbolic function of the Virgin of Guadalupe was erased from the country. On the contrary, melodrama functioned as a mode of negotiating the integration of Church and state ideologies into a cohesive modern code of social behavior.

According to Elena Feder, Mexican melodramas were intended as a cultural thread linking the post-revolutionary project of modernization and the formation of a Mexican identity, or *mexicanidad*, with Mexico’s religious past that had already played a crucial role in shaping the collective consciousness of a large part of the population (247). Moreover, Feder also points out that Mexico’s religious imaginary when fused with melodrama “functioned discursively as an heterogeneous site of identity formation, where often-clashing categories, such as Woman, Indian, Mestizo, White, Gringo, Priest, Peasant, Child, Mother, Father, Family, and Work, were constantly reconfigured in order to renegotiate *mexicanidad* in ways that adapted to and resisted the separation of Church and State” (247).

In addition to its concern with promoting Mexican identities, male hegemony, and a synthesis of Church-state authority, Mexican Golden Age melodrama also became a key site for constructing and disseminating a particular conception of *mestizaje*.¹⁴ From the perspective of the post-revolutionary state, the *mestizo* male body was suitable to personify nationalist ideology because of its connections with both a *criollo* and an indigenous past.¹⁵ Mexican melodrama had a pedagogical function for biologically male bodies, especially if they were impoverished, indigenous and/or peasants, which was to foster their self-recognition as male *mestizos*; that is, as modern Mexican citizens.¹⁶

Carlos Reygadas integrates the masculinist codes of melodrama, as formulated in the Golden Age, into *Battle in Heaven* as clichés that are expressed and followed by the male and female characters. In my analysis of melodramatic clichés in *Battle in Heaven*, I argue that they comprise a shared language, but one which functions to the detriment of all Mexicans, and with particularly harmful consequences for bodies with brown skin; that is to say, for the central bodies to which the Mexican state addresses its nationalist ideology.

The masculine body of Marcos, the male protagonist of *Battle in Heaven*, is configured through this shared language, but he nonetheless reveals some telling discrepancies with the same melodramatic codes of gender identity. Similar to Toscana's masculine figures, Marcos emphasizes a difference between the idealized melodramatic male *mestizo* venerated by the

¹⁴ Susan Denver argues that these hegemonic ideas of the post-revolutionary state “can trace a strong genealogy to José Vasconcelos’s imagined community” (15). She further explains how Vasconcelos’s nationalist project viewed uneducated, impoverished indigenous and *mestizo* populations as “‘Mexicanos en potencia’ (‘potential Mexicans’) ... [who] could improve at least their moral and ethical lot if they were uplifted by culture” (15).

¹⁵ Federico Navarrate explains *mestizaje* in these terms in *Las relaciones inter-étnicas de México* (10-11).

¹⁶ Although my argument underscores the function of Golden Age as a venue for the circulation of state ideology, I also agree with Daniel Chávez, who maintains that foregrounding *only* the state’s control of cinema omits possible counter readings of these films and instances in which they could be seen to question official histories (see “The Eagle and the Serpent”). However, given that my main focus in this chapter is to examine Reygadas’s critical engagement with melodramatic codes of masculinity, my discussion of Golden Age cinema here is limited to its role as an instrument of state power.

Mexican state and the actual, *real* identity and lived experience of brown lower-class males.

However, in Reygadas's film, this difference presents itself not as a farcical failed imitation, as it is manifested by Toscana's male characters, but is revealed through contradictory experiences in the body of the brown male protagonist.

I sustain that these corporeal contradictions denounce the codes of the male mestizo hegemony that comprises the ideology of *mexicanidad* in the post-revolutionary Mexican state as a system of power which promotes asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships among Mexicans based on differences of race, gender, and class. And since cinematic melodramas were one of the main venues through which the state promoted the ideological foundations of this system, I argue that melodramatic language also works as a discourse of oppression to control and subjugate biologically male bodies.

Battle in Heaven depicts Mexico after 1994, that is to say, under NAFTA and the neo-liberal economic regime of globalization, and so I also analyse the interaction between this system and the nationalist models of citizenship promoted by the post-revolutionary state through its melodramas. According to James Cypher and Raúl Delgado Wise, "Neoliberalism can be summed up as an extreme perspective within the economics profession that proclaims a faith in the idea that economic institutions and individuals will achieve their maximum potential *only* under conditions where market forces are virtually unconstrained by any limits save those that establish and enforce property right" (8). What this means, as they explain, is "a virtual absence of any social safety net, the private ownership of all resources and production facilities, the absence of regulations on corporations and labor markets, and, of course, the unconstrained movement of capital and all goods across borders" (8).

The neoliberal transformation of Mexico's economic structure has some notable consequences for the systems of power and cultural hegemony established by the post-revolutionary state, and I trace the significance of these throughout my analysis of Reygadas's characters in the context of a neoliberalized Mexican state in *Battle in Heaven*. In accordance with Cypher and Delgado's findings, my position is that neoliberalism, rather than simply weakening the state's capacity to exert its authority over bodies and subjectivities, actually operates in concert with the state's nationalist discourses, especially those related to masculinity, which results in even tighter constraints on the selfhood of brown males like Marcos. By highlighting the interaction between neoliberal economic structures and the masculinist codes of melodrama and *mexicanidad*, I advance the point that in Reygadas's film the politics of global capitalism are shown to sustain hierarchies of race, gender and class put into place under the auspices of the post-revolutionary state.¹⁷ Furthermore, the confluence of violence and subjugation within the Mexican state and the politics of neoliberalism impede the formation of a collective voice.

It is precisely such a voice or consciousness that the film posits as necessary for brown Mexican males especially, but also for all Mexicans in general, to begin challenging the systems of oppression in the country. This is a voice that the film proposes should come from the bottom up, as opposed to the constructed discourse of Mexican identity that originated with the

¹⁷ Concerning the significance of social class in the intersection between *mexicanidad* and neoliberal transformations, Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues that for the Mexican urban middle-classes, "el neoliberalismo desplaza 'lo mexicano' como principio estructurante del campo socio-simbólico en amplios espacios del imaginario cultural mexicano" [neoliberalism displaces Mexicanness as the structuring principle of the socio-symbolic field across broad swaths of the Mexican cultural imaginary] (124). As opposed to this position, in my analysis of *Battle in Heaven*, I argue that for the brown lower-class Mexican male, as much as for other social classes in Mexico, the politics of neoliberalism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive, but rather operate in unison to further entrench the conditions of exploitation.

Revolution but was quickly manipulated by elites and ultimately contributed to the degradation of ordinary people's lives.

The relationship between Golden Age Mexican melodramas, gender identities, and the Mexican nation in *Battle in Heaven* has been analyzed by Lahr-Vivaz in her dissertation, "Unconsummated Desires and the Fragmented Nation" (2008). Lahr-Vivaz examines images of bodies and their excess in the film and shows how they question the codes of national identity transmitted through the cinema of the Mexican Golden Age. According to her argument, the subversion of melodrama through the aesthetics of excess disrupts the narrative of national hegemony, which contributes to the film's representation of a fragmented nation. She also claims that the film demands an "active spectatorship" (144), and that, ultimately "*Batalla en el cielo* encourages us to recognize ourselves as consumers (and producers) of the 'nation'" (157).

Although I agree with Lahr-Vivaz's conclusions regarding the participation of the spectator in the film, I have difficulty accepting her assertion that the structure of melodrama serves to facilitate the deconstruction of the Mexican nation under a postmodern paradigm, and I would argue that this perspective overlooks the violence integrated into melodrama's gender codes. In order to analyze the dynamic between nationalist discourse and the configuration of gendered bodies in the globalized context of *Battle in Heaven*, I will address segments of the film in which the tradition of cinematic melodrama and questions of masculinity stand out. My effort is to unravel the allegories that have discursively formed Mexican bodies as well as the ways in which brown males such as Marcos respond contradictorily to these allegories.

However, I begin by looking in general at aspects of Reygadas's work which are relevant to my discussion of *Battle in Heaven*. My overview helps to show that, beyond the shared

aesthetic elements, many of his films show underlying concerns with questions of masculinity and nationhood.

2.2 Mexico through Reygadas's Lens

Critic Rafael Hernández-Rodríguez, in his book *Splendors of Latin Cinema* (2010), asserts that the success of directors including Reygadas, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, and Alejandro González Iñárritu has resulted in what could be called a twenty-first century renaissance of Mexican cinema. But Hernández-Rodríguez also points out that Reygadas's work forms part "of a different kind of cinema, an independent cinema or cinema of auteur" (54), along with Fernando Eimbcke, Julián Hernández, and Francisco Vargas.¹⁸

Reygadas has directed four full-length films, *Japan* (2002), *Battle in Heaven* (2005), *Silent Light* (2007), and *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012). He also directed a short-film titled *This Is My Kingdom* (2010). All of his films are set in Mexico, and only *Silent Light* does not explicitly address themes of Mexican identity. *Silent Light* was lauded by critics and competed at the Cannes film festival where it won the jury prize in 2007.¹⁹ The film is set in a rural area of the state of Chihuahua and centers on a Dutch-dialect-speaking Mennonite community. The narrative revolves around Cornelio, a father and husband who has a love affair with another woman. In *Silent Light*, as in *Japan* and *Battle in Heaven*, Reygadas uses long takes and 360° pans of the landscape, which have been considered a trademark of his style.²⁰ Another

¹⁸ Cynthia Tompkins in *Experimental Latin American Cinema* also refers to Reygadas's films as auteur cinema (159). Misha MacLaird in her doctoral thesis "Una época fatal: Mexican Cinema's Death and Rebirth, 1994-2006" uses the term "independent cinema" to classify the body of work produced by Reygadas, Fernando Eimbcke, and Julián Hernández (209).

¹⁹ Reygadas has been awarded several other prizes at Cannes: *Japan* took the Camera d'Or in 2002; *Battle in Heaven* competed for the Palme d'Or in 2005; and in 2012 he received the Best Director award for *Post Tenebras Lux*.

²⁰ Some critics go as far as to state that these characteristics produce "some sublime, meditative moments: moments of pure, unapologetic visual ecstasy that come close to repealing the cinematic laws of gravity" (Bradshaw "Review of *Silent Light*").

characteristic shared these by films is that each explores the inner life of a male protagonist. In *Silent Light*, for instance, Cornelio struggles with guilt after his wife learns about his extramarital affair. His feelings of self-reproach are augmented when his wife suddenly dies of heart-attack, only to be brought back to life by a kiss from Cornelio's mistress.²¹

In *Japan*, Reygadas's first feature film, an unnamed artist—played by non-professional actor Alejandro Ferretis, who is a friend of Reygadas's family—travels from Mexico City to the countryside, specifically to the rim of the Tarahumara canyon, to commit suicide. He arrives at small town named Ayacatzintla (whose actual inhabitants are featured in the film) where he is introduced to Ascen (short for Asunción), an old woman who rents him a room. Besides having a male lead character, *Japan* also contains other elements that reappear in Reygadas's later productions, such as the cast of non-professional actors and prominent nude and sexual scenes.²²

Above all, however, *Japan* illustrates Reygadas's ongoing preoccupation with exploring the intersection between masculinity, *mexicanidad*, and neoliberalism. The first two sequences of the film visually situate the viewer at the confluence of these systems and signal the director's interest in examining how they organize contemporary Mexican society. In the opening scene, as traffic comes out of a tunnel and merges into huge avenues that pass beneath enormous billboards advertising a multitude of consumer goods, one cannot fail to notice the conditions of neoliberalism in Mexico City. The cultural imagery of *mexicanidad* comes to the fore in the

²¹ Because the film features a female character who dies and then inexplicably returns to life, many commentators draw a comparison to Carl Theodor Dreyer's well-known film *Ordet* (e.g. Tompkins 177). Aside from Dreyer, Reygadas has mentioned in multiple interviews that Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky and Roberto Rossellini have greatly influenced his work (e.g. Wood 117-118).

²² Nudity and sexuality in Reygadas's films have been focus of a great deal of critical attention, particularly in relation to *Battle in Heaven*. Some critics have argued that the supposedly prominent images of nude bodies interfere with Reygadas's larger aesthetic objectives. For example, Tiago de Luca asserts that Reygadas's films cannot be considered transcendental because they fail to "point *beyond*, to an ineffable realm" ("Carnal Spirituality: the Films of Carlos Reygadas"). He holds that Reygadas's focus on the flesh devours the spiritual component of his work.

film's early scenes when the artist is traveling through the countryside and a number of close-up shots focus on the magueys, a plant which has long been integrated into the visual discourse of post-revolutionary cultural nationalism through the work of filmmakers and artists such as Emilio "Indio" Fernández, Gabriel Figueroa, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Within the first minutes, the film also emphasizes how the Mexican countryside has been configured as a space in which males—particularly from the upper classes—exercise their dominance over nature with activities such as hunting. The protagonist reveals that his own relationship to the land is connected to his childhood memories of taking hunting trips with his father. This suggestive detail hints that the motives behind his decision to return to this rural landscape in order to take his own life might be rooted in his male identity.

The implications of this convergence of imagery signaling neoliberalism, *mexicanidad*, and masculinity in *Japan* could be approached through the following set of questions: How is the cultural significance of Mexico's rural countryside reshaped under neoliberalism? What effects do the intersecting politics of *mexicanidad* and neoliberalism have on the daily life of Mexicans who inhabit the countryside? What are the origins of the crisis of masculinity faced by urban and upper class males, and what is the significance of their relationship to the Mexican rural landscape? These questions could also be adapted to an analysis of *Battle in Heaven*, with the most obvious difference being the spaces in which the two films take place. The complementarity between the films' distinct settings points to the division between the urban and rural spaces in the cultural politics of post-revolutionary Mexico, since the city was presented and represented through film as the site where Mexican modernity was going to take shape, and the countryside was imagined as the space where roots of Mexico were located, the space containing the nation's past.

Another of Reygadas's productions, the short film *This Is My Kingdom* is also set in rural Mexico, specifically at a ranch in Tepoztlán in Mexico State. Reygadas was invited to participate in a film project intended to commemorate the 2010 centennial anniversary of the beginning of the Mexican revolution. He was among ten directors who contributed ten-minute films addressing the significance of the revolution in contemporary society. *This Is My Kingdom* is filmed in documentary style and shows fragments of a celebration that Reygadas organized at the ranch. The gathering begins as a genial afternoon luncheon attended by the director's friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, but gradually becomes a riotous and chaotic party lasting late into the night. Reygadas documented everything that occurred during the event with ten simple digital cameras.

Prominent in *This Is My Kingdom* are the social divisions manifested among the guests. When planning the gathering, Reygadas deliberately invited people belonging to a diverse range of social classes and walks of life, ranging from wealthy urban socialites to local fieldworkers, but during the party itself they remain largely separated from each other. One local family is shown observing the party from their own house without actually joining in the festivities. Within the party, the upper class guests seat themselves at different tables than those occupied by peasants. There is only one guest, an American woman, who appears to speak indiscriminately to everyone. However, as evening approaches, alcohol is consumed in larger quantities, and the boundary lines that separate the different social strata begin to blur. People from dissimilar social classes interact and share in the revelry, which soon shifts to chaos and violence. Led by a group of youths, most of the people in the party take part in destroying a parked car, ultimately setting it aflame.

Through the depiction of tensions and disconnections between the different groups of guests at the party, the film shows a concern with how Mexican society continues to maintain the hierarchies that the revolution was supposed to have destroyed. This sense of failure and disappointment with the imagined community of the post-revolutionary Mexican state is also a pervasive theme in *Battle in Heaven*. However, instead of direct references to specific historical events (e.g. *This Is My Kingdom*'s connection to the centennial celebrations commemorating the Revolution), in *Battle in Heaven* there are oblique references to the melodramatic cinema of the Mexican Golden Age and its links to the nationalist politics of the post-revolutionary state.

Another significant sequence in *This Is My Kingdom* is the montage during the last seconds of the short film, which illustrates the distress, disorientation, and confusion of the partygoers. The sequence opens with shots of people adding fuel to the fire by throwing in combustible objects, followed by a series of medium close-ups and close-ups of faces expressing uneasiness. Yet there is also a pervasive sense of acquiescence toward the destruction that is occurring at the party, which is manifested in the shots of guests filming the violence with their cellphone cameras just as they (and the camera crew) filmed the more banal moments at the party. The normality of recording everything that occurs denotes the lack of a principle of selection that would distinguish what is significant from what is not.

The pervasive presence of cameras and recording devices in the film signals how contemporary neoliberal Mexico has produced a way seeing everything as part of the same, a sense that nothing ever happens. Expressions of violence, segmentation of social classes, as well as the momentary abolition of these divisions through alcohol, become commonplace events when perceived through the many lenses of the guests' cameras. In this way, Reygadas's film represents the Mexican revolution as a kind of quotidian exercise, where communal destruction

is part of the celebration but does not really disturb the frameworks that control the Mexican national community's daily life. The normalization of life without events also forms a significant part of the pervading atmosphere of *Battle in Heaven*.

2.3 The Quotidian Language of Melodrama

Battle in Heaven's basic narrative thread can be summarized as follows. Marcos works a chauffeur and security guard for the family of a high-ranking general in the Mexican military. His job includes duties such as driving the general's daughter, Ana, and escorting a company of soldiers who perform the flag-raising ceremony in the central square of Mexico City. Marcos and Ana each have a secret they disclose to one another: Ana prostitutes herself for pleasure, and Marcos, along with his wife (Berta Ruiz), kidnapped a baby for ransom, but the infant subsequently died from an unknown cause. Rather than admitting to the crime, Berta suggests to Marcos that they look for religious redemption through participation in the pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Later on, Ana has pressures her chauffeur into having sex with her, after which she tells him to turn himself in to the police. After a taking a journey into the countryside, Marcos appears to have taken the decision to confess to the police. He pays a visit to Ana, who is staying at her boyfriend's apartment, to say goodbye. Before he leaves the apartment, something prompts Marcos to react with brutal violence, and he stabs Ana to death with a kitchen knife. Shortly afterwards, while the police are searching for him, Marcos mechanically joins the pilgrimage to the Basilica, only to die once he reaches the nave inside the shrine.

It is important to note that the *Battle in Heaven*'s scenes are not structured in order to render the plot coherent. The storyline is full of narrative gaps, and the sequence of events is held together only by Marcos's presence throughout the film. Moreover, the ambiguous dialogue,

disparate focalization, and the lack of clear cause-and-effect relationships all combine to flatten the traditional narrative arch, giving the film a distinctively slow pace and an atmosphere of boredom. Other elements that contribute to the film's ambience of monotony and indolence include the absence of music in certain scenes, the pervasive background noise, the actors' scant movement, the spare dialogue, and the long duration of scenes in which not much seems to happen. An illustrative instance is an approximately five-minute long sequence which takes place in a corridor of a subway station. The principle action in this segment of the film consists of a brief conversation between Marcos and Berta, who exchange words while standing rigidly against a wall, barely moving their heads.

Embedded within the film's 98 minutes, there are a multitude of images, movements, and spoken phrases that make reference to the codes of social conduct that formed a major part of the underlying ideology of Mexico's state-sponsored melodramatic cinema of the Golden Age. The fact that these codes remain recognizable in the behaviors of film characters in *Battle in Heaven* at the beginning of the 21st century points toward the success of the Mexican state's efforts to use cinema to educate its citizens and to form a national identity and a collective cultural lexicon. However, the film also makes a point of portraying the characters' interactions as mechanical and perfunctory, and the film's tone of boredom and weariness signals the characters' obvious lack of engagement with post-revolutionary politics, or *mexicanidad*. In *Battle in Heaven*, melodrama's quotidian place in globalized Mexico inherently contradicts the lessons it was originally intended to disseminate.

One telling example of the film's references to the language of melodrama can be found in two similar scenes in which the eyes of Berta and Ana are each shown in a close-up shot with a teardrop running down their cheek. This use of close-ups and extreme close-ups of the face as

means of emphasizing dramatic expressions of affect was also a common device in Golden Age Mexican cinema. For instance, in Emilio “Indio” Fernández ‘s 1946 film *Enamorada* there is a sequence of close-up and extreme close-up shots of the eyes of Beatriz, a character played by acclaimed Mexican actress María Félix (fig. 2.1).



Figure 2.1 *Enamorada*. María Félix. Film still.

This type of shot illustrates the deep love and affection that Beatriz feels toward General José Juan Reyes. Beatriz’s eyes portray an archetypal female expression of suffering caused by incommensurate or unrequited love, but the image also conveys her submission, given that in an earlier sequence José Juan Reyes strikes Beatriz, knocking her to the ground outside of a church.

In Ismael Rodríguez’s film, *Nosotros los pobres* [*We, the Poor*] (1948) there is another illustrative example of an extreme close-up shot of a female character’s eyes. In this melodrama, there are several prominent images focusing on the eyes of “la paralítica” (the Paralytic), played by María Gentil Arcos (fig. 2.2).



Figure 2.2. *Nosotros los pobres*. María Gentil Arcos. Film still.

The Paralytic is an old woman who, as the name implies, cannot move any part of her body, except her eyes. She is also the mother of the film's protagonist, Pepe "el Toro" [Pepe "the Bull"]—played by Pedro Infante—and the only witness to a robbery that occurs in the family home. The repeated close-up shots of her eyes recur to suggest female pain and resignation, but they also have an important function in evoking the remorse felt by the man who committed the crime of stealing from Pepe and his family. The Paralytic's eyes single out the individual who betrayed the trust and collective well-being of the community. In accordance with melodrama's role in the nation-building project, the film demonstrates how "the poor" needed to learn to create a network of support within their neighborhood. This close-knit community—a microcosm of the nation—helps individuals overcome any hardships and develop a collective identity. In *We, the Poor*, the people from Pepe's neighborhood, including his work buddies, as well as "the woman who wakes up late," and his beloved "chorreada" [Grouchy] all appear as members of a sort of extended family. Thus, the image of the Paralytic's eyes is used to stress the excessive feelings of guilt experienced by the robber who fails to honor the social contract.

As shown in these examples, the rhetoric of excess charges the mundane with meaning, and the overloaded situations, bodies, movements, expressions and gestures are easily identifiable as moral allegories. It is in this manner that Mexican cinema of the Golden Age

created a moral or ethical text through which the melodramatic characters taught the audience a lesson.²³

In Reygadas's film, the close-ups of Ana's and Berta's eyes as well as the teardrops sliding down their faces demonstrate how women have learned how to be Mexicans by using the melodramatic conventions of affect in daily life (figs. 2.3 & 2.4). The images place emphasis on the shared rhetoric of *mexicanidad* that helps to create a cohesive community by illustrating the use of the same melodramatic language by two women that are of different racial backgrounds and social classes: Ana is white and forms part of the nation's elite, while Berta is brown and comes from a lower class. From the perspective generated through Mexico's neoliberal and nationalist discourse, the fact that these women share the same codes of affect conveys the idea of a harmonious, non-classist, and non-racialized society and nation.



Figure 2.3. *Batalla en el cielo*. Anapola Mushkadiz. Film still.

²³ According to Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, the excess of expression and meaning is inherent to melodrama because: "the desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship" (4).



Figure 2.4. *Batalla en el cielo*. Berta Ruiz. Film still.

It is crucial to add that *Battle in Heaven* is concerned with revealing the differences that are obscured when these shared codes are deployed in the service of the state's project of cultural nationalism. Whereas Berta's tear represents a response triggered by feelings of loss at the death of her husband, there are no clear reasons in the narrative to explain Ana's tears, which draws attention to the artificiality of the visual discursive codes in cinema used to signal Mexican femininity. In the shots of Ana, Reygadas employs the melodramatic device of the extreme close-up of a woman's eyes, but separates it from any diegetic purpose, thus exposing the hollowness of a key signifier of a female identity supposedly shared between Ana, Berta, and all Mexican women. In the nationalist vein of melodrama, individuals whose identities are not integrated into roles designated as legitimate by the community are singled out for scorn and criticism. The nation values ethical cohesion between citizens, such that the rich learn to care for the poor. But in *Battle in Heaven*, the commonality between Ana and Berta extends only as far as the cinematic devices that structure their presence on the screen. In fact, their relationship to one another is defined by conflict and discord. After discovering that Marcos revealed the details of the crime to Ana, Berta coldly declares, "Ahora tendrás que mandarle a alguien... no sea que la riquilla vaya a hablar [Now you'll have to send someone after her ... so the little rich girl doesn't

speak”]. Similarly, when Ana obliges Marcos to have intercourse with her, she appears to think nothing of the harm this would cause to Berta.

Battle in Heaven works to disturb the notion that melodramatic expressions of emotion function as shared language among Mexicans. In a further example, Marcos, after having confessed to Berta that he is going turn himself in to the police, places his hand on his chest and declares to his wife: “Vamos a estar separados, pero te llevaré adentro. [We’re going to be separated, but you’ll be in my heart.]” Later, when Marcos goes to tell Ana that he is about to confess his crime to the police, he asks her: “¿No te importa que estemos separados Ana? [Won’t you mind us being separated, Ana?]” She replies mechanically, “No Marcos, te voy a llevar adentro. [No Marcos, you’ll be in my heart.]” The excessive emotional weight that these words carry is suspended by the mechanical way that Marcos and Ana enunciate the phrases. By neutralising the affect of melodramatic language in this way, the film poses critical questions about role that this type of discourse has had in shaping the imagined community

Battle in Heaven’s deliberate interruption of the traditional coherence between emotions, sensuality, words, and corporal movements or gestures seems designed to reveal the language of melodrama as a cliché, that is to say, as an automatic response to events without a legitimate or authentic emotional investment in them. If clichés are defined as expressions “of commonly shared beliefs in the world” (Landy 85), then *Battle in Heaven* is concerned with interrogating the origins and underlying significance of such beliefs, as well as the mechanisms that cause them to be shared in the context of post-revolutionary Mexico. The national community as it appears in *Battle in Heaven* is one in which *mexicanidad* is performed only at the corporeal level, and where the boundaries of race and class are violently reinforced.

As portrayed in the film, Mexico's hegemonic gender codes of masculinity have a vital role to play in regulating the national community's structure of power. But male identity is also a key site at which the oppressive system's internal paradoxes come into view. In the pages that follow, I will demonstrate how Marcos's quotidian, corporeal, and performative use of melodramatic masculinity contradicts the post-revolutionary Mexican state's gendered principles of citizenship and subjectivity. Moreover, I will argue that the neoliberal politics that give place to apathy, boredom, and perfunctory displays of national identity in Mexico contribute to the configuration of maleness in which violence is rendered habitual.

2.4 The Corporal Contradiction of the Mexican Male

Battle in Heaven's opening scene already illustrates the complicated relationship between masculinity as a gender category, Mexican melodramatic clichés, the biologically masculine body and subjectivity. The scene starts with a tilt shot that moves downwards over Marcos's naked body towards Ana who is performing fellatio. The camera also dollies in and out, keeping Marcos's whole body in the middle of the frame. Similar to Mexican melodramas of the cinematic Golden Age, in Reygadas's film the male occupies the central stage, which reflects de la Mora's claim regarding the naturalized, transparent and consubstantial relationship between Mexican cinema, virility and *mexicanidad* (de la Mora xiii).

Even though *Battle in Heaven* does not make explicit references to particular melodramas, it is possible to trace Marcos's physical performances of masculinity in terms of their allusive relationship to male figures of the Golden Age, such as Pedro Infante. According to de la Mora, the post-revolutionary Mexican state's initiative to circulate iconic images of masculinity in melodramatic cinema was ideologically configured to teach brown males how to be modern Mexicans (de la Mora 7).

De la Mora explains that even though Infante was white, he was depicted as a model of national identity, as a *mestizo*, because he played lower-class roles (75).²⁴ He further notes that Infante “represent[ed] a positive machismo” (80), and embodied the characteristic qualities of the ideal Mexican man: “kind, humble ... disciplined, healthy, athletic, [and] authentic.” (75).²⁵ Visually, Infante was often heroized through the use of low angle (“under-the-chin”) shots and soft lighting, which would hide imperfections, since his image was intended to function as a seductive spectacle for the audience (fig. 2.5).²⁶

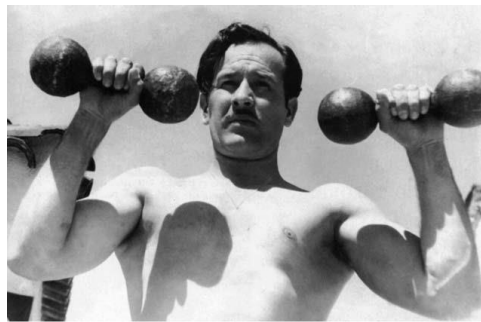


Figure 2.5. *Pepe el toro*. Pedro Infante. Film still.

As opposed to Golden Age cinema’s flawless male bodies presented in grand stature, in *Battle in Heaven* Marcos is visually flattened out with eye-level shots, and his body is illuminated with hard lighting. Reygadas reveals him as a middle-aged, heavy-set man with an unathletic physique and a complexion that is commonplace in Mexico; in other words, as a *real* brown Mexican male, and not an actor portraying an idealized set of features (fig. 2.6 & 2.7). This corporeal contradiction reveals the gap between the promises of modernity, which were

²⁴ According to de la Mora, these characteristics help to distinguish Pedro Infante from *criollos*, who were also white, but depicted as “aggressive, arrogant ... and upper-class” (de la Mora 80), and who were directly associated with colonialism.

²⁵ He was also: “approachable, human, imperfect, rarely violent, playful, and emotionally expressive” (De la Mora 80).

²⁶ Paul Smith in “Eastwood Bound” calls the iconic low angle shots of Eastwood’s face “under-the-chin shots” (121).

channeled through Pedro Infante's body and the roles he played, and the reality of the contemporary Mexican male.

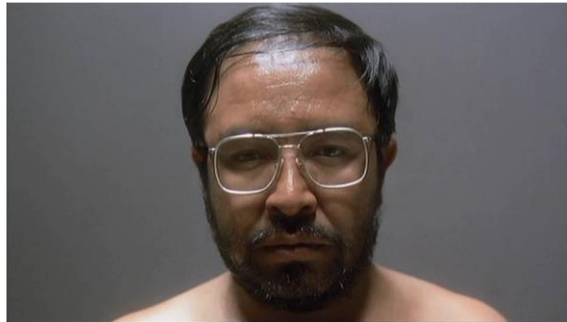


Figure 2.6. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández. Film still.



Figure 2.7. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández. Film still.

In the trilogy directed by Ismael Rodríguez, *We, the Poor* (1947), *You, the Rich* (1948), and *Pepe "the Bull"* (1952), it was implied that that Pepe's strong body and positive demeanor were a direct result of his job as a hard-working carpenter, and later a boxer. Melodramatic cinema casts the modern urban laborer as poor but happy and confident in his masculine social role.

In *Battle in Heaven*, by contrast, the consubstantial relationship between modernity and the biologically male body is contested through the portrayal of Marcos's employment as unfulfilling and precarious. Marcos's daily experience is defined by his position as a chauffeur, and the film emphasizes this with an abundance of scenes featuring Marcos behind the wheel of the SUV he drives for the general's family. Due to the huge dimensions of contemporary Mexico

City, Marcos spends most of his time driving alone and in silence, which could certainly be factors contributing to his overweight, stressed body, and his quiet, passive personality.

One significant example of Marcos's passivity can be found in a scene where he is driving Ana from the airport to the brothel known as the "Boutique." While stopped at an intersection, Marcos appears lost in thought and does not notice the traffic light change to green. The camera—and the audience—patiently wait for Marcos to move or react. However, instead of taking action, Marcos remains physically immobile and mute. He does not begin to move the vehicle forward until a passing driver screams at him: "¡Despiértate pinche negro de mierda, y muévete hijo de tu reputa madre!" [Wake up you damned black shit! Move it you son of a bitch!]. Even though this shouting prompts a response from Marcos, it is one that is marked by submissive acceptance of verbal abuse since Marcos simply continues along the route toward his destination.

Marcos's lack of agency and voice sharply contrasts with another popular film featuring Pedro Infante where he plays a character whose job, like that of Marcos, consists of driving across Mexico City. In the 1951 film *A.T.M.: ¡¡A toda máquina!!*, also directed by Ismael Rodríguez, Infante stars in the role of Pedro Chávez, a drifter who becomes a transit officer for Mexico City's elite motorcycle police unit. As an employee of the civil service, Pedro not only has a fixed schedule, a fair salary, and free time, but also a degree of power and agency that is guaranteed and supported by the correspondence between his masculinity and the modes of subjectivity promoted by the state. His position within an authoritative public institution created for and by a collectivity of males, encourages Pedro to respond with measured violence to any provocation, to actively engage with aggressors, and to drive his motorcycle masterfully through the urban landscape injecting action into the film by obliging the camera to move with him.

By comparison, when Marcos remains silent and docile, and the immobile camera forces the spectator to wait for some action to occur, what becomes apparent is the absence of a community that would grant him visibility and a voice, a collective network of power through which he could activate his agency. In *Battle in Heaven*, this lack appears as a correlation to the neoliberal economic structures currently enforced in Mexico. According to David Harvey, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade,” and he further clarifies that “the role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (2). Cypher and Delgado explain that these theories were originally conceived to be applied in first world countries, such as the U.S., but they were also adapted to countries with underdeveloped economies such as Mexico (65). However, the adjustments failed to consider crucial aspects of third world reality, such as the “informal economy” and the disguised unemployment of people working as street vendors and other highly marginalized occupations. Even more importantly, the first world architects of neoliberalism disregarded the fact that the Mexican economy was in the hands of the national oligarchy (Cypher and Delgado 66).²⁷

The consequences of implementing a neoliberal economy in Mexico that remains under the control of the same group of people who held sway over the markets before NAFTA—and, for that matter, throughout the entire post-revolutionary period—are expressed in *Battle in*

²⁷ Cypher and Delgado are specifically commenting on the broad structure of the models used to promote NAFTA in Mexico. With this purpose in mind, they trace the ideas of nineteenth-century French economist Leon Walras, who argued that market systems were naturally harmonious and that a free market would create a fair, competitive economy that would crystallize into full national employment. Cypher and Delgado point out that such ideas are articulated in terms that are “stripped of history, institutions and power,” which helps to justify their imposition in disparate contexts worldwide (65).

Heaven through Marcos's conditions of employment and the contradictions revealed through his bodily experiences. Marcos's lived reality contradicts validation of two ideologies that directly affect brown male bodies: the social supremacy of the male mestizo as formulated in Mexican national identity, and the state's relinquishment of direct control over the economy in order to allow individual citizens the freedom to prosper in the markets sustained by neoliberalism.

The paradoxical confluence of these ideologies appears within Marcos's working conditions since he is the private employee of a high ranking military official. The economic and social power that the general exerts over Marcos suggests that the Mexican state continues to be an influential factor in lives of ordinary citizens. In this sense, the nationalist notion of the supremacy of the male mestizo is theoretically still valid, yet the state's neoliberal policies encourage the privatization of labor, which exposes Marcos to alienation and deeper exploitation.

In the film, the primacy of the mestizo male is confirmed in the sequences featuring the nationalist masculine spectacle of the Mexican army's performance of the "Salute to the Flag," where the military serves to represent the Mexican state composed of an organized assemblage of biologically male bodies that function systematically and collaborate in the veneration, constitution, and care of the nation (fig. 8). This display of masculinity also reveals its enshrined values: bravery, discipline, and agency. In these sequences, Marcos appears marching in-step with the battalion of troops, visually integrated as part of the Mexican state and its masculine virtues.



Figure 2.8. *Batalla en el cielo*. Film still.

However, contrary to the economic independence and agency that a male *mestizo* should be able to obtain, Marcos is subjected to a high degree of exploitation as his job does not simply involve an established set of regular duties, but he must also perform personalized errands for the members of the general's family. Marcos is apparently on call throughout the day and at night, and the film disorients the spectator regarding the passage of time since it is not always possible to determine the time of day during particular sequences, nor how much time has passed between one scene and the next. The uncertainty of time in the film captures Marcos's experience of being subjected to an unregulated and exploitative schedule which robs him of consistent opportunities for rest and recovery. Furthermore, the fact that Marcos's wife Berta works as a vendor in a subway station suggests that Marcos's salary is insufficient to support his family. The pinnacle of his precarious economic position is marked by the couple's act of kidnapping the baby for ransom.

Even though Golden Age cinema also portrayed characters whose precarious conditions could not easily be overcome by the honest labor of working men, the narratives frequently conclude with a final triumph over hardships and a restoration of masculine supremacy. As de la Mora explains, Pedro Infante's "roles were fully imbued with sacrificial tendencies and willingness to take whatever means necessary to ensure the well-being of his family and friends"

(76). For example, in the final installment of the Pepe “the Bull” trilogy, the protagonist prevails over all the challenges that he has faced over the course of several difficult years, and he ends up winning not only a boxing tournament but also a family.

In contradistinction, *Battle in Heaven* depicts the continuation of underemployment and impoverishment within its neoliberal context and discloses the falsity of the myth of the hard working men that was instituted through Pedro Infante’s iconic male roles. Reygadas’s film reveals a crisis of masculinity wherein men can no longer occupy a dominant role in the family due to his low salary. The emasculation of the brown male comes clearly into the foreground in a scene where Berta slaps her husband across the face.

Additionally, the enormous gap between the Mexican male who forms part of a cohesive community of poor city dwellers as represented in the Pedro Infante films, and the isolated, exploited male represented in *Battle in Heaven* by Marcos reveals the disintegration of social class in neoliberal Mexico. According to economist Guy Standing, globalization “has resulted in a fragmentation of national class structures” (7). However, he explains, “as the world moved towards a flexible open market, class did not disappear” (7). In Standing’s terminology, Marcos could be considered as part of the “the precariat,” a group which is, as he puts it, “not part of the ‘working class’ or the ‘proletariat’,” given that these terms suggest “a society consisting mostly of workers in long-term stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements” (6). Standing argues that, unlike members of the “working class,” many entering the precariat would not be able recognize their fellow workers. Nor can they be considered “middle class” since they not have a “stable or predictable salary or the status and benefits that middle-class people [are] supposed to possess” (6). In *Battle in Heaven*, Marcos’s job consists of performing service labor, that is to say, he does not produce

anything, and merely functions as the fuel of neoliberal Mexican capitalism. This also holds true for the Marcos's relationship to the film director.

Marcos is, in real life, a chauffeur who works for Reygadas's family, and he was asked to participate as a performer in the film without being given many details about what the project would involve (Higgins "I Am the Only Normal Director"). Even though the precise details of the arrangement between Marcos and Reygadas cannot be known except by those directly involved, what is certain is that Reygadas's position of power over Marcos cannot be completely separated from the decision to display his naked body in front of the camera for the sake of art. As a member of the economic elite and a clear beneficiary of global capitalism, Reygadas's relationship to Marcos demonstrates how the privileged members of Mexican society have at their disposal a wide range of human material, i.e. brown lower-class males.

By making the underlying power dynamics of the film explicit and visible, Reygadas intends to show that art is embedded within the same framework of race and class that structures the language of melodrama and global capitalism. The nationalist ideology of Mexico, masculine identity, and neoliberal practices are all designed to benefit western elite white bodies. As R.W. Connell has shown, the world of late capitalism generates global hierarchies of gender, which are uneven, violent, and racial, and where the supremacy of white, Western males is coercively at play (12).

In Reygadas's film, the upper-class whites who enjoy the benefits of capitalism appear not only as *real* subjects, but also as citizens of neoliberal Mexico and the globalized world, while brown male bodies are depicted and treated as commodities, illustrating what Harvey describes as the "financialization of everything" under neoliberalism (33). One example of the corporal commodification of brown bodies can be found in the scene that takes place in a subway

station. This sequence begins with a medium close-up of Marcos and Berta who are both leaning against a wall in an underground corridor of the station. In front of them is a large assortment of clocks, sweets, and other trinkets which Berta has for sale. The scene features very long takes showing Marcos and Berta behind their vendors' stand, barely moving at all (fig. 2.9). Marcos and Berta's corporal rigidity and the mechanical movements of their heads mirror the motion of the clocks (Tompkins "Deleuzian Approach" 163). Their passivity and the mise-en-abyme between the couple and the clocks being sold signals a commodification of the bodies' of the brown characters whose only function in the neoliberal economy is to participate as servants of capital. According to Craig Epplin, the perspective the camera takes in *Battle in Heaven* when symbolically erasing the borders between the human and the non-human is that of global capitalism (300).



**Figure 2.9. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández and Berta Ruiz.
Film still.**

As I have been explaining, the dehumanization of Marcos is directly reflected in the conditions of his participation in neoliberal Mexico, his job, and his corporeal performativity. As depicted in the film, the male gender codes of global capitalism in Mexico are a system of oppression in alignment with the teachings of melodrama performed by the white Pedro Infante, who taught poor urban brown male bodies how to have a class identity. The system is effective because the post-revolutionary Mexican state has comprised male mestizo ideology as the

discourse through which brown male bodies are corporally visible and have a voice, that is to say, are formed as citizens and subjects, while the neoliberal policies in Mexico expand the definition of citizenship to those bodies who actively participate in capitalism ideally as economical agents or active consumers. Thus neoliberalism justifies the exploitation of labor, while the quotidian use of the codes of Mexican melodrama continue to promise a cohesive and caring society, where hard working brown males can keep their dominant place as they endure sacrifices. The result, then, is that brown males continue to work while neoliberalism unravels the networks of support for the urban poor, and allowing for even greater exploitation by removing regulated work schedules, precise definitions of duties, and the possibilities for a collective voice.

2.5 Disciplining the Brown Male Body

Throughout the film's narrative, Ana interprets Marcos's body and identity through the lens of melodrama, which is also the lens of *mexicanidad*, leading her to assume that he has strong sexual desires and little control over them. This is illustrated when Ana claims that Marcos always wanted to go to the "Boutique," articulating this supposed desire on his behalf. Another example takes place inside the "Boutique" when Ana comes to the conclusion that Marcos wants to have sex with her. Ana's assumptions can be traced to the cultural codes circulated in melodramas, where males are sexually aggressive and irremediably promiscuous. The promiscuity, in real and fictional life, of Mexican icons of masculinity such as Pedro Infante was normalized and became a naturalized behavior among Mexican males (de la Mora 101). Thus, based on her assumptions, Ana believes that Marcos needs to be disciplined.

Indeed, as disclosed by the corporal contradictions, the hegemonic nationalist discourse celebrates the mestizo identity while simultaneously positing that brown bodies are inadequate

for modernity. From a global capitalist perspective, brown males fail to perform as male *mestizos* and active agents of neoliberalism due to their lack of reason, impulsive personality, as well as naïve nature. Within this frame of thought, Reygadas's films suggests that the Church, the Mexican state, and global capitalism work together in order to discipline bodies into accepting their organized codes of masculine behavior.

The imposition of the hegemonic ideology over the brown male body is effective because of the power that the elites have over the livelihood of brown bodies. In *Battle in Heaven*, Ana successfully obliges Marcos to perform as male *mestizo* who lacks control of his body because she is his boss, and even though Marcos asserts that he does not want to go to the "Boutique" and he does not want to have sex with Ana, she still scolds him for his lustful desires, as in the following dialogue:

Ana: Hace quince años que trabajas para mi papá Marcos. Me conoces desde que era una niña. Eres el único que sabe de este lugar, te meto por primera vez y vienes a decirle a todas que me quieres coger. ¿Cómo ves?

Marcos: Que sólo dije que vine aquí nomás porque fue idea tuya Ana.

Ana: ¿Qué crees que no me di cuenta con la cara que me veías en el aeropuerto Marcos?

[Ana: You have been working for my dad for fifteen years, Marcos. And you've known me since I was a little girl. You're the only person who knows about this place. I bring you here for the first time and you tell everyone that you want to fuck me? What's that about?

Marcos: I only said that I came because it was your idea to bring me here, Ana.

Ana: Don't you think I noticed how you were checking me out in the airport, Marcos?]

Reygadas signals the falsity of Ana's assumption to the audience by taking on Marcos's perspective during the sequence in the airport. Earlier on, Marcos had dropped and broke his glasses while riding the subway. When he arrives to pick up Ana at the airport, the camera illustrates how his blurred vision makes it impossible for him to cast a male gaze onto any women. Nonetheless, Ana perceives Marcos merely as a brown body who needs to learn to submit to privileged power. For this reason, she disciplines him by literally driving him to have sexual intercourse with her.

Marcos's movement during this scene is mechanical and passive. His passivity is illustrated visually in the way that Ana installs herself literally and figurative on top of Marcos (fig. 2.10). In this sequence, the performance of masculinity is reduced to the virile sexual organ. It is in this sense that Marcos acts according to the principles of neoliberalism since his body is used a commodity by Ana. At the same time, he is obliged by Ana to follow the gender codes adopted by the Mexican state and promoted through Mexican melodramas, while his exposed body, brown skin stillness, and muteness contradict the supremacy of Mexican gender identity, since they bear resemblance to the primitive behaviours of the past as portrayed in the melodramatic stereotypes of Mexico's indigenous populations (fig. 2.11).



Figure 2.10. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández and Anapola Mushkadiz. Film still.



Figure 2.11. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández. Film still.

Susan Denver explains that in the films of the Mexican Golden Age the indigenous figures represented the other side of civilization, since they were depicted as primitive, passive, submissive and enigmatic beings (90). She further points out that indigenous characteristics were stylized in specific ways to symbolize the nation's past and that of the male *mestizo*. Thus, it is coherent with the Mexican state's didactic use of cinema that Pedro Infante played the role of an indigenous character in *Tizoc* (1957).

Similar to *Battle in Heaven*, the melodrama *Tizoc* revolves around the relationship between an upper class white woman from the city and a brown male, in this case an indigenous man named Tizoc. María Félix plays María, a woman whom Tizoc believes to be the Holy Virgin. Tizoc naively falls in love with María mistakenly believing that she returns his love and that she would marry him. In what is presented as a violent act of irrationality, Tizoc kidnaps

María, who subsequently dies when an arrow lands in her chest. Tizoc then kills himself with the same arrow that took his lover's life.

The most prominent aspect of Tizoc is his passive and infantilized personality. His passivity is best illustrated at the beginning of the film when he submits to an assault by some townspeople who throw stones at him. Here another comparison could be drawn to *Battle in Heaven* since Marcos often is abused by the inhabitants of Mexico City and is never shown launching any complaint. For instance, in a sequence I have already described, Marcos is in a crowded subway wagon and he accidentally drops his glasses. As he reaches down to pick them up from the ground a group of men call him "drunk," and a woman kicks him with her high heel shoes, shouting "Stop it, you pervert! What you looking at?" The impact of the blow on Marcos's body causes the heel to break. Marcos picks it up and politely returns it to the lady who kicked him.

From the hegemonic perspective, Marcos's passivity reveals the failure of the state's cinematic program of education for brown male Mexicans. Tizoc-like behavior should have been surmounted through the example of Pepe "the Bull", that is to say, through emulation of the iconic poor urban male who is also hard-working, strong, and aggressive. Instead, in the twenty-first century, Marcos's conduct not only resembles that of Tizoc, but he is also treated accordingly by the current systems of power in Mexico, such as the state, global capitalism, and the Church.

The alliance between the Church and the state in share in the task of disciplining bodies in neoliberal Mexico is illustrated in *Battle in Heaven's* use of footage of real pilgrims marching throughout Mexico City. In one sequence, the pilgrims are singing "A tí virgencita" ("To You, Little Virgin"), a hymn which combines praise to Our Lady of Guadalupe with a celebration of

the Mexican nation: “¡Qué viva la reina de los mexicanos! [Long live the queen of all Mexicans].” As indicated in the chant, the Church and its followers grant Our Lady of Guadalupe recognition as the sovereign ruler over all Mexicans. However, *Battle in Heaven* makes evident that the correspondence between religious and nationalist modes of promoting the discipline of bodies by visually highlighting the similarity between the formations of pilgrims and the formations of soldiers who perform “The Salute to the Flag.” Both assemblages constitute spectacles that venerate Mexico, the only difference being that the pilgrimage is primarily intended as feminine celebration, while the soldiers’ performance is overwhelmingly masculine.

The Church’s disciplinary function draws Marcos and Berta to seek forgiveness for the moral errors they have committed. This is suggested in the following dialogue, where Berta presents to Marcos the idea of seeking redemption through participation in the pilgrimage to the Basilica of Guadalupe:

Berta: ¿Vamos a la peregrinación el domingo?

Marcos: ¿Cómo se te ocurren tantas pendejadas?

Berta: Con tantas chingaderas que hemos hecho ¿no te das cuenta?

[Berta: Are we going to the pilgrimage on Sunday?

Marcos: How do you come up with such bullshit?

Berta: After all the shit we’ve done, don’t you see?]

Under the system of power created by the allegiance between the Church and the state, brown bodies are lead to accept full responsibility for the precarious conditions of their lives as well as the inappropriate choices they make with those conditions, producing a mode of self-perception

that admits a lack of reason and need for discipline. This is illustrated in the film when Marcos joins the procession of pilgrims that are heading toward the virgin's shrine.

During the journey towards the basilica, the pilgrims provide Marcos with cues and accoutrements that help him to perform according to the codes of discipline advocated by the Church. At one point, Marcos is shown walking on his knees, as other pilgrims do, and later on he also holds a candle. Afterwards, a man talking through a megaphone covers Marcos's head with a blue hood, which Marcos accepts without opposition. As Marcos continues to walk on his knees, the man screams at him: "Te has salvado, te has salvado... Sigue adelante. ¡No más drogas! ¡No más alcohol! ¡No más mujeres! ¡No más tetas! ¡No más tetas!" ["You've saved yourself! You've saved yourself! ... Onward! No more drugs! No more alcohol! No more women! No more tits! No more tits!"]. In this scene Marcos's identity is defined as that of a male who cannot control his sexual desires, impulses, passions, and indulgences (alcoholism and drugs); in short, he is conceived of as an irrational being. The designation of Marcos's brown male body as having limited use of reason contradicts the symbolic power that the Mexican state through melodramatic gender identities has discursively assigned him, and he is once more read as the child-like figure of Tizoc.

Due to its irrational behavior, the male brown body of Marcos is incorporated into religion as a body that needs to be saved and domesticated. Thus, the pilgrims continue to impose a series of religious disciplinary codes onto Marcos as he approaches the shrine. For instance, Marcos is shown hooded and with his hands bound behind his back, and later on his back is covered with a *rebozo* (fig. 2.12). As way of emphasizing both the large amount of pilgrims and their collective procession, Reygadas includes several crane shots that pan over the

crowds of people gathering in the plaza in front of the Basilica, suggesting that any one of them could have bound Marcos's hands, given him a candle, or put a *rebozo* on his back (fig. 2.13).



Figure 2.12. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández. Film still.



Figure 2.13. *Batalla en el cielo*. Film still.

From this perspective, the film's emphasis seems to be on the shared language of religious codes, which creates a cohesive community regulated through state ideology. This idea is also suggested by the inclusiveness of the lines of pilgrims which are composed of women, men, and children from Mexico City and other parts of the country, both rural and urban. However, the ethics of this shared language and its performance are shown as corporally contradictory since the pilgrims help Marcos and his brown male body to perform according to the codes of conduct prescribed to followers of Our Lady of Guadalupe, but they fail to care for him in terms of his

physical well-being. This lack of ethical engagement is apparent when Marcos falls to the ground, injuring his head and no one stops to help him. When Marcos appears alone inside the Virgin's shrine with his hood soaked in blood, the film insinuates that no one assisted him even though he clearly suffered a serious wound. *Battle in Heaven* suggests that the union of melodrama and the state was successful in comprising an identity that works to create a shared language through which bodies are disciplined. However, as I have been suggesting through these pages, the disciplinary function of this language relies on an ontology of the Mexican man crafted by the state which determines brown male bodies as inherently inadequate for capitalist modernity.²⁸



Figure 2.14. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández, scene still.

2.6 The Battle for the Brown Male

In a city governed under the politics of neoliberalism, the system of power orchestrated by the post-revolutionary state through melodrama sharply and violently contrasts with the

²⁸ Roger Bartra in *La jaula de la melancholia* argues that *lo mexicano* corresponds to “una adaptación de cánones estrechamente ligados al desarrollo capitalista y a la consolidación de los Estados nacionales. Es decir, a lo que llamamos Occidente moderno” [an adaptation of the canons tightly linked to capitalist development and to the consolidation of nation states. That is to say, to what we call the Modern West] (218-219). Bartra proposes a metaphor, the axolotl, through which it is possible to understand the metalanguage of *mexicanidad* that has defined the Mexican subject. The axolotl is a Mexican salamander that failed to undergo metamorphosis. Bartra recuperates this image and argues that the Mexican state has defined the Mexican subject as an axolotl, as a being that has a primitive—indigenous—soul and character and that has to be educated in order to be modern. However, because the country continues to be “underdeveloped,” there is an implicit blame assigned to *mestizos*.

benefits that both systems originally purported would bring to urban poor, working-class, and lower-middle class Mexicans. Through Marcos's corporal contradictions, especially related to his masculinity, the film shows how the current configuration of elite power justifies its coercive discipline of brown male bodies. What seems to be at stake in the battle that takes place over brown male bodies is the definition of humanity.

The genealogy of the violent campaign to discipline brown bodies and to claim the right to define the human can be traced to the European Renaissance, as illustrated in the sequence where Marcos stabs Ana to death. In the *mise-en-scène* when Marcos violently confronts Ana, she is positioned in front of a print of a well-known Renaissance painting, *Girl with the Red Hat* (1665-1666) by the Dutch artist Vermeer (fig. 2.15). Indeed, at several other points in the sequence leading up to this moment Ana is often visually compared to this portrait. The presentation of Ana as a continuation of the European ideal of modern womanhood speaks to her privileged upper-class position, as well as to the imposition of an ideology of power on the axis of race and class that has been at play since the Renaissance and that continues to function in the era of global capitalism.



Figure 2.15. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández and Anapola Mushkadiz. Film still.

Similarly, Marcos is also compared with a painting during this sequence. The visual comparisons of Ana and Marcos situate these bodies in a relationship of exploitation that has

continued throughout the history of Mexico, where white upper-class subjects have used brown bodies to perpetuate their own privilege. In Mexico, this history of oppression can be traced to the conquest and colonization, which coincides with the cultural imaginary of the European Renaissance.

Marcos's comparison with a painting takes place while he is waiting for Ana in Jaime's apartment and stares up at a print of "A Horse Frightened by Lightning" (1813-14) by Théodore Géricault, which appears in an extreme close-up shot (fig. 2.16). The horse is obviously a male, and the painting places emphasis its fearful corporal reaction by highlighting its straining muscles and foaming mouth. The visual link between of Marcos and the horse serves to reconfirm the hegemonic disciplinary mode of perceiving the male protagonist as a powerful aggressive male with naturally strong and uncontrollable sexual desires and an excess of tension and stress. The horse's natural response to an alarming situation (in this case, a thunderstorm) is one that needs to be tamed if the animal is going to provide useful service to a rider. For Marcos, however, it is the disciplinary situation itself that provokes the agitation and unease manifested in his loss of bladder control just before he stabs Ana. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the systems of power that dominate him, Marcos's violent act shows instead that he is uncontrollable and violent precisely because he is a brown male lacking reason. By murdering Ana, Marcos is not killing his oppressor nor is he resisting the racist system that is still at work in contemporary society, but rather he performs a contradictory confirmation of his gender identity as constructed through the hegemonic post-revolutionary ideology of the Mexican state and its neoliberal polices.



Figure 2.16. *Batalla en el cielo*. Film still.

In *Battle in Heaven* these systems of power profess to save the brown male from himself, from his natural condition of irrationality, and they do this by exercising dominion over his body. One of the key elements of the process of domination involves embedding him within a reductive ethical structure consisting of binary divisions between good and evil, sin and virtue, and guilt and innocence. These, of course, can be traced to the quotidian codes of melodrama that I have been describing throughout the chapter. Under this interpretative framework, the battle over the brown male body is not for his redemption, nor to alleviate his sense of guilt for having committed misdeeds, but rather simply to subjugate him and prompt him to become a full participant in his own self-regulation using the codes of gender conduct circulated through melodrama. Any feelings of guilt ascribed to Marcos are necessarily linked to the structure of power that surrounds him and determines both the socio-economic conditions of his existence and the possible responses he can make to these conditions. The sources of redemption available to him simply involve submission to the same systems of power that propelled him to act as a violent, irrational male in the first place, i.e. the Church and the state. Neither of these institutions has any real interest in righting the wrongs that Marcos committed, nor do they have any concern for his spiritual or physical well-being. Rather, their primary intention is to induce

him to recognize voluntarily his own wrongdoings and to submit himself to the police or the care of the Church; in other words, to transform him into a loyal servant.

The Church and the neoliberal Mexican state are engaged in battle with the brown male body and its purportedly uncontrollable nature. This struggle necessarily takes place “in Heaven” because the ideologies and systems of control are always conceptualized as transcendent and eternal principles which exist above and beyond the sphere human influence rather than as the outcomes of a deliberate effort to maintain elite privilege. In waging this battle, one of the most effective weapons has been the gender category of masculinity. From early on in the post-revolutionary period, the operative technique has been to impose models of masculinity such as that of the Mexican male *mestizo*, or the white male agent of global capitalism, while maintaining networks of power that impede brown male bodies from achieving these ideals. As a result of the brown male’s failure, he can be deemed inadequate for modernity. As the brown male body undergoes stress and tension, the danger of violence that would threaten the system of control is attenuated when individuals learn to internalize the source of their angst and seek out disciplinary measures at their own volition.

In *Battle in Heaven*, Marcos never appears cognizant of the battle that is being fought to keep him subjugated, that is, of the power structures that function to define his daily life and to determine the significance of his body. Rather than developing a utopian narrative of resistance, the film invites the audience to observe the behavioral constraints which remain imperceptible to Marcos even as he is enveloped by them. A key scene where Marcos climbs a hill in the countryside illustrates the how film refuses to impute to Marcos a critical consciousness of his oppression while at the same time creating a standpoint from which to the spectator can develop an awareness of the battle over brown bodies. Marcos and his family take a trip into the

countryside, where Marcos leaves the others behind and begins mechanically climbing a hill. As he sets out, he is surrounded first by exhaust fumes of a tractor plowing a field and then by a thick fog, making it difficult for him to see, a difficulty compounded by the fact that earlier on he lost his glasses when Berta slapped him in the face. Upon reaching the top of the hill, a clear blue sky appears and Marcos stands on a peak next to a steel cross. The camera's low angle enframes the transcendent view, tentatively suggesting that Marcos has reached a state of clarity (fig. 2.17). However, after the camera completes a lengthy pan over the Valley of Mexico, a close-up shot of Marcos shows that he has covered his eyes and face with both hands (fig. 2.18).



Figure 2.17. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández. Film still.



Figure 2.18. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández. Film still.

Apparently unable to cast his gaze out from this heavenly perspective, Marcos has reached a limit point, where the cross marks the boundary that delineates the ultimate definition

of life beyond which Marcos does not, cannot, or dares not look. Yet the film's spectators are given the opportunity to think critically about that to which Marcos remains blind, i.e. the politics of neoliberalism, nationalism, the Church and their treatment of brown bodies, as well as the spectator's own position and participation in these systems. In other words, the film provides a meta-perspective which reflects upon the lenses through which brown male bodies are read and upon the violence inherent to this reading.

2.7 Conclusions

Battle in Heaven's representation of neoliberal Mexico is significantly characterized by a collective lack of awareness regarding the passage of time. As Tompkins observes, the film emphasizes the imperceptible unfolding of time through "the slow motion of Reygadas's circular pan" ("Deleuzian Approach" 170). She is specifically referring to the sequence where, during Ana and Marcos's sexual encounter, the camera begins a 360° pan over the surroundings outside the building, taking in daily life and material reality. Over the duration of this shot, the camera brings into view a banal assortment of objects such as cracks in the wall, faucets, television antennas, and other tangible elements of the urban environment. Sounds are also an important element of this sequence as we can hear voices coming from a television program and the shouting of children at play. Reygadas highlights the passing of time in quotidian life, where nothing seems to disrupt the continuous flow of inconsequential quotidian events. However, as I have been demonstrating through these pages, there is in fact a substantial struggle taking place for control over Marcos's brown body in order to perpetuate a system of power and privilege.

It is precisely in order to show that *something* is happening that Reygadas frequently employs close-ups shots of bodies that draw the spectator in to look beneath the surface. Along these lines, Lahr-Vivaz argues that the nude scenes in Reygadas's films are close to what Claudia

Schaefer terms the “cinema of excess,” which, as Lahr-Vivaz explains, “offers the possibility of shocking the spectator from a state of complacency through images that disrupt his sense of the normal,” where the normal, I might add, consists of bodies that fit the global culture of capitalism’s norms of beauty: white skin, and slim, toned bodies (143).

In the sequence which shows Marcos and his wife having intercourse, the director’s intention to shock the spectator becomes evident through the close-ups of body parts. In this case, the shots of naked bodies are cross-cut with shots focusing on a copy of another Renaissance painting, “Dead Christ Supported by an Angel” (1475–78) by Antonello da Messina, which hangs in the couple’s bedroom. This comparison appears to be addressed directly to the audience since the perspective of the painting could not reflect Marcos’s point-of-view since he has lost his glasses, and Berta is facing downwards in the bed. The visual contradistinction between the figures in the painting and Marcos and Berta highlights the difference between bodies which express the ideals of western civilization, and those are considered defective or inconsistent with modernity that even though they are embedded into neoliberalism’s economic structure.

Reygadas uses similar camera movements to depict both the couple in coitus and the portrait of Christ, the only difference being the direction: the camera tilts downwards over Marcos and Berta and upwards towards Christ’s head and shoulders where the angel is sensually supporting him. Marcos and Berta’s bodies are brown, overweight, and drenched in sweat (figs. 2.19 & 2.20). The couple’s darkened bedroom contains objects such as Coca-Cola bottles and teddy bears, which signal their participation as peripheral consumers in the neoliberal economy. The decor of their space generally conforms to stereotypes of kitsch, as in, for instance, the pink curtains covered with hearts. In contrast, Christ’s body, following Renaissance aesthetics, is

depicted in harmonious perfection and illuminated brightly to reveal his fit, white, and slim body (fig. 2.21). In the background, there is a pleasant view of the forested countryside, suggesting that a concordance between man and nature, but with man at center stage elevated above the material world, and with Christ representing the utmost ideals of mankind. As indicated by the expression on his face and the bloody wound in the side of his torso, Christ is dying, but the angel holding him is already prepared to carry him upward toward a higher plane of reality (fig. 2.22). The implicit suggestion embedded in the image is that through the perfect body of Christ, humans may learn to follow a rational and moral path guided by God and achieve spiritual transcendence. Imperfect bodies may thus become signifiers of irrationality and immorality.



Figure 2.19. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández. Film still.



Figure 2.20. *Batalla en el cielo*. Marcos Hernández and Berta Ruiz. Film still.

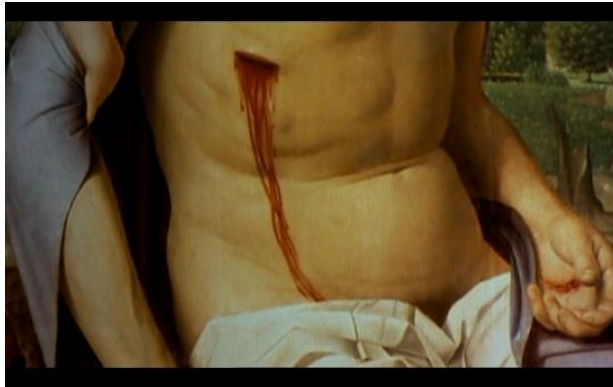


Figure 2.21. *Batalla en el cielo*. Film still.



Figure 2.22. *Batalla en el cielo*. Film still.

As might be expected, these scenes have caused a lot of controversy, but not so much for the insinuation of sexual pleasure in religious iconography, but because of the exposure of non-hegemonic bodies. Jonathan Romney in a review of *Battle in Heaven*, “Super Sex Me,” describes the nude scenes featuring Reygadas’s non-professional actors as cruel, grotesque, and exploitative. The shocking images of exposed flesh and bodies which do not conform to western standards of beauty make Reygadas’s camera into what Schaefer calls “a weapon for disturbance and intrusion” which can counteract “the fatigue of the eye” (11).

The images of excess in Reygadas’s film serve to shake the spectator from a state of boredom in order to intensify the focus on the quotidian violence that affects brown bodies. This violence surfaces even in the film’s reception among reviewers such as Romney, who applies the

adjective “grotesque” the naked, brown, and overweight bodies. The critical terms used to respond to these bodies signal that they are deemed inappropriate for serious contemplation since they lack the aesthetic harmony which would reveal the characters’ inner being and spirituality.

Another way in which the film awakens the spectator is by calling attention to the invented narrative that lies behind the codes of masculinity linked to the Mexican Golden Age of cinema, which is reproduced in contemporary representations of the brown male body in cinema and television. One scene centers on Marcos watching a televised soccer game. On the screen, one of the most recognizable teams in Mexico celebrates its triumph, while the game’s announcer shouts, “Señoras y señores ¡Pumas campeón! ¡Pumas campeón de México! [Ladies and gentlemen, Pumas are the Champions! Champions of Mexico!]” An Argentine player, Vignatti, in an interviewed following the match exclaims, “Esto no es la realidad para mí. Es lo más lindo que le ha pasado a Vignatti en diez años. [This is unreal to me. This is the best thing that has happened to Vignatti in ten years.]” And Marcos repeats after him: “Esto no es la realidad ... Esta no es la realidad ... Lo más lindo que ha pasado a Vignatti ... Lo más lindo. [This is unreal... this is unreal... the best thing that ever happened to Vignatti... the best thing.]” Marcos repeats these words mechanically while masturbating, showing his corporal engagement and incorporation into the celebration of the Mexican state and its televised spectacles of male supremacy and triumph as represented in the soccer game. The discrepancy between Marcos’s corporeal movement and his words suggests that he is unaware of what he is repeating. According to Lahr-Vivaz, “Vignatti’s and Marcos’s words are ... addressed to the audience, who are reminded that *this*—i.e. the film—is not reality” (155). Thus, the audience is invited to critically engage with the film and its representation of the male brown protagonist. It is in this

way that *Battle in Heaven* calls attention to the exploitative forces of cinema and its language as captured by the visual representation of brown male bodies.

In the context surrounding the televised soccer game, what is “unreal” is the supremacy of Mexican male mestizos, as well as the support they receive from other Mexican males. But if the state’s hegemonic representations of male bodies are fabricated, then the masculine roles performed by Pedro Infante must be considered equally untrue, including his interpretation of Tizoc. Following this line of thought, the representation of Marcos in *Battle in Heaven* is not real either, since the possibilities for interpreting his performance are limited to the lenses provided by the politics of gender designed by the post-revolutionary Mexican state, and by the ideologies of western modernity and global capitalism, both of which determine subjectivity on the axis of gender and race.

Within this panorama, ultimately, the film seems to be calling for a new voice, one that should come directly from brown male bodies, and that would define their subjectivity, body and performances on their own terms. This is suggested through the auditory contrast between Marcos muteness and the often overwhelming noise that surrounds him, much of which signals the oppressive presence systems of power. The ringtone on Marcos’s mobile phone is a reminder of the transformations of globalization and neoliberalism, since the particular tone he uses is ubiquitous in many countries. A similar point could be made regarding the noise of the digital clocks that can be heard throughout the scene that takes place in the subway station. The noises generated during the flag-raising ceremony clearly signal the power of the state, and the presence of religion resonates through the pilgrims’ hymn to Our Lady of Guadalupe, as well as in the sacred music of Bach that plays in the gas station (“Harpsichord Concerto No. 1 in D Minor”)

and John Tavener's "The Protecting Veil," which provides the soundtrack to opening sequence of the film.

Marcos's muteness stands out significantly against the abundance of sounds that continuously envelop him, and the film ends with an enigmatic silence that reflects Marcos's own uncommunicativeness. In one of the last sequences of the film, which takes place after Marcos has died, a group of men are shown in a church tower ringing two huge bells. The sound of the bells is muted, but it is possible to hear the pouring rain. Within the imaginary of Mexican national history, the bells are reminiscent of Mexico's independence from colonialism. According to the official narrative regarding the events of 1810, the priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla called a mass by ringing the church bells and encouraged his parishioners to join the rebellion against their colonizers. He led the uprising and chose the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe for the militia's flag.

In Reygadas's film, the ringing of the bells is a call to recognize the continuation of the colonial system in contemporary times. That is to say, the continuation of oppression, subjugation, exploitation and violence exercised upon brown male bodies through the ideology of the post-revolutionary Mexican state, the Church, and global capitalism. This call is not for a rebellion equivalent to armed insurrection that took place in 1810 since the bells do not ring. The call in *Battle in Heaven* is precisely for a voice to express a consciousness of oppression, but also a voice that would redefine the body and subjectivity of brown males.

3. THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF TRANSGENDER POLITICS IN MARIO BELLATIN'S

SALÓN DE BELLEZA

3.1 Introduction

My analysis of Carlos Reygadas's film *Batalla en el cielo*, argues that the discursive framework of life articulated by the post-revolutionary state remains an impossible model for the implied subject of the nationalist project in contemporary Mexico. The combination of the film's setting in post-NAFTA Mexico City and the director's allusions to Mexican melodrama situates the film within the binary of national/global and invites questions regarding the apparent weakening of the state, and along with it, national values such as family, social mobility through hard work, and masculinity. In a globalized context, the film attempts to represent how the organizing networks of late capitalism exacerbate the living conditions for Mexican men, for whom precarity becomes a necessary (though paradoxical) consequence of the consubstantial relationship between masculinity, *mexicanidad*, modernity, and neoliberalism. The film provokes an exploration of alternatives which contest the effects of the global gender system on male bodies. In a similar vein, the work of Peruvian-Mexican author Mario Bellatin raises questions about the possibilities that exist for creating communities bound together by narratives other than those developed by the state or global capitalism. Bellatin's unconventional approach often involves a suspension of a specific context of national signifying codes, which tends to bring the underlying geopolitical dynamics of global capitalism to the fore. The work of Bellatin constructs post-national worlds defined by precarity and cruelty which are configured as vestiges of a violent capitalist system.

In this chapter, I offer a reading of *Salón de belleza* [*Beauty Salon*] (1994) which examines the role of gender codes in determining not only the performative relationship between

subjectivities and bodies, but also the ethical relations that structure modern social formations, as well as the possibilities for these to be subverted. The novella is narrated by a hair stylist who owns a beauty salon, and the plot follows the transformations which the salon undergoes as a result of a city-wide epidemic of an unknown virus, referred to throughout the text only as “el mal” [“the evil” or “the disease”²⁹], which infects significant numbers of the unnamed metropolis’ inhabitants. The lack of medical attention available to the infected, as well as the social stigma and rejection they face, compels the narrator/protagonist to convert his salon into a hospice, which he calls the Terminal [“el Moridero”], a place where the sick and dying can receive the care necessary for a safe and comfortable death. Through my analysis of active and conscious performances of both masculinity and femininity that the narrator sustains in his efforts to practice an ethics of care, I argue that his intention to construct a subversive space for an alternative community by means of a transgender politics fails. The choices that inform the narrator’s performances and the construction of the Terminal correspond to the logic of capitalism, which is inherently linked to masculine morality. I trace the failure to subvert the hegemonic and heteronormative social order to the restrictions inherent to established categories of gender and the moral paradigms inextricably attached to them. In other words, I argue that the narrator’s objective to create what in Jack Halberstam’s terms could be considered a queer time and place is unachievable within the current configuration of global geopolitical power dynamics and the corresponding models of gendered subjectivity.³⁰

²⁹ In my citations, I quote from the original text as well as the English translation by Kurt Hollander, modifying it where necessary as indicated with internal parenthesis.

³⁰ In his book, *In a Queer Time and Place* Halberstam explains, “There is such thing as ‘queer time’ and ‘queer space’” (1). For the author, queer time and place develop in opposition to heterosexual structures of family and reproduction, such that “the queer way of life will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being” (1).

The social extremes of precarity and death serve as the narrator's ethical impetus for the construction of the Terminal. These conditions are presented as a consequence of the governing principles of modernity defined by the geopolitical configuration of a Eurocentric structure of power, which promotes and justifies the denigration and elimination of bodies belonging to territories deemed discordant with Western logic. Bellatin's portrayal of a post-national world in the novella underscores how practices of expulsion are inherent to capitalism and manifest in the form of rationalizations for relegating to the social and economic periphery bodies whose sexual desires run counter to reproduction, heteronormativity, and dominant masculinity. The violent expulsion of biologically male bodies in *Salón de belleza* is revealed as intrinsic to the capitalist political and economic structure of globalization. Sakia Sassen refers to such justifications of expulsion as "narratives of displacement" (82). According to her work, in Europe and North America (U.S. and Canada) the narrative is also inherent in international law which identifies the state as the sole subject and excludes other actors, specifically citizens. Sassen signals that the narratives of displacement are comprised of other specific cultural practices legitimated by men and masculine gender codes (82). In Bellatin's fiction, ideologies of displacement are concretized in the brutal forms of expulsion suffered by the infected inhabitants of the city, as in the refusal to provide basic forms of care, the deliberate creation and maintenance of precarious conditions for the ill, and a denial of dignity for the dying and the dead. In this perspective, the term "el mal" comes to designate not only the infection itself, but also the social order and modes of authority necessary to maintain its conditions of possibility and the underlying rationalizations for the violence it unleashes. In the narrator's account, the challenge of mounting an effective opposition or alternative to this systematized politics of expulsion on the basis of a sense of ethical responsibility for the wellbeing of fellow human beings at a personal and social level is

revealed as a logical impossibility. The concept of care does not form part of the socio-political order; it is excluded from the public sphere and relegated to the private, a dichotomy which corresponds to a categorical gender division between the masculine, defined as dominant and rational, and the feminine, defined as affective and nurturing. The narrator's past experience, transvestite practices, and particular social position allow him to exercise a significant degree of control over the performance of both masculine and feminine gender codes, granting him the possibility to implement a project that attempts to incorporate feminine ethics of the private sphere into a re-construction of the political and masculine space. However, the effort conceived in these terms inevitably fails to generate an alternative to the social order.

The impossibility of forming communities in resistance held together by the ideal of mutual wellbeing and configured with the objective of dismantling and opposing the practices of death and expulsion is presented as a consequence of a globalized power structure which promotes and maintains asymmetric geopolitical relations. The narrator's inability to create and sustain an ethics of care, which in the West has been configured as a feminist mode of opposition to the politics of masculinity, illustrates how non-Western spaces have no access to resistance through the moral gender division delineated by the private and public sphere as they are subjected to another form of binary exclusion, the separation of the human and non-human.

The emphasis that Bellatin's text places on the power dynamics of globalization and its masculinist manifestation in the body of the transvestite narrator appears distinct from other texts in gay literature of Mexico, in which lives and bodies are defined as abject through a paradigm of center-periphery relations.³¹ Within the field of Mexican literary studies, Bellatin's fiction raises

³¹ For example, the work of Luis Zapata and in particular his novel *Las aventuras, desaventuras y sueños de Adonis García, el vampiro de la Colonia Roma* (1979), deals with the efforts of a small-town youth to make it Mexico City and to explore homosexual relationships.

questions in relation to the classification of national literature, given that his attention to ethics invites an exploration of the connection between different national contexts of Latin America. It is possible to suggest that the Mexican-Peruvian author creates a post-national territory in order to investigate the nodes of violence and elimination which compose the structure of modern power. On this point, Bellatin's fiction resonates with Jean Franco's definition of the trajectory of Latin American modernity along an axis of cruelty.³² Bellatin's writing calls for a consideration of the current conditions of cruelty in the global power structure and a search for forms of relation which take into account "el mal," that is, the systemic and rationalized expulsion and elimination of bodies.

In a similar vein, Mary Louise Pratt in "Tres incendios y dos mujeres extraviadas" analyzes the configuration of sex, gender, and urban violence in Bellatin's novella. According to Pratt, the violence exercised against masculine bodies in the narrative is presented as a consequence of the neoliberal order, which undermines the social contract which had established horizontal relationships of co-existence between male heterosexual citizens (93). In her interpretation, the narrator's effort in transforming the salon into the Terminal is designed to recuperate lost agency by constructing a monosexual masculine space governed by the administrative logic of capitalism (99). The project, however, turns out to be suicidal, which Pratt understands as the impossibility of imagining alternatives to the sexual order determined by the heterosexual social contract (100). A fundamental aspect of the text which escapes Pratt's analysis is that the narrator as well as the infected victims of "el mal" have always been excluded

³² In *Cruel Modernity* (2013), Franco argues that intentional, organized violence or cruelty is inherent to modernity and accepted as part of the natural order (1). Franco proposes that in the context of Latin America and particularly in Mexico, the process of conquest laid the foundation for modernity's practices of cruelty as the Spanish justified their violent efforts to eliminate the indigenous world. The perpetuation of violence in Mexico and Latin American through different stages of history has continued under the pretext of "modernization," which is another way of referring to the elimination of indigenous characteristics (8).

from social contracts that promote communal bonds between heterosexual men, since neoliberalism does not mark the beginning of violence against men who embody diverse sexualities.

Isabel Quintana, in her article “Escenografía del horror,” argues that the principal problematic of Bellatin’s work (in terms of form as well as content) can be condensed into the following question: How can horror be narrativized? According to Quintana, Bellatin’s work explores the violence that configures urban communities. The lack of a national referent signals for Quintana the value of representing situations and scenarios which precede identity and historical origins (488). In this way, the narrative remains limited to the laws of the text in which the abstract authority of state power controls bodies that are infected, aged, dying, or deformed. The narrative and the textual world, according to Quintana, are configured through the voices of bodies as a way of registering the modes of violence they have suffered. In *Salón de belleza*, the story of the transformation of the salon into the Terminal represents for Quintana a mode of survival for people who have been excluded from the protection of the state. However, the strict rules and rationality by which the space is governed provoke a deadly self-destructive impulse (492). The argument reiterated in Quintana’s article establishes that one of the consequences of the social contract is the creation of marginal spaces in which excluded populations survive governed by primitive impulses, which implies that the only way to be civilized is through an improvement of the social contract. Contrary to Quintana’s position, my reading of the text’s treatment of masculinity considers gender as the site in which subjects transcend their “primitive” status; that is, gender is the system necessary for the constitution of moral laws and construction of the potential for social being.

Alicia Vaggione's article "Literatura/Enfermedad: El cuerpo como desecho" offers an approach to *Salón de belleza* through Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception." Vaggione explores the way in which the infected bodies in the Terminal become waste, pure materiality, and thus excluded from the juridical order. She argues that the Terminal signifies a state of exception given the prevalence of disorder and the conditions which leave life so unprotected as to render murder null and void. In my analysis of the novella, the Terminal does not appear as a state of exception to the extent that the narrator is at least partially successful in creating a regulatory social system which diverges in significant ways from the dominant orientations of Western masculinity. And even as the failure of this project becomes apparent along with lack of sovereignty in the Terminal, my reading does not find indications of a state of exception, but rather argues that Terminal becomes a space defined by the continuities of the violence inherent to global capitalism.

Vek Lewis's study, "Salón de belleza: Genre and Narrative Point of View" also approaches the novella with the goal of analyzing the configuration of the infected body and the construction of the figure of the transvestite narrator. Lewis's argument focuses on the textual elements that are woven together to create the narrative, and he analyzes the voice of the narrator as a starting point to distinguish between healthy and infected bodies. Lewis argues that in the novella, the healthy and young body is site for expressing individuality and producing movement, fluidity, and transcendence, especially in terms of homoeroticism and transvestism. When the body is infected by "el mal," which Lewis identifies as HIV/AIDS, it is converted into the abject and denied any type of sexuality. The main difference lies in that the transvestite and homosexual are categories of "otherness" while the infected are deemed abject and refused participation in the self-other dynamic.

According to Lewis, the effort of Bellatin to maintain a non-didactic prose style without specific referents relates to his intention to demonstrate and critique the way in which the body is given meaning by the rhetoric constructed in centers of power such as the state. In this sense, Lewis identifies Bellatin's text as postmodern given that it seeks to deconstruct the function of narrative in the domination of bodies, or illnesses such as HIV/AIDS (137). In my own position, I argue that more than revealing "el mal" as discourse, the fiction of Bellatin shows its effects with the objective of illustrating the function that gender codes have in maintaining the framework of power in which "el mal" exists and of examining what possibilities there are for resisting it.

From a different perspective, Ángeles Donoso Macaya in her article "'Yo soy Mario Bellatin y soy de ficción' o el paradójico borde de lo autobiográfico en *El gran vidrio*" explains that Bellatin's work "revivifies notions of unity, completion, and coherence beginning with that which appears most elemental: the body. What is interesting is that the corporeal deformations, anomalies, or mutilations appear at the level of enunciation of the characters ... In this way, the bodily mutilation reverberates, one way or another, with the tongue and the word of the narrators" (105). Donoso shows that the mutilated autobiographical voice in Bellatin's fiction denounces two elements, one being the trauma of the protagonists/narrators (98), and the other, "the impossibility of a complete inscription" of the self (108). Similarly, in her analysis of one of Bellatin's self-reflexive short stories, she shows how the impossibility of a unified voice impedes the evolution, development, and regeneration of the narrative as well as the narrator himself, directly defying the autobiographical genre conventions. While I agree with Donoso's position on the relation between the body and text in Bellatin's work, I argue that in *Salón de belleza* the

lack of development or linear continuity in the narrative serves to denounce the absence of a language adequate to comprehend, name, and grasp that which is destroying people's bodies.

The problem of not having a language through which to approach local changes brought on by global politics is also a theme I explored in *Batalla en el cielo*. The lack of a common language contradicts the narratives of nationhood which purport to form subjects corresponding to the codes and politics which configure the "good life" promised by modernity. In *Salón de belleza*, the possibility of a common language is revealed as a function of social privilege; that is, there exist narratives, politics, and codes which allow certain subjects to be intelligible and to enjoy personal agency, but access to these is restricted. Differently from Marcos, the protagonist of Reygadas's film, who perceives the failure of masculine codes disseminated by the post-revolutionary state and falls into a state of almost complete paralysis, the narrator of *Salón de belleza*, conscious of the precariousness of his condition, seeks to counter the effects of failure by appropriating the gender codes that grant agency. The politics, mechanisms, and consequences of this effort are examined in the next section of my chapter.

3.2 Strategies of Power

The narrator's account of the origins of the beauty salon begins with the story of how he fled from his family home at an early age: "I had run away from my mother's house at that time. My mother never forgave me for not turning out to be the straight son she had wanted. As I had no source of income someone suggested I go up north" (33) ["En esa época recién me había escapado de la casa de mi madre, quien nunca me perdonó que no fuera el hijo recto con el que ella soñaba. Como no tenía medios de subsistencia, me aconsejaron que fuera al norte del país" (46)]. Having travelled on his own to a different region of the country, the narrator began working at a men's hotel and formed a particular bond with the owner: "[He] treated me with

respect. He always gave me advice ... He said that ... I should take advantage of my young age as much as possible. Thanks to him I handled my finances intelligently, and that's why ... I was able to return with enough capital to invest in a beauty salon" (34) [...me trataba con cariño. Me aconsejaba siempre ... Me dijo que yo debía de aprovechar lo más posible los años que tenía entonces ... Gracias a esa persona ... pude regresar con el capital necesario para invertirlo en la creación del salón de belleza" (47)]. Even though the narrator's "origin story" seemingly discloses the reasons for his escape from home, the episode which set in motion the series of events that led to the creation of the beauty salon and later the Terminal, its effect is rather to obfuscate. Specifically, he uses the ambiguous phrase "hijo recto" to refer to his mother's expectations that he apparently failed to meet, resulting in her disappointment which drove him away. The modifier "recto" carries a slightly different set of semantic possibilities than can be conveyed in the translator's rendering of the word as "straight." While "straight son" does have a double meaning as it may denote both heterosexuality and virtuous or respectable behavior (as in the expression "keeping on the straight and narrow"), the phrase "hijo recto" used negatively to express the mother's dissatisfaction over her son's failure to fulfill his familial role coincides more directly with connotations of a lack of integrity and moral rectitude while at the same time implying his inadequate masculinity, either in terms of his shortcomings as a potential household breadwinner, or his apparent homosexual tendencies. The ambiguity that inheres in the narrator's account of this crucial moment in his own past mirrors the vagueness and circumscription which characterize his representation of "el mal" throughout the text. The narrator inhabits a context defined by a lack of semantic precision, which can be linked to the absence of a common language to serve as the foundation for shared ethical principles in the public life of the community. In this sense, the narrator presents his early departure from home not simply as an

escape from the moral condemnation he receives from his mother, but also as the initiation of a search for a language or semiotic code that would bring social coherence to the configuration his body and gender; in other words, a signifying system capable of establishing the ethical basis of queer community.

Scarcity in *Salón de belleza* is not simply linguistic, but also economic, and the narrator's pursuit of moral integrity which develops over the course of the novella is driven simultaneously by his search for employment and financial stability. His first job in a hotel exclusively for men provides him with both the material conditions for survival and access to a community constituted in terms of masculine gender codes. His relocation from a familial and heterosexual space to a monosexual one is accompanied by a shift to an economy in which prostitution is implicitly accepted as a form of economic exchange rather than condemned as sexual misconduct that provokes outrage within bourgeois morality. Thus, the narrative tacitly connects questions of financial subsistence with the exploration of alternative ethical possibilities and formations of gender categories.

As his search continues, the narrator learns to rely on his body not simply as a means of economic survival, but as a site for producing actions and signs toward the construction of communal ethics as well as his own integrity. This becomes clear through his physical movements between distinct areas of the social environment, each with somewhat different configurations of moral and gender codes. He practices crossing through these separate spaces in his city by citing particular semiotic assemblages linked to masculinity and femininity, at times opting to dress as a woman and at others strategically deploying the signs of maleness. According to Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui in *Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature*, a basic definition transvestism is that it corresponds to “the performance of gender, of

what historically and culturally gets labelled ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’” (3). Importantly for this discussion, he develops his analysis toward the notion that this type of performance is significantly and paradoxically analogous to nationalism’s construction of a gendered subject. In his view, the process of transvestite identity formation occurs as a critical reflection of the nation’s rejection of undesirable bodies; in other words, transvestism incorporates an understanding of gender codes as a primary instrument of the state’s dominance and hegemony: “the transvestite internalizes the strategies of authority, of power” (10).

The narrator’s assimilation of strategies of power into his transvestite gender performances can be observed in his calculated methods of navigating through the structures of violence and codes of authority that pervade public and private spaces in the text. As he describes how he and his workmates at the salon would venture out at night in search of amusement, the narrator explains, “We couldn’t travel dressed as women for we had already gotten into dangerous situations more than once” (13-14) [“No podíamos viajar vestidos de mujer, pues en más de una ocasión habíamos pasado por peligrosas situaciones” (24)]. One such danger, mentioned several times in the text, is that of running into members of the violent Goat-Killer Gang who rove certain neighborhoods of the city seeking out vulnerable victims to terrorize. As an example of the narrator’s efforts to counteract the risks associated with passing into particular areas, he describes how he and his partners would move about particular zones of the city dressed as males carrying women’s clothing and makeup inside a valise. He furthermore informs us how, once he and his companions had changed into women’s dress, they “would hide the suitcases in a hole at the base of statues of national heroes” (14) [“ocultábamos los maletines en unos agujeros que había en la base de la estatua de uno de los héroes de la Patria” (24)]. This scene serves not only as a playful act of irreverence directed toward nationalist narratives of

history and the culture of patriotism, but also signals the narrator's awareness of the performativity implicit in the construction of the gendered figure of the national hero, whose representation in the public sphere masks a hidden truth.

The growing consciousness which the narrator exhibits in his efforts to re-configure dominant gender codes also becomes apparent in his management of the beauty salon, as he describes how the changes are gradually implemented: "We also began to start dressing like that [i.e., as women] when we attended our clients. It seemed to create a more intimate atmosphere in the beauty salon" (35) ["También habíamos adoptado la costumbre de vestirnos así [de mujer] para atender a las clientes. Me parecía que de ese modo se creaba un ambiente más íntimo en el salón" (48)]. Creating this "intimate" relationship with the women who come to the salon, however, is revealed as more of a pragmatic business strategy than an authentic gesture of personal confidence as the narrator's primary objective is not to share bonds of friendship or community with the clients but rather to improve the economic viability of the salon. As he explains, "That's how my clientele gradually began to grow and I could afford everything I needed to make my clients feel they were in a first-class establishment" (34) ["Así fue como la clientela fue gradualmente aumentando y eso me permitió comprar los elementos necesarios para hacer creer a las clientes que se encontraban en un establecimiento de alta categoría" (47)]. In this regard, the narrator's deployment of the signs of gender in the syntactical rearrangement of the transvestite performance corresponds closely to Victor Seidler's description of the relationship between masculinity and utilitarianism in language. In *Discovering Masculinities*, he writes, "an instrumental-purposive model of action comes to structure men's lives, including ... a particular relationship to language so that language comes to be used as a weapon for the

defense of masculine identity, rather than a mode of expressing connectedness with others, or honesty about emotional life” (7).

The narrator’s strategic and functional use of sign systems in the salon invites a skeptical reading of his construction of the events composing the narrative as well as of the explanations he provides of his motives and the efforts he makes to re-configure the ethical framework of his own actions. His careful arrangement of the elements of the story often appear designed to give his choices the veneer of moral acceptability, similar to the way in which his gender performances allow him to gain the confidence of his clients or to pass safely through distinct social spheres controlled by violence. In relation to the customers at the salon, he sometimes presents himself as motivated by noble intentions which correspond to the needs and desires of women who are forced to live in a patriarchal world which values them primarily for their youth and beauty. He claims that the salon had originally “been dedicated to beautifying women” (23) [“había embellecido hasta la saciedad a las mujeres” (34-35), the majority of whom were “old [and] worn-out ... [by] long-term suffering (20) [“mujeres viejas o acabadas por la vida [y] una larga agonía” (30). Aesthetic and compassionate reasons are also cited for his decision to install the aquariums throughout the salon as he explains, “The hope was that while the clients were being attended to they would feel as if they were submerged in crystal-clear water, rejuvenated and beautiful once they returned to the surface” (15) [“Lo que buscaba era que las clientas tuvieran la sensación de encontrarse sumergidas en agua cristalina mientras eran tratadas, para luego salir rejuvenecidas y bellas a la superficie” (25)]. By deflecting attention away from his material goal of running a successful business, the narrator crafts a particular impression of himself in the text using similar strategies to those he employs with clients in the salon itself.

The narrator's deliberate efforts to construct a space (and a text) with an ethical basis become intelligible through a rhetoric which simultaneously conceals and reveals the motives and consequences of his actions. At numerous significant moments in the narrative, he subtly minimizes indications of his own agency. His account early on in the text of the first three fish that he buys for the salon's aquariums illustrates a rhetorical pattern of masking or justifying his association with control, cruelty, and death. On the first few pages of the novella, the narrator explains how he began his project of breeding fish with three royal guppies, a male and two females, one of which is pregnant. After the first night, the male fish inexplicably perishes and the narrator removes it from the aquarium. Next, the pregnant female gives birth to several offspring, all but three of which are eaten by the other female. Finally, the female that had given birth dies and is removed from the tank. The narrator's matter-of-fact tone during this brief anecdote suggests that he wants to present the fish as governed by the laws of nature and their animal instincts. But his responsibility for the fate of the fish in his aquariums is simultaneously unveiled through the parallel descriptions of his intentionality to buy colorful fish to attract customers to the salon and of the control he exercises over the artificial environment and the fish's possibilities for survival. His management of the aquariums is sometimes characterized in benevolent terms, as when he explains, "I tried to figure out the right amount of food to give the fish to prevent them from overeating or starving. Controlling the amount of food also helped keep the water crystal clear at all times all times" (2) ["Simplemente traté de darles la cantidad correcta de comida para que los peces no sufrieran de empacho ni murieran de hambre. El control de la comida ayudaba además a mantener el agua cristalina" (10)]. Yet, at the same time, he is compelled to admit his less principled reasons for intervening in their survival: "At one point I grew bored of having only guppies and golden carp. I think it's a personality flaw. I grow

tired of things very quickly. ... Without any feelings of remorse I gradually stopped feeding them and hoped they would eat each other” (5-6) [“... pronto me aburrí de tener exclusivamente Guppys y Capras Doradas. Creo que se trata de una deformación de mi personalidad: muy pronto me canso de las cosas que me atraen. ... Sin remordimiento alguno dejé de alimentarlos con la esperanza de que se fueran comiendo unos a otros” (14)].

Throughout the text, the narrator’s rhetoric is fraught with subtle and not-so-subtle contradictions. In relation to the fish, his discourse initially implies an understanding of them as natural beings determined by their own independent processes, but at the same time he shows that he is conscious of asserting his own power within a system of asymmetric relations in which he retains control over the life and death of the animals in his care. The underlying discrepancy in this case corresponds to a key conceptual opposition that informs masculinity as a gender category: the historically constructed division between natural order and the social order (Seidler 188). This separation forms the basis of the narrator’s granting himself the power to take part actively in an ethical structure which “conceives relations between people as private and voluntaristic, and sees power as having to do merely with access to goods, thereby becoming tied to distributive conceptions of justice” (Seidler 10). In this sense, even though he does not endorse it directly, the narrator’s control over the existence of the fish coheres with the notion of a hierarchal division between the rational, social beings and those which are tied to the natural world and are incapable of acting in accordance with a system of ethics. Seidler shows how the concept of justice as detached from the formation of the individual is inherent to liberal politics that “embodies a Kantian rationalistic inheritance ... [B]y assuming the integrity of the individual, liberalism precludes itself from developing a sense ... of the damage done to the individual through the workings of the relationships of power and subordination” (10). In *Salón*

de belleza, relations of power and subordination are introduced early in narrator's experience of exploitation at the hands of the owner of the hotel where he gets his first job. However, the narrator's omission of any acknowledgement of his own subordinate position suggests that in order to sustain a perspective in which he is defined as a rational and moral individual he must minimize the role of power relations in these narratives and justify the differences of power that he himself creates and relies upon.

The narrator's lack of remorse over the mistreatment of the fish or the manipulation of the clients illustrates how his construction of events in the text is designed to uphold his own sense of justification and moral validity. His mode of self-representation suggests he has internalized a form of masculinity in keeping with the Enlightenment model of subjectivity, which rests on a conceptual equivalency between the masculine and the moral. In this regard, Seidler writes that "Rationalism has always tended to be legislative, believing that through the independent workings of reason, independent of our experiences and desires, we could discern what is 'right' and 'wrong'" (182). The narrator's identification of his morality with his masculinity gives him the confidence and justification to oversee the fate of the other living beings. He exercises logical control over the structure of events in the narrative in order to detach himself from any implications of unethical behavior that would undermine his masculinity and moral integrity. At the same time, his mastery over the sign systems associated with gender allows him to move effectively through public spaces, to transform private spaces, and to control what types of relations will be established with other individuals in these spaces. In this sense, his strategic deployment of gender codes goes beyond the notion of performance and is presented as intertwined with the underlying structures of the regime of power which he inhabits, and of which "el mal" is a direct consequence. Taking into account the narrator's configuration of his

own role in the construction of the text, his consciousness of the power of gender-signifying codes, and the agency he exercises in the formation and governance of social spaces, it becomes possible to interpret his account of his visits to the bathhouse and later his construction of the Terminal in terms of a discourse of spatial and temporal queerness.

3.3 Beyond Masculine Morality

Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* develops the notion of a spatiality and temporality of queerness which is in opposition of the time and space of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction (1). For him, this implies the construction of a logic that runs counter to the dominant values of bourgeois society. In *Salón de belleza*, the search for a form of life that differs fundamentally from the hegemonic norm is suggested in the narrator's descriptions of his visits to a bathhouse: "My favorite one was run by a Japanese family. It was a place exclusively for men. ... Like the sign outside the baths, the wooden counter in the lobby, with multicolor fish and red dragons carved into it, was an attempt to create a Japanese look" (6-7) ["El local de mi preferencia era atendido por una familia de japoneses y era exclusivo para personas de sexo masculino ... En el vestíbulo habían tratado de respetar el estilo oriental que se notaba en el letrero de la puerta. Allí había un mostrador decorado con peces multicolores y con dragones rojos tallados en alto relieve" (16-17)]. The narrator's emphasis on the oriental context he finds so appealing marks his intention to cross of a boundary beyond the Western bourgeois order which informs and structures his masculine and rational subjectivity. His stress on the exclusion of women from the space (apart from the owner's daughters, who work as receptionists) further suggests how it appears to him an alternative to the heteronormative social system.

The narrator describes a form of ritual shedding of one's exterior self which is involved with entering the bathhouse, conceptualized as part of a process designed to signal the opening

up of a distinct spatio-temporal domain: “They would give visitors a clear plastic bag in which they could store their valuables ... The Japanese girls would then put your bag into a numbered locker and usher you into the next room” (7) [“El primer paso era la entrega de pequeñas bolsas de plástico transparente para que el mismo visitante introdujera en ellas sus objetos de valor ... Las japonesas entonces guardaban la bolsa en un casillero determinado. Después hacían la invitación para que se pasara a una sala posterior” (16)]. The next step consists of removing one’s clothing. With regard to this requirement, the narrator stresses how on his visits to the bathhouse he “always made a point of wearing men’s clothes” (7) [“tenía la precaución de llevar sólo prendas masculinas” (16-17)] Once nude, visitors are handed two towels with which to cover themselves before making their way into the baths proper. This exchange of male garments for a simple pair of towels represents more than a change of attire; it signals the discarding of one’s masculine performance. The final stage of the transformation is marked by the detachment of one’s body from the categories of gender that occurs as one enters the baths and the towel is removed, at which point “anything can happen” (9) [“cualquier cosa puede ocurrir” (18)].

This account of the narrator’s visits to the bathhouse suggests possibilities for sociality in a time and place not governed by the established gender categories which take shape as an intrinsic component of modern power mechanisms of subjectification and governmentality, as indicated by his analogy: “At that moment I always felt like I was inside one of my aquariums ... I also experienced the same strange feeling as when the larger fish hunted the smaller ones” (9) [“En esos momentos siempre me sentía como si estuviera dentro de uno de mis acuarios ... También vivía el extraño sentimiento producido por la persecución de los peces grandes que buscan comerse a los chicos” (18)]. In the fish tanks, the lack of language and a rational power regime apparently permits the existence of a state of pure nature where beings are ruled only by

their corporeal instincts, and the narrator suggest that a similar possibility arises in the baths. In this sense, time and place he describes does not correspond to a community of resistance, but rather to a state of absolute vulnerability: “At that moment, the lack of any possible defense and the thickness of the clear walls of the aquarium became a very palpable, all-encompassing reality” (9-10) [“En esos momentos la capacidad de defensa, los rígidos que pueden ser las transparentes paredes de los acuarios eran una realidad que se abría en toda su plenitud” (19)].

The narrator’s representation of the bathhouse as space of vulnerability rather than one of community where resistant subjects can seek alternative forms of politics by detaching themselves from the dominant social order signals its failure in terms of the construction of queer space since it remains constrained by an established set of rules which limit access and control which bodies may enter. The narrator’s comparison of the bathhouse with an aquarium suggests that the “pursuits” are neither fortuitous, natural, nor voluntary, and as such, the “queer space” does not initiate a distinct temporality as it depends upon the existing order of power for its conditions of possibility. In *Salón de belleza*, the impossibility of creating a queer time and space also becomes clear when infected male bodies begin to appear abandoned on the city streets, revealing that which lies outside of the control of the citizens and of the narrator himself as it emerges from a logic and language of cruelty that they cannot access: “el mal.”

3.4 The Subversion of the Hyper-Masculine Order

The narrator’s account of his own efforts to construct the Terminal as an alternative space takes shape within the context of the uncontrolled epidemic of “el mal,” and throughout the narrative he highlights not only the damage that the virus does to bodies, but also the suffering caused by the expulsion of the infected from the state establishments which are ostensibly designed to provide some form of protection:

The first time I accepted a guest was at the request of one of my co-workers ... That time ... my co-worker told me how one of his closest friends was on the brink of death and no hospital would take him in. The sick person's family didn't want to take care of him either and so due to a lack of economic possibilities his only option was to die under one of the bridges by the river that runs parallel to the city. (36-37)

[La primera vez que acepté a un huésped, lo hice a pedido de uno de los muchachos que trabajaba conmigo ... aquella vez ... me contó que uno de sus amigos más cercanos estaba al borde de la muerte y no querían recibirlo en ningún hospital. Su familia tampoco quería hacerse cargo del enfermo y por falta de recursos económicos su única alternativa habría sido morir bajo uno de los puentes del río que corre por la ciudad. (50-51)]

Significantly, the social establishments which reject and abandon the infected are those which have played a critical function in the maintenance of a patriarchal order, i.e. families and public health institutions. In this context, it becomes pertinent to ask, what has caused the weakening of the institutions which had protected, served, and cared for men? In what ways is their function in relation to the gender system changing, especially under the pressures of globalized neoliberalism? And what types of performance does the narrator of *Salón de belleza* adopt in order to contend with the devastating effects of the new order? Along a similar line with these questions, Pratt avers that the novella's representation of violence in the shape of the absence of protection or networks of support to alleviate the suffering of those infected with "el mal," "se lee lógicamente como ruptura del contrato social, o como evidencia de la erosión del contrato social" (93) ["can be logically read as a breakdown of the social contract, or as evidence of the

erosion of the social contract”]. Fiona Robinson in *The Ethics of Care* explains that the social contract is inherent to the masculine system and a result of the changes of power that occurred after the seventeenth century: “the great revolution that was the birth of liberal ideas in the seventeenth century challenged the notion of patriarchal rule by asserting the fundamental equality of men based on the idea of natural rights. Knowable to reason, these rights belonged to all men and led to the birth of the idea of democracy through the heuristic device of the social contract” (33). She also shows that one of the consequences of positing the consubstantiality of maleness, reason, and morality is that women are defined by their “natural” qualities such as reproduction and nurturing. As such, men retained dominion over the public space, and women were relegated to the private sphere. For Robinson, the immediate effect of this division is that the activities related to sanitation, caregiving, and childrearing are hence considered feminine responsibilities. She emphasizes that “devaluating the activities of care may contribute to the maintenance of ‘cultures of violence’” (24).

In *Salón de belleza*, violence does appear to cohere to the logic explained by Robinson in the sense that “el mal” manifestly dominates the city and its inhabitants, taking over the power of the state and its institutions, destroying the possibilities for a legitimate space in which to enact an ethics of care. But this does necessarily signify the erosion of a social contract, that is, the weakening of a patriarchal structure of power that establishes equal relations between men with shared interests. Nor does it correspond to a relationship between center and periphery, as generated by the nation-state. The violence can be conceived of as a ruling order fundamentally distinct from the democratic ideals of Western modernity. “El mal” appears as both the cause and

effect of a structure of domination based on hyper-masculinity and extreme cruelty which deploys expulsion and death as the primary means of social control.³³

The initial decision to subvert “el mal” takes shape through the narrator’s involvement in communal acts of caregiving, which imply a set of values and motives corresponding to the feminine gender codes and performances:

My co-worker begged me to take him in and I agreed without thinking much about the consequences. ... That young man died one month after he arrived. I remember how we all almost went crazy trying to revive him. We brought in doctors, nurses and herbalists, and we even went to visit some witch doctors. We took up a collection among friends to buy him some very expensive medicine.
(37-38)

[El muchacho que trabajaba conmigo, me rogó que lo recogiéramos ... [y] acepté sin pensar mucho en las consecuencias ... Aquél joven murió al mes de su internamiento. Recuerdo que casi nos volvimos locos al tratar de restablecerlo. Convocamos a algunos médicos, enfermeras y yerberos. También personas que se dedicaban a la curandería. Hicimos algunas colectas entre los amigos para comprar medicamentos, que eran sumamente caros. (50)]

One of the elements which highlights the type of support which is offered to the victim of the disease is that it emerges from a community of friends. The group participates in the physical and economic care of those who are stricken by “el mal.” Importantly, this is not a community

³³ The mode of power I describe as the signified of “el mal” would seem to correspond to that which Jean Franco in *Cruel Modernity* identifies as inherent to Latin American modernity. For Franco, the modern era begins with the conquest of the Americas, and it is during this fatal encounter that social relations based on limitless cruelty begin to take shape (7-8). According to Franco, one of the key characteristics of Latin American modernity is a rationalizing discourse which accepts the social, economic, and political necessity of cruelty. Her analysis reveals that empathy and care are not compatible with the logic of modern formations of capitalism in Latin America.

constructed on the basis of a patriarchal social contract, but rather a collective relationship driven by compassion. Even though it is not mentioned explicitly, emotional support is a key part of the process as it emerges from friendship and not as part of an effort to protect mutual self-interest. Furthermore, the phrase “we almost went crazy” [“casi nos volvimos locos”] suggests an experience of heightened concern shared among the friends which contravenes the rational principles that uphold the patriarchal order. The affect which moves the narrator to participate in caring for the first “guest” of the Terminal corresponds to a logic distinct from the one produced by Kantian configuration of the individual, rational and moral male subject. Virginia Held, in her book *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, refers to the practice of providing care to another person who may or may not form part of the same community as an integral part of the ethics of care and its feminist disposition. According to Held,

The ethics of care usually works with a conception of persons as relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories. The dominant theories can be interpreted as importing into moral theory a concept of the person developed primarily for liberal political and economic theory, seeing the person as a rational, autonomous agent, or a self-interested individual (13).

The recognition of dependency as the essential element in the formation of a person eliminates the socio-spatial division between public and private spheres and the attendant gender signifying systems which produce the individual as a rational and independent subject. In this sense, by developing performance based on the recognition of his relational subjectivity, the narrator engages in an effort to construct the Terminal as subversive space that challenges the mode of power represented by “el mal.”

After the first guest swiftly dies, the impetus for the creation of the Terminal is shifted toward the narrator's empathetic sensitivity to the comfort and dignity of the victims of the sickness rather than a utilitarian principle of keeping them alive by any means: "I don't know where we got the idea that helping sick people means keeping them away from the jaws of death at all costs. I made up my mind after that experience [i.e. of the first guest] that if there was no other option the best thing was a quick death under the most comfortable conditions I could offer the sick person" (38). ["No sé dónde nos han enseñado que socorrer al desvalido es tratar de apartarlo a cualquier precio de las garras de la muerte. A partir de esa experiencia [la del primer huésped] tomé la decisión de que si no había otro remedio, lo mejor era una muerte rápida dentro de las condiciones más adecuadas que era posible brindársele al enfermo" (52)]. Affected by this impulse toward care, the narrator explains that he decided to found the Terminal as a place where the infected "were guaranteed a bed, a bowl of soup and the company of all the other dying people ["tenían una cama, un plato de sopa y la compañía asegurados" (50)]. Thus, a subversive moral practice is revealed in the creation of the Terminal, even while its principle of organization is that of helping the sick to die. As Held mentions, "The ethics of care starts with the moral claims of particular others, for instance, of one's child, whose claims can be compelling regardless of universal principles" (10). The abstract moral principle that life ought to be preserved regardless of the circumstances, which can be linked to a rationalist, scientific, and utilitarian ideology embedded in modern legal and medical frameworks, is what the narrator has to reject in order to address the immediate needs of the terminally sick victims who arrive at his door.

By limiting himself to offering the most basic forms of care to only the most hopeless cases, the narrator tries to uphold a structure of relational dependency. At times, he says, "young,

strong men” [“muchachos jóvenes y vigorosos”] would arrive at the Terminal, and he would have to send them away and tell them to return “only when their bodies were unrecognizable” (39) [“hasta cuando sus cuerpos estuvieran irreconocibles” (53)]. When they did return, he explains, “It was surprising to see how this kind of guest, the ones who had knocked on the door while still healthy and whom I only accepted later, were the most thankful for the care they received” (40) [“Y era sorprendente ver que este tipo de huésped, el que había tocado la puerta sano para ser rechazado después, era el más agradecido con los cuidados” (54)]. The gratitude is presented as proof that the infected are in agreement with the ideals realized by the narrator’s ethical project. In a general sense, what he achieves is that relational dependency rather than abstract morality becomes the basis for determining ethical actions. His conception of relations with the guests therefore differs from patriarchal notions of abstract political equality among subjects within the public sphere. The narrator attempts to construct set of moral relations based on care and emotional connection, that is, on a dependence rather than independence. In many ways, this corresponds to Held’s assertions regarding the ethics of care, as in the following passage:

Those who conscientiously care for others are not seeking primarily to further their own *individual* interests; their interests are intertwined with the persons they care for. Neither are they acting for the sake of *all others* or *humanity in general*; they seek instead to preserve or promote an actual human relation between themselves and *particular others*. Persons in caring relations are acting for self-and-others together (12; original emphases)

Interestingly, the narrator must also care for himself at the same time as he attends to the sick and dying at the Terminal, not simply because they form part of the same community, but

because he wants to assert death as a principle for the creation of another type of system, which would serve to oppose the practices of cruelty and expulsion directed against biologically male bodies. The conceptual basis of the narrator's project of creating the Terminal as a space which offers both an escape from the effects of "el mal" as well as from the constraints of dominant gender categories takes shape through references to his experiences in the bathhouse and with assembling his aquariums. Once the beauty salon begins its transformation into the Terminal, the narrator notes how the fish tanks also start to change: "The water ... isn't very clear anymore. It's taken on a greenish tinge, fogging up the glass walls of the aquarium" (19) ["el agua ya no es cristalina. Ha adquirido un tono verdoso que ha terminado por empañar las paredes del acuario" (29)]. This prompts the narrator to admire the capacity for survival of the new royal guppies he had acquired: "What surprises me most is the resiliency of this last batch of fish. Regardless of the small amount of time I dedicate to raising them they still somehow cling to life. It reminds me of the strange death often experienced in steam baths. There is also long-term suffering in the baths" (19-20) ["Y lo que me sorprende son lo fiel que se ha mostrado esta última camada de peces. Pese al poco tiempo dedicado a su crianza, se aferran de una manera extraña a la vida. Me hacen recordar esa curiosa muerte que sentía en los Baños Turcos. Allí también existía una larga agonía" (30)]. The anguish associated with the bathhouse is presented as interminable suggesting, in accordance with my previous reading, that queer space implies a stalled temporality in which completion is perpetually deferred. As distinct from the bathhouse, in the Terminal, death becomes a *real* end to the present situation: "The subject of long-term suffering ... has nothing to do with my guests. They are cursed. The less time they spend in the Terminal the better" (20) ["...el tema de la larga agonía no tenía nada que ver con los huéspedes. En ellos la larga agonía era una suerte de maldición. Mientras menos tiempo estuvieran alojados en el

Moridero era mejor para ellos” (30-31)]. Death, then, comes to signify an ending that gives way to the start of a new temporality.

In *Salón de belleza*, the Terminal appears to suggest a system originating in the configuration of a subject which challenges the model of the rational masculine individual. The objective of constructing a space on this premise requires that the guests of the Terminal proceed to their deaths since this opens the possibility of eradicating the vestiges of a network of power linked to the gender system which excludes them and makes them disposable. At the same time, the Terminal is premised on a future outcome conceived as a teleological projection which appears cut short given that only death—albeit configured within an ethics of care—can bring to an end the division between public and private space and, concomitantly, the binary gender system. However, maintaining the Terminal and its politics of death brings up a host of other problems which contradict the principles of the ethics of care and, in fact, prevent the act of dying from becoming a symbol of the start of a new temporality.

The contradiction is revealed, once more, through the narrator’s attempts to establish an analogy between the aquariums and his experience of reality. He explains how he took steps to prevent the contagion from spreading into his last remaining fish tank: “I’ve placed this fish tank somewhat away from the guests. I don’t want their rot to reach the water; I don’t want the fish to be infected with any fungus, virus or bacteria” (19) [“La pecera la he colocado en un lugar alejado de los huéspedes. No quiero que las miasmas caigan encima del agua. No quiero que los peces se vean atacados por hongos, virus o bacterias” (29)]. Despite these remarks, it becomes clear in the very next sentence that the narrator himself is the one most likely responsible for the infection of the aquariums. Having already established that he himself has contracted the disease (“yo también estoy atacado por el mal” (12)], he confesses that “Sometimes when no one is

looking I put my head into the fish tank and I even go so far as to touch the water with the tip of my nose” (19) [“A veces, cuando nadie me ve, introduzco la cabeza en la pecera e incluso llego a tocar el agua verdosa con la punta de la nariz” (29-30)]. The enclosed space of the Terminal thus becomes an extension of the same network of power signified by “el mal” as the narrator’s seemingly deliberate dispersal of the sickness into the aquariums creates a reminder that what impedes the project of constructing a field of subversion is that death is not symbolic but real. The demise of the guests at the Terminal, then, does not mark the end of one system and the beginning of another, but rather re-affirms the disposability of bodies deemed inadequate to perform within the parameters of established gender codes.

3.5 Conclusions: The Failure of the Terminal and Transgender Ethics

The narrator’s management of the Terminal becomes an obstacle for the formation of a space which can sustain an ethics of care. The Terminal’s original formulation in terms of communal relations of dependency conflicts with the narrator’s role as the main authority figure and arbiter of the strict set of rules that regulate the space. At times, he rhetorically constructs an ambivalent attitude toward his position of authority, as when he says, “I don’t know why I insist on being the only one to take care of business here” (21) [“No sé de dónde me viene la terquedad de llevar yo solo la conducción del salón” (31)]. He also suggests that he has no other choice but to take sole control of the project, since “My fellow workers, the ones I worked with in hairstyling and cosmetics, died long ago” (21) [“Mis compañeros de antes, con los que trabajaba en los peinados y en la cosmetología, han muerto hace ya mucho tiempo” (31)]. The narrator’s sense of isolation and disconnection can certainly be understood as symptoms of his awareness of his own impending death from the disease, but they also appear as manifestations of the barriers to dialogue in the Terminal, which interrupt the process of forming a community rooted

in the ethics of care. Without dialogue, the narrator loses the ethical relations he had created with the victims of the disease in his effort to understand their needs. For this reason, the ethical community of care is displaced by a system of norms and values which bring the Terminal closer to the Kantian model of morality, in which abstract principles justify the actions of the individuals who claim to embody them.

Throughout the text, the narrator describes the rules which he upholds in the Terminal: “I believe I’ve mentioned that doctors and medicine are prohibited here, as are herbal and spiritual healers and moral support from friends and families. The rules of the Terminal are inflexible. Outsiders can only donate money, candy and bed clothes” (20-21) [“Como creo haber dicho en algún momento, los médicos y las medicinas están prohibidos en el salón de belleza. También las yerbas medicinales, los curanderos y el apoyo moral de los amigos o familiares. En ese aspecto, las reglas del Moridero son inflexibles. La ayuda sólo se acepta con dinero en efectivo, golosinas y ropa de cama” (30-31)]. The control that he exercises in the Terminal recalls his mastery over the gender codes which he employed in the salon and also in the careful planning he used to travel through the city and gain access to the bathhouse. In the salon, his appropriation of the gender system was partly intended to help him maintain the viability of the business, whereas in the bathhouse, the purpose was to explore the possibilities for detaching from the heteronormative social structure and the modes of performance it requires. In the Terminal, the narrator’s assumption of control is intended to preserve the principles which form the basis of the project, including that of need to ensure a dignified and humane final transition: “It wasn’t death that got me. The only thing I wanted was to make sure these people, abandoned by state hospitals, didn’t die like dogs in the middle of the street” (38) [“No me conmovía la muerte como muerte. Lo que quería evitar era que esas personas perecieran como perros en medio de la calle,

o bajo el abandono de los hospitales del Estado (52)]. This original idea of helping people to die with their dignity and humanity intact allows the bodies in the Terminal to be distinguished from animals by integrating them into a system based on a shared recognition of dependency, on an ethics of care. However, the effort to oppose the ideology of death and expulsion of “el mal” through the tightly controlled conditions of the Terminal creates a moral contradiction which manifests most directly in the narrator’s refusal to admit women into the space. In this way, the cruelty which results from the narrator’s assertion of individual control over the Terminal begins to mirror that of the “el mal” itself: “The Terminal underwent a crisis when several women came to ask me to let them die here. They came to the salon in very bad condition. Some were holding small children also ravaged by the disease. I stood firm from the very beginning” (23) [“Uno de los momentos de crisis por los que pasó el Moridero, fue cuando tuve que vérmelas con mujeres que pedían alojamiento para morir. Venían hasta la puerta en pésimas condiciones. Algunas de ellas traían en sus brazos a sus pequeños hijos también atacados por el mal. Pero yo desde el primer momento me mostré inflexible (33-34)].

Even though “el mal” affects women as much as it does men, the narrator insists that the Terminal remain a space exclusively for males: “I never accepted anyone that wasn't a man” (34) [“Nunca acepté a nadie que no fuera del sexo masculino” (35)]. The rigorous and resolute enforcement of the rule separating the two genders reveals the narrator’s intention to create a community that is intelligible in the terms established by the larger network of power, but which is no longer excluded from its social protections. In response to the institutional rejection faced by victims of the disease, the narrator’s initial project of creating a community of care soon becomes an institution designed to validate male bodies using mechanisms of expulsion, and death which are in many ways equivalent to the cruelties which create and sustain “el mal.” An

important indicator of this process is the narrator's injunction against affection in the Terminal as a means of giving priority to the instrumental goals of the project.

In order to illustrate the importance of prohibiting emotional attachment to ensure the effective functioning of the Terminal, the narrator describes an episode which "could be considered a stain on my work record" (31) ["podría considerarlo como una mancha negra en mi oficio" (45)]. His regretful error of "having become emotionally involved" with one of the guests occurred at a time when "I still had not yet perfected my technique" (31) ["...me arrepiento de haber caído sentimentalmente ... aún no había perfeccionado del todo mi técnica" (44)]. After this experience, the narrator develops a utilitarian system for treating the bodies under his care, which he describes as follows:

I manage to impose the appropriate atmosphere. I don't really know how to describe this state, though it's something like a total lethargy in which even the possibility of their inquiring about their own health no longer exists. This is the ideal slate in which to work. In this way it's possible to avoid becoming involved with any particular individual. It's easier to handle the workload and the chores get done without interference. (31)

[...logro establecer la atmósfera apropiada. Se trata de un estado que no sabría bien cómo describir con propiedad. Logran el aletargamiento total, donde no le cabe a ninguno la posibilidad de preguntarse por él mismo. Este es el estado ideal para trabajar. De esa forma, logras no involucrarte con ninguno en especial y de ese modo haces más expeditivas tus labores. Cumples así con tu trabajo sin ninguna clase de traba. (44)]

The elimination of any type of emotional or affective relation with the infected in order to create a purely functional methodology in the Terminal contradicts the principles of the ethics of care which have empathy as a foundational component. The narrator's "perfected" model, which privileges detachment and abstraction, is fully coherent with the order of hyper-masculinity. The rigidity and absolute authority with which the narrator governs the Terminal reveals his intention to perform an ethics of care only as an instrumental means of establishing himself as a visible subject within patriarchal social order which produced "el mal." His assertion of a masculine gender role in his position of control suggests that he seeks a politics of integration which would restore official protections and recognitions to those biologically male bodies who had been rejected by the regime of cruelty. However, as my discussion has attempted to show, gender categories are not a weapon that can be used to combat "el mal." On the contrary, these categories are inherent to the model of power that produces "el mal."

In *Salón de belleza*, the narrator's fluid comparisons between the salon, the aquariums, the bathhouse, and the Terminal locate the bodies of the people and the fish within the same framework of categorization. He conceptualizes each of these enclosed spaces in terms of the logic that produces "el mal" which allows certain bodies to be considered disposable. In the same way, the absence of a common language that would serve to dismantle "el mal" as well as to gain access to the network of power that generates it, reveals its temporal permanence; that is, "el mal" appears as the root that has sustained the distinct languages that comprise the stages of modernity. Masculinity is presented as inherent to "el mal" given that it is an order that excludes all manifestations of femininity, including the most basic possibility of creating communities or relations based on care, empathy, and mutual well-being. Within *Salón de belleza*'s exploration of "el mal" as a manifestation of the regime of hyper-masculinity, Bellatin presents a pessimistic

vision in which men live like fish, enclosed within invisible cages that determine the meanings and possibilities of their own bodies and performances, allowing principles of cruelty to administer and control the distribution of what is necessary for one's health, well-being and survival. In the same way, ethical formations seeking ways to detach from the categories of gender also remain inside the stagnant water of the fish tank in which the bodies that don't correspond to the European order are consumed and disposed of.

4. NEW MASCULINITIES IN *Y TU MAMÁ TAMBIÉN* AND *RUDO AND CURSI*

4.1 Introduction

In my discussion of Mario Bellatín's *Salón de belleza* I examined the novel's account of male bodies whose social being is determined under the parameters of global, hegemonic, masculine morality. As distinct from the center-periphery dynamics associated with national power frameworks, the global structure I described exercises practices of expulsion which are inherent to the ethics and politics of globalization in a context defined by the vestiges of a nationalist and capitalist order. In this chapter, I continue exploring the relationship between global codes of masculinity and the national order, but in contemporary Mexican cinema. I am particularly interested in exploring how national cinema participates in the circuit of transnational film.

Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden in "What is Transnational Cinema?" explain that "In its simplest guise, the transnational can be understood as the global forces that link people or institutions across nations" (1) and they further note that "transnational cinema—which by definition has its own globalizing imperatives—transcends the national as autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force" (2). In the field of contemporary Mexican cinema, two examples which clearly reflect the influence of global political and economic transformations on film production are Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001), and his brother Carlos's *Rudo y cursi* (2008), due not only to their international critical and financial success, but also to shared cinematographic and thematic proposals they deploy in order to move across borders more fluidly.³⁴

³⁴ Along with a handful of other directors, Alfonso Cuarón became associated with the beginning of a renaissance in Mexican film which brought a surge of international attention to a cohort of independent filmmakers in the country and marked the entrance of Mexican cinema into the transnational marketplace. In "A Mexican Nouvelle Vague:

My argument is that *Y tu mamá también* and *Rudo y cursi* mark their allegiance to a global cinema aesthetic through the representation of contemporary Mexico as a chain of signifiers linked to the national imaginary. In this sense, their cinematic practice is integrated with a set of cultural codes governed by the asymmetric structures of power of the hegemonic transnational order, and thus upheld by the same principles of masculinity which form the pillars of the ideology of *mexicanidad*. Alfonso Cuarón's film explores the effects of the transfer of political power from the PRI to the PAN and the impact of NAFTA on the national economy, while that of Carlos Cuarón takes place during Felipe Calderón's declared war against the drug cartels. But even though both films present readily identifiable Mexican socio-historical contexts, their composition nonetheless reveals an underlying trajectory towards integration into the field of transnational cinematic production and marketing.³⁵

In the case of *Rudo y cursi*, the film received financial backing from companies with transnational scope, such as Cha Cha Cha Films, a production firm established as a partnership between three of Mexico's most internationally recognized directors, Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro. It also received additional funding from Producciones Anhelo (owned by Jorge Vergara, a Mexican billionaire and founder of the Omnilife corporation), Canana Films (Mexico), Focus Features (U.S.), Universal (U.S.) and Esperanto Filmoj (a U.S.-based firm owned by Alfonso Cuarón). The film was also picked up for distribution in Mexico by Universal and by Sony Pictures Classics in the U.S. *Y tu mamá*

The Logic of New Waves under Globalization," Jeff Menne argues that the films that did the most to provoke discussions of a revival of Mexican cinema are *Amores perros* (2000) directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*, and *El crimen del padre Amaro* (2002) by Carlos Carrera (72). He also explains that these films prompted a new configuration of film culture in which the national and the global spheres of reception interact (73).

³⁵ According to Luisa Alvaray in "National, Regional, and Global: New Waves of Latin American cinema" the alliances between European, U.S., and Latin American film production companies has generated changes at the level of infrastructure which in turn shifted the theoretical and discursive foundations of Latin American cinema (56).

también, for its part, was financed mostly by private investment from Jorge Vergara, but received distribution from Twentieth Century Fox in Mexico, and from IFC Films and Good Machine in the U.S.; the film went on to become a major domestic and international box office success.³⁶

The transnational dimensions of *Y tu mamá también* also take shape in relation to the film's genre associations as a road movie. Part of my position in this chapter is that the genre conventions in Alfonso Cuarón's film have a particularly strong resonance with expectations held by international audiences due to the symbolic significance of Mexico in road movies throughout Hollywood history. I argue that the film's Mexican imagery is subordinated to the aesthetic and ideological demands of the genre.³⁷ Carlos Cuarón's *Rudo y cursi* also strongly depends on an established set of genre conventions as it is constructed as a parody of a sports film. The critical function of the comic discrepancies presented in the film is one of the key foci of my analysis, particularly in relation to the representation of national ideologies articulated within a context governed by the transnational market.

The concomitance in both films of ideologies, codes, and signifiers associated with the nation and a transnational framework of cinematic production and reception suggest questions regarding the nature of the filmic intersection of these paradigms. In what ways do these works

³⁶ The transnational features of the film's production have been pointed out by Paul Julian Smith, who in "Transatlantic Traffic in Recent Mexican Films," highlights how even though *Y tu mamá también* is broadly speaking a Mexican production, it nonetheless "participate[s] in a newly intense economic and cultural exchange between Latin America and Europe through the transatlantic reach of ...[its] parent company (Omnilife) [and its] idiosyncratic casting of [a Spanish actress] in [a] central role" (299).

³⁷ My understanding of the significance of "genre" in film production and reception coincides with that of Altman in *Film/Genre*: "According to most critics, genres provide the formulas that drive production; genres constitute the structures that define individual texts; programming decisions are based primarily on generic criteria; the interpretation of generic films depends directly on the audience's generic expectations" (14). The audience's recognition of the conventions is equally important as the criteria used by film producers and critics to define distinct genre segments of the cinema market: "If it is not defined by the industry and recognized by the mass audience, then it cannot be a genre, because films genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared" (16).

traffic in “Mexicanness” as they move through the international cinema circuit? How do global politics affect the function of masculine and feminine gender codes? In order to address these issues, my analysis concentrates on how masculinity is configured within the structures of neoliberalism, the cultural ideology of *mexicanidad*, the politics governing the transnational film market, and the national cinematic tradition. Approaching these last two aspects involves a detailed discussion of filmic elements such as genre, the star system, the cinematographic language employed by the directors, as well as a consideration of the reception of both films by national and international audiences. My reading moves toward an examination of a conjunction between the economics and politics of transnational cinema and those of narco-trafficking in terms of how each system participates in the configuration of the performance Mexican masculinity in these films. Through this approach, my analysis shows how the Mexican body becomes a form of merchandise, a disposable product, or raw material in the marketing of Mexican culture in the transnational tourist economy as much as in the drug trade. Furthermore, I posit that these films suggest processes in which transnational politics are configuring new forms of masculinity.

Some of the connections between these two films have been examined previously by Claudia Schaeffer and Ignacio Sánchez Prado. Schaeffer’s article, “Parodying Paradise: When Mexican Buddy Films turn Rudo y Cursi,” discusses both films from the perspective of the genre conventions of the buddy film, and argues that the erotic gaze, an essential component of homosocial relations, is displaced by pleasures produced through capitalism. She further explains how significant transitions have occurred in the Mexican buddy movie as money replaces women’s former function in coordinating the possibilities of friendship between two male

characters in these narratives.³⁸ Schaeffer posits that the discoveries prompted by the protagonists' relationship reveal the crisis and framework which comprise the discourses of nationality, masculinity and sexuality in the twenty-first century. In contrast with Schaeffer, my argument shows that the politics of transnational cinema intrinsically affect aspects of cinematic narrative, such as the codes of masculinity that have been established through Mexico's national film productions. My focus reveals that in both films, male bodies are mobilized and defined by desires of conquest, which converts them into one-dimensional characters facilitating the development of the narrative and advancing the transnational objectives of the genre. The politics of desire inherent to homosocial relations serve to fix aspects of Mexican national culture at the symbolic level and to shape them in accordance with the films' transnational trajectories. In this sense, the new wave of Mexican cinema presents itself as a consequence of its conditions of production, which directly affects the body.

Along similar lines, Ignacio Sánchez Prado in *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema, 1988-2012* argues that national cinema produced in 1980s and 1990s expresses an urge to be free of the aesthetic and ideological codes of *mexicanidad* in order to explore the new social realities resulting from political and economic changes that were rapidly taking shape (6). According to Sánchez Prado, *Y tu mamá también* is a key example of how Mexican filmmakers adapted their cinematic language and aesthetic codes to the transnational film market as part of a process of detaching from the constraints of *mexicanidad* (185-186). In contrast to Sánchez Prado's position, I contend that the subordination of national culture to the demands of a transnational film market does not result in a displacement of the codes of *mexicanidad*,

³⁸ This traditional function of female characters in the Mexican buddy movie is particularly evident in several Golden Age films featuring Pedro Infante, such as *A.T.M. A toda máquina* (1951) and *¿Qué te ha dado esa mujer?* (1952), both directed by Ismael Rodríguez.

especially those associated with masculinity. Rather, national ideologies serve as key components in the configuration of a globalized Mexican cinema. I develop this argument through my analysis of Alfonso Cuarón's incorporation of voice-over in *Y tu mamá también* in which I show how the potential alternative perspectives inherent in the road movie genre, including voices representing feminist and counterculture standpoints, are silenced both by the codes of Mexican masculinity and by the transnational paradigms embedded in the film. The underlying discursive framework of *Y tu mamá también*, I argue, is organized in terms of a neoliberal model of the global citizen defined by the consumption of territories, cultures, and bodies, which creates a paradox for the film's ideal Mexican, middle-class spectator, given that the forms of identification are limited to an inaccessible global masculinity or traditional, hegemonic maleness determined by dynamics of social and racial discrimination.

In my discussion of *Rudo y cursi*, I show how the film explores the social degradation connected to the neoliberal order, including its effects on the family unit, the imagined community, and homosocial relations fomented and sustained by the national sport, soccer. The significance of failure of the Mexican male characters to achieve success in the world of national and transnational athletics at the professional level is articulated through the film's portrayal of parodic discrepancies in relation to the ideals typically represented in sports films. In order to generate comedy, Carlos Cuarón's film relies on presenting Mexican culture and masculinity in terms of inadequacy and inferiority, suggesting that the transnational games ethic is available only to white, Western bodies. In this way, the film suggests that the only accessible model of masculinity which permits a conjunction of Mexicanness with the politics of the transnational order is that of the narco. In order to approach the configurations of masculinity in both films, and to highlight the significance of the changes that have occurred in the social context during

the relatively short period between 2001 and 2008, I examine these two works separately, beginning with the earlier film by Alfonso Cuarón and then moving on to a discussion his brother's film.

4.2 *Y tu mamá también*: A Feminist Road Film?

Deborah Shaw in her book *The Three Amigos* makes an argument, echoed by Sánchez Prado, that Alfonso Cuarón's first film, *Sólo con tu pareja* (1991), should be credited with restoring the Mexican middle-class film audience by giving them a reason to return to the cinema (Shaw 6, Sánchez-Prado 69). Furthermore, this romantic comedy, despite being funded by the state, already shows initial signs of the aesthetics of the emergent new wave of Mexican cinema and the influence of neoliberalism in the country. According to Sánchez Prado, the success of Alfonso Cuarón's film can be attributed to the development of a middle-class familiarity with, and taste for, the film genres that were being churned out by Hollywood.³⁹ Other factors behind *Sólo con tu pareja*'s becoming a hit include the narrative's resonance with middle-class experiences in Mexico during this era, including the re-configuration of class identity through discourses of consumption and the saturating influence of mass media and marketing (71). Further appeal comes from the film's lightly comic approach to one of the most serious topics of the period, HIV/AIDS.

After *Sólo con tu pareja*, Alfonso Cuarón was presented with the opportunity to begin working inside the Hollywood system, directing films for major studios (Shaw 6). During this stage in his career in the U.S., he directed *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998). Shaw comments that these films are characterized by "a distinctive visual palette and *mise-en-scène*" (6). Alfonso Cuarón then returned to his home country to begin working on his

³⁹ Sánchez Prado explains that the popularity of U.S. comedies in Mexico has to do with their distribution through cable television services, whose subscribers are predominantly middle-class (83).

second Mexican film, *Y tu mamá también*, which marked the development of an original directorial and cinematographic style. Shaw argues that “*Y tu mamá también* can be seen as an attempt to establish an authorial voice, and a new signature filmic trait developed, namely the unusually long take often used for tracking shots” (7).

In 2004, Cuarón directed *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, which was followed by *Children of Men* (2007), in which themes of gender and sexuality are once again brought to the fore in a political context, language, and social imaginary configured by contemporary mass media (Shaw 208). The most recent work by Cuarón is *Gravity* (2013), which has been well received by critics and has generated a significant amount of commercial success with audiences. In the field of Mexican film studies, *Y tu mamá también* has received the most attention among Cuarón’s production. It has generated an immense bibliography of critical reviews and scholarly articles, and for this reason my discussion includes references only to recent texts related to this film, as well as those which focus on gender codes and the dynamics of national and transnational politics.

In “Sex, Class and Mexico in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también*,” Acevedo-Muñoz offers a reading of the film which considers the role, relevance, and socio-cultural significance of the Malinche myth in contemporary Mexico under the transnational regime of neoliberalism. Acevedo-Muñoz argues that the film posits the figure of Malinche as a woman with agency, capable of undermining the core promises of the Mexican revolution by revealing how the homosocial structure rests upon homosexual desire and classist assumptions. In “Transnational Cinema and the Mexican state in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también*,” Hester Baer and Ryan Long emphasize how the film reproduces homophobic and misogynist attitudes established in the hegemonic nationalist ideology. Along similar lines, Claudia Schaeffer shows how the film’s

road movie genre conventions induce audience expectations about the adolescent protagonists' journey toward individual self-discovery; however, explains Schaeffer, the young men's rite of passage is marked by a separation caused by homophobia and class difference.

Developing a somewhat different line of analysis, Deborah Shaw highlights elements which she believes contributed to the film's success with foreign audiences, and she points out that "what is perhaps central when considering the international appeal of the film is that it presents a traveler-friendly view of Mexico that corresponds to expectations of the commercial ends of the foreign-language film market" (177). Similarly, Andrea Noble in "Seeing the Other through Film. From *Y tu mamá también* to *Qué viva México!* and Back Again" also analyzes the film in the terms of its road movie characteristics, but she concentrates on its intertextual dialogues with other works that have represented rural peasant and indigenous communities in Mexico. Noble's discussion illustrates how the film approaches the politics of the gaze and the intrinsic links to histories of power and knowledge (140-141).

My reading of the film also takes genre as a starting point, as I show how road movie conventions frame the protagonists' process of being stripped of their masculinity as they become objects of desire for the female protagonist, Luisa, whose parallel journey suggests a shared trajectory with other feminist versions of the road narrative. However, the director's distinctive use of voice-over and vagrant-camera shots destabilize the foundations of the masculine and feminine gender codes, as well as the film's links to feminist politics and reveal an underlying transnational masculinist principle of organization. I argue that it is the asymmetric dynamics of power governing this paradigm that relegate the Mexican males to a subordinate position.

Y tu mamá también's narrative focuses on the relationship between two adolescent males, Tenoch Iturbide and Julio Zapata, played by Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal respectively. Their friendship not only takes shape around shared interests, including sex, drugs, rock music, and generally trying to “pasarla bien,” [“have a good time” or simply “pass the time”], it also transcends class divisions as Tenoch belongs to an elite family while Julio was raised by a single mother in middle-class circumstances. The plot follows the changes experienced by the friends during the vacation period before beginning their studies at university, thus patterning itself in terms of the two young men's coming-of-age, or transition to adulthood, within the additional genre layering provided by the road movie elements. After both of their girlfriends depart to spend the summer in Europe, Tenoch and Julio find themselves at loose ends until they meet a Spanish woman, Luisa Cortés (played by Maribel Verdú), who is married to Tenoch's cousin Jano, a philandering intellectual whose repeated acts of infidelity cause Luisa eventually to leave him. It is Luisa's decision to escape from her failed marriage that motivates her to take the opportunity to join Julio and Tenoch on a spontaneous road trip to visit a beach on Mexico's southern Pacific coast, “Boca del cielo.” The film follows their journey through the countryside, but the focus quickly turns to the sexual tension that builds between the three travelers as they become entwined in a triangular knot of lust, seduction, and jealousy. The film comes to a close with the group's separation as Luisa decides to remain at the beach while Julio and Tenoch return to their studies. In a brief coda or epilogue, we learn that the two friends have basically lost contact after being at university and pursuing careers which suggest further separation and class distinction, as Tenoch is working towards an economics degree at ITESM while Julio studies biology at UAM.

One of the film's distinguishing features is that the narrative action is repeatedly interrupted by an unseen narrator whose frequent voice-over commentaries sometimes provide context related to the main characters, but also offer details concerning minor characters or background events which seem superfluous to the plot. These moments are often accompanied by shots in which the camera wanders away from the principal actors (or vice versa) and lingers, seemingly without direction, on various aspects of the surroundings.

For my reading of the film, it is important to note how the road trip at the center of the narrative is initiated by Luisa's desire to travel out of Mexico City and visit the coast, particularly Puerto Escondido, which she explains to Julio and Tenoch when she meets them at a wedding reception. The two adolescents, captivated by the fantasy of an erotic adventure with an attractive woman, immediately invent a story about a marvelous and pristine beach which they could all visit together. The sequence ends suggestively with Luisa lost in distraction listening to the mariachi band, and Julio and Tenoch entranced by Luisa's body.



Figure 4.1. *Y tu mamá también*. Maribel Verdú, Gael García & Diego Luna. Film Still.

This initial encounter between the three main characters (see fig. 4.1) illustrates the dynamics of their relationship which are articulated throughout the rest of the film. The protagonists are emphasized in shallow focus, reducing the significance of the context in which the dialogue unfolds. In these types of shots, the intimate proximity of the characters' bodies

conveys a shared unity of desire, revealed not only by the intent stares of the Julio and Tenoch, but also through the thin fabric of Luisa's dress. The composition of the image seems designed to prefigure the homoeroticism that gradually emerges toward the end of the film, as the gazes of the two male characters intersect on Luisa, who looks toward the horizon. The dynamics of sexual rivalry between the two males, played out during the entirety of the journey, also cohere to the model of homosocial relations central to the hegemonic national ideology of Mexico, which has been manifested in many film productions since the beginning of the Golden Age of cinema, as exemplified in many of Pedro Infante's most famous roles, e.g. in *A.T.M.: A toda máquina* (1951) and *Dos tipos de cuidado* (1953). As Claudia Schaeffer explains, "Not new by any means to Mexican cinema, films centered around the intimate relationship between two men or, even more commonly, the triangulated erotic relationship of two men and a woman that functions as a catalyst as well as an excuse to bring them closer together, have flourished in Mexican cinema since its golden age in the 1940s and 50s" (55).

In addition, the protagonists in *Y tu mamá también* conceptualize their male identities and their framework of homosocial bonding in terms of a set of rules which they have written for themselves: "The Charolastra Manifesto," which takes inspiration from Anglo/U.S. pop culture.⁴⁰ According to Julio and Tenoch, the word "charolastra" is derived from two sources: 1) Steve Miller's song "The Joker," which contains lyrics about a "space cowboy"; and 2) misheard lyrics to the song "Should I Stay, or Should I Go?" by The Clash. These adaptations of rock music references into the teens' mode of self-definition help to establish the importance of the

⁴⁰ The manifesto of the Charolastras consists of the following "commandments," repeated at various times throughout the film's dialogue: 1) There is no greater honor than being a Charolastra. 2) Whoever wants to can make his asshole into a kite. 3) Pop kills poetry. 4) Getting high at least once a day is the key to happiness. 5) You shall not screw another Charolastra's girl. 6) Fans of Club América (a Mexico City professional soccer team) are fags. 7) Down with morality and up with whacking off. 8) Never marry a virgin. 9) Fans of Club América are fags. 10) Truth is cool, but unattainable. 11) The asshole who breaks any of the previous rules loses his title of "Charolastra."

context of neo-liberal globalization on their cultural experiences. The prohibition against sexual pursuits that undermine the primacy of male bonding relations is particularly significant, as both characters eventually confess that they have secretly slept with one another's girlfriends. The codified affirmation of male solidarity crumbles all too easily as the friends go their separate ways at the end of the film. The sexual betrayals underscore the fragility of the friendship that had taken shape across class lines as their anger brings out insults and resentment connected to their differing levels of social privilege. The adolescents' failure to maintain the cohesion of their code of morality and identity founded on masculine ideals is also a sign of the impossibility of constructing an alternative system of social values.

The road trip in *Y tu mamá también* contrasts with the types of journeys undertaken by male protagonists in U.S. films that follow road movie conventions. The genre has been important in U.S. cinematic engagements with questions of masculinity and male identity, and often the road trips depicted in these films have a strong spiritual or psychological dimension.⁴¹ Robert Shari in "Western Meets Eastwood. Genre and Gender on the Road" points out that, "The road movie's linear structure and the metaphorical road's connotations of individualism, aggression, independence, and control, combine the Western's ideal conceptions of the American and the masculine" (61).⁴² Julio and Tenoch's journey, by contrast, is guided not by a spirit of independence or a sense of purpose and destiny, but rather by carnal desire. Furthermore, the two

⁴¹ In the introduction to *The Road Movie Book*, Cohan and Hark explain that road movies use the salient image of the highway to explore questions related to the national cultural imaginary of the U.S. (2). Despite its strong associations with U.S. cultural experience, the road movie has been an important genre in the development of the new Latin American cinema of the twenty-first century. In Mexico, in addition to *Y tu mamá también*, María Novaro's film *Sin dejar huella* (2000) was significant for its road movie narrative. Likewise, Brazilian director Walter Salles directed the Argentine film *Diarios de motocicleta* (2004) about Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (played by García Bernal) and his transformative journey across the South American continent.

⁴² The road movie's fundamental narrative structure already implies masculinity's basic separation from the domestic sphere. According to Shari, the road or highway is a primordial space for defining or re-defining male identity. He highlights the antecedents of the genre in Westerns, which relied upon a direct relationship between the hero and his landscape in order to illustrate man's ability to control and conquer his surroundings.

teens do not have control over the direction of their voyage, nor do they have any true understanding of their destination. Luisa, on the other hand, does seem to embark upon the trip with a clear sense of feminist agency which coheres with politics presented in other female-driven road movies. Additionally, her position as a European tourist in Mexico enables her to observe the context from a detached perspective which views Julio and Tenoch as extensions of the exotic surroundings.

According to David Laderman in *Exploring the Road Movie: Driving Visions*, the road movie genre underwent a significant change in the 1960s and was converted into a “mode of social protest and alternative lifestyle [which] reached a heated apex” (19). In the 1990s, the genre was still associated with rebellion, but in one key example, it served to express opposition to the patriarchal order. The landmark road movie of that decade was Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which as Laderman puts it “forcefully fuses classical road movie narrative structure with feminist social critique” (184). However, he explains, the film’s feminist politics does not involve counteracting the traditional role assigned to Mexico as a key signifier of rebellious attitudes and liberatory desires of U.S. protagonists in both westerns and road movies alike. For the heroes of *Thelma and Louise*, writes Laderman, “fantasizing about Mexico is understandable: it is in their character, and it makes geographic sense as having destination. But such fantasizing nevertheless rearticulates the exoticizing tendency that permeates the genre, where freedom beckons across the national border, down south, in the ‘primitive’ underdeveloped country” (193). And it is precisely in Mexico that the road trip in *Y tu mamá también* begins.

Luisa makes her decision to journey south to “Boca del cielo” with Julio and Tenoch upon learning that her husband has cheated on her once again. The narrative development

suggests that the trip has a spiritual or psychological significance for Luisa as she set out to regain agency in her personal life. Her goals thus conform to the established genre conventions of the road movie concerning the importance of both interior and exterior aspects of the journey. The film's Mexican context further emphasizes the intertextual dialogue between *Y tu mamá también* and *Thelma and Louise* along with other U.S. road movies which imagine the southern border as the final frontier of civilization. The journey into Mexico signals the opportunity to escape from social conventions, particularly the gender politics which configure the dominant heterosexual normative hierarchies as well as the division between domestic and public spheres.

In *Y tu mamá también* sexuality is plainly central to the transgressive trajectory of the journey, as the characters attempt to explore beyond the established borders of heterosexual monogamy. But again, it is Luisa who takes the initiative to engage actively in non-normative sexual relations, as she first encourages Julio and Tenoch to expose their own hidden forms of infidelities and later seduces them into a *ménage à trois*. In this much analyzed sequence, Luisa and the two teens find themselves in a mostly empty cantina where they consume excessive quantities of alcohol. Luisa takes advantage of the animosity between Julio and Tenoch as she appears to encourage sexual competition and successfully leads both of them into the bedroom for a tryst (see fig. 4.2).



Figure 4.2 *Y tu mamá también*. Maribel Verdú, Gael García & Diego Luna. Film Still.

Commenting on the composition of this scene, Alberto Ribas offers the following observations:

La mujer en el centro del encuadre presionada por el cuerpo de los dos jóvenes cita una posición común en el cine pornográfico con obvias apelaciones a fantasías de sumisión femenina ante el asedio de falos múltiples. Sin embargo, es Luisa quien controla la situación en todo momento, especialmente al encararse ante los dos muchachos, dando la espalda al espectador ... hasta sustraerse por la parte inferior del encuadre. En su ausencia, el cuerpo femenino continúa controlando el encuentro a frente de los dos jóvenes a la vez que frustra las expectativas voyeurísticas iniciadas por la danza de la escena anterior y forzando al espectador a contemplar la verdad del encuentro homoerótico entre los dos muchachos (469).

[The woman in center of the frame pressed between two young male bodies cites a familiar position depicted in pornographic cinema with its obvious associations to fantasies of female submission to the siege by multiple phalluses. However, throughout the encounter, it is Luisa who controls the situation, especially as she brings the two teens face to face, turning her back to the audience and even withdrawing to the lower part of the frame. In her absence, the female body continues controlling the encounter between the two young men while at the same time frustrating the voyeuristic expectations created by the dancing in the previous scene, forcing the spectator to contemplate the truth of the homoerotic encounter between the two teens.]

According to Deborah Shaw, Luisa also challenges the patriarchal order to promote post-feminist discourses when she creates her own manifesto (185). The female protagonist, in an outburst of rage and exhaustion at the endless fights between Julio and Tenoch, demands that if they are going to continue the voyage together, they will need to adhere to her rules. Shaw argues that once Luisa establishes a feminine order, she invokes a symbolic celebration by offering a toast to the clitoris (196). According to Shaw, “the female empowerment of the film, then, takes a predominantly sexual form and is not threatening to men, but rather invites them to become better lovers and be more considerate to women’s needs” (197). In contrast to Shaw’s reading, I argue that Luisa’s feminist precepts are not intended to improve the masculine politics governing Mexican men, but rather, as her name “Cortés” suggests, Luisa conquers the young men’s bodies and induces them into a sexual relation which will end their friendship.

The road trip unfolds in terms of Luisa’s feminist discourse which is sustained and determined by her use of biologically male bodies who inhabit the territory of Mexico. Her justification for appropriating the bodies of Julio and Tenoch comes from her perception of them as incapable of controlling their impulses. From her perspective, then, Mexico is a space lacking civilization and inhabited by bodies too irrational and primitive to control their sexual urges. However, the feminist voyage undertaken by Luisa is destabilized by the masculine transnational order which governs and defines not only gender codes and their political effects, but also the possibilities offered by the road movie genre, within a national framework, to reveal and reconfigure the parameters of male-female power relations.

4.3 The Consumerist Politics of Transnational Masculinity

Luisa’s position of power and agency in the road trip appears to imply a feminist agenda, thus it comes as somewhat of a surprise when the film eventually reveals that she set out on the

beach adventure with two younger companions not in search of an escape from the patriarchal order but rather because she knew she would soon die from cancer. Her terminal illness and imminent death change the perspective in which her role as a road movie protagonist can be interpreted. Her decision to join Julio and Tenoch on their adolescent adventure suddenly begins to seem rather impulsive and somewhat irrational, and likewise her sexual advances with the teens. Her resolve to stay behind with the family of a fisherman (Chuy) in the coastal village near the beach is not based on any desire to seek out a different social order, but rather rests on her need to receive care during her final illness. With regard to this aspect of Luisa's journey, Shaw points out that,

Cuarón may well assert that Luisa 'muere tremendamente feliz' ('Luisa dies tremendously happy'), but what remains unspoken and unfilmed is that Mabel, Chuy's wife, will have to nurse this stranger who has decided to spend the remainder of her life with them, before spending her final four days in a hospital (we learn of the final days when Tenoch recounts the facts of Luisa's death to Julio at the end of the film) (194-195).

Luisa's pragmatic use of the fisherman and his family, as well as the impossibility of interpreting her voyage in feminist terms, coheres with the transnational dynamics embodied by the film given that the economy of carework in Western countries has prominently benefited from the globalized labor pool which draws upon impoverished women often marked by the colonial difference.⁴³

⁴³ In *Servants of Globalization*, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas analyzes processes of globalization related to female workers from the Philippines and other poor nations who provide domestic labor in the West, including the emotional carework of serving as nannies.

The consumption of the labor of brown and other Mexican bodies is emphasized through the use of voice-over in the film. My approach to the voice-over argues that it is one of the most significant cinematographic elements of *Y tu mamá también* due to its mediating function in relation to the audience. I propose that the voice-over delineates the ideal spectator as a masculine subject whose identity is formed by means of the consumption of bodies, territories, and cultures. In the film, the incorporation of the voice-over with the vagrant camera shots creates a separation from the principal narrative and characters in order to reveal that which is beyond their ideological perspectives, that is, beyond the limits of nationalism and feminism which frame their vision. The images and the masculine voice featured during these sequences make visible the anonymous passersby whose journeys and struggles, past and present, intersect with the paths traveled by the film's main protagonists: funeral marches, pilgrimages, weddings, wakes, peasants being rounded up by federal police, farmhands moving herds of cattle to pasture, or to barren fields covered in trash. In addition, the voice-over provides a glimpse of the interior thoughts of the characters as well as fragmentary accounts of historical processes.

Based on the ideas developed by Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror*, Hester Baer y Ryan Fred Long posit that “the disembodied voice-over—which is exclusively male—is privileged in narrative cinema ... [It] possesses absolute authority and mastery over the narrative, which is reinforced by the voice-over's assertion of an extradiegetic space, a spatial and temporal order that lies outside the filmic narrative” (158). They further note that in *Y tu mamá también*, “the voice-over is an ‘undemocratic’ assertion of male authority and control [that] functions, on a formal level, to contain and direct the film's meaning for the viewer” (159).

In addition to providing an interpretative perspective for the audience founded in masculine authority, the voice-over also embodies neo-liberal politics. Daniel Giménez Cacho,

the actor who performs the voice-over, also appeared in Cuarón's first film, *Sólo con tu pareja*, where he played a Mexican man absorbed by neoliberal codes, as his job consisted of designing slogans for commercial products. The voice-over in *Y tu mamá también* is also reminiscent of that found in travel documentaries whose function, according to Alter, is "to transport viewers to faraway and exotic locations" (197). The film's road movie narrative framework further accentuates the function the voice-over fulfills in introducing the audience to rural Mexico in similar terms to those which have been conventionally deployed in U.S. road movies depicting this territory as the outside the boundaries of civilization. The Mexican landscapes portrayed in the film appear in compositions typical to the genre, with frequent travelling shots and wide-angle crane shots (Noble 124). According to Shaw, the visual emphasis on the landscape and the population inhabiting the rural villages combined with the neutral tone of the voice-over's commentaries on issues such as people's deaths, intimate desires, and the effects of pollution on the local food supply, creates the impression for the audience that "they are accessing an insider's view of Mexico ... which can be thrilling for audiences, who can experience virtual travel without having to leave their hometowns" (187-191). However, as Shaw continues "viewers are left with a soft leftist notion that there are victims of globalization and modernity; yet no alternatives are suggested, and no particular group is held accountable" (193). Similarly, the apparent lack of any connection between the different social problems represented in the film, and the lack of explanations or enquiries about their causes, articulates a survey of Mexican reality through the images and discourses that have been established as signs of social dysfunction. This superficial treatment of the effects of neoliberalism in Mexico takes shape in terms of an act of violence by perpetuating the hierarchical dynamics which allow the privileged (European and North American) audience to observe and form knowledge about a foreign

country through the mediation of an objective and reliable (masculine and authoritative) voice and a set of familiar genre conventions (the road movie) which reinforce the silence of the subaltern (rural Mexican peasants).

For the Mexican middle-class spectator, *Y tu mamá también* also creates a dilemma, given that the voice-over, as Hester Baer y Ryan Long put it, “disrupts identification with the characters to call the viewer’s attention to social, political and historical events that fall outside the purview of the film’s immediate story” (159). The national audience cannot identify with the codes of masculinity performed by Julio and Tenoch, and once detached from these forms of identity, the only other available option is that of accepting the idea of the two young men as incapable of controlling the sexual desires and defined by a reductive to a set of macho attributes. Furthermore, the national audience is unable to participate in the experience of virtual tourism the film offers to foreign audiences, given that the film depicts landscape that would be at least somewhat familiar even to urban Mexicans, especially if they have family ties in rural areas of the country. Given that the vagrant camera and voice-over do not pause to provide a close-up examination of the passersby who appear on screen, these figures are reduced to silent subalterns with whom the Mexican audience cannot identify. The exclusion of the national audience from the politics of identification promoted in the film, the reduction of the protagonists to a narrow set of stereotypes of Mexican masculinity, and the representation of ordinary Mexican people in terms of familiar “third world” visual and discursive tropes are all factors which contribute to the film’s transnational framework and delineate the implied ideal spectator in terms of the globalized male subject.

In my reading of the film, I have posited that it offers a touristic perspective of Mexico to be consumed by foreign spectators, which reduces the country to a territory composed of bodies

to be used for particular ends, including entertainment and sensual pleasure. This is not only the result of the instrumentalizing relationship that Luisa has toward the bodies of Julio and Tenoch and also with the fisherman and his family, but it also derives from the fundamental characteristics of the road movie genre which define the male protagonists in terms of an essential masculine drive toward erotic conquest of female bodies. Additionally, film promotes a relationship of consumption in the superficial sense of engagement it offers with a collection of “pertinent” social and economic issues of the twenty-first century.

The transnational audience is therefore defined by its capacity to experience pleasure in consuming territories with national characteristics, including bodies, cultures, and social issues. This aptitude for consumption is configured as fundamentally masculine, not only due to its affinity with global politics, but also because of the implied devaluation of feminist politics, as when the agency and opposition to patriarchy suggested by Luisa are transformed when her role becomes that of an object for pleasurable contemplation by a masculine gaze. Within the national context the exclusion of Mexican spectators presents questions concerning the position they occupy in relation to cultural productions. While transnational film purports to bring middle class audiences back into the cinema, the case of *Y tu mamá también* suggest that the function of these spectators is reduced to recognizing the changes taking place in Mexico but not playing an active role in the process. At the same time, the integration of national ideologies serves to criticize the continued authority of national identities while they have lost their capacity to contribute to an imagined community, and to reveal the gender codes which configure Mexico’s global masculine identity. Seven years after the international success of *Y tu mamá también*, Carlos Cuarón’s film *Rudo y cursi* explored the challenges brought to Mexico and its population

by the changes in national cultural production, particularly in relation to the configuration of masculinity.

4.4 *Rudo y cursi*: A Sports Film a la mexicana

The films written and directed by Carlos Cuarón have been characterized by their integration of popular genres developed in the commercial cinema of the U.S. His latest production, *Besos de azúcar* [*Sugar Kisses*] portrays contemporary Mexico using similar parameters to those commonly found teenage romance films such as the Hollywood film *My Girl* (1991), directed by Howard Zieff.⁴⁴ In the case of *Rudo y cursi*, Carlos Cuarón created a parody of the conventions of the sports film, a genre which has been significant in the history of popular U.S. cinema.⁴⁵ The comic discrepancies generated in the depiction of similarities and differences between this film and established characteristics of the sports genre highlight the traditional values which appear in the ideological terms of *mexicanidad* within the country, and in terms of stereotypes to international audiences. In other words, the persistence of these components of Mexican identity creates the comic impediments to a conventional Hollywood-style heroic sports narrative and produces a parodic image of the soccer star.⁴⁶ Carlos Cuarón's film presents the politics of Mexican masculinity as a catalyst for the difficulties experienced by the nation in its

⁴⁴ *Besos de azúcar* takes place in Tepito, a lower-class neighborhood in Mexico City whose inhabitants have their own cultural identity, which is nonetheless formed within the ideological framework of *mexicanidad*. Tepito also happens to be the location of the city's most popular open-air market (*tianguis*), famous for being a place to buy and sell contraband, stolen property, and counterfeit products. As might be expected, Tepito is generally associated with organized crime.

⁴⁵ Ignacio Sánchez Prado in his brief commentary on *Rudo y cursi* also categorizes the film as a comic farce which mocks the cinematic conventions of the sports film and the socio-cultural discourse of success which it typically promotes. He contrasts the film with the commercial soccer trilogy *Goal!* (Danny Cannon, 2005; Jaime Collet-Serra, 2007; Andrew Monahan, 2009).

⁴⁶ Margaret Rose, borrowing from F. J. Lelièvre's article from 1954, "The Basis of Ancient Parody," explains that an ambiguity exists in the word "parodia," since the prefix "para" can be translated as both nearness and opposition. Rose concludes that the double meaning of "para" is immanent to parody. She asserts that parody imitates its referent while at the same time questioning the very concept of imitation. It does this through the use of comic discrepancy, which marks the difference between the parody and the object parodied. It is through the use of comic discrepancy, observes Rose, that parody goes beyond imitation itself (*Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* 31).

efforts to integrate into a transnational order. On the one hand, when family is configured as a value which precedes all others, the global structure of power does not allow for the conservation of masculine supremacy. On the other hand, giving priority to the well-being of the family and upholding fraternal bonds prevents the formation of the cosmopolitan and multicultural masculine subjectivity capable of succeeding in the transnational world. Sports provide a significant context for the illustration of these problems due to the ideological values that have inscribed into their social function since the British empire of the 19th century.

Rudo y cursi portrays the experiences of two brothers living in an isolated rural region of Mexico's southern Pacific coast. The film focuses on the rivalry between the siblings, Tato and Beto, which is intensified by the arrival of a professional soccer recruiter who offers one of them the chance to join a team in Mexico City and to drastically improve their economic conditions. Tato, played by Gael García Bernal, earns the nickname "El Cursi" [The Cheesy One] due to the exaggerated and overwrought ball-handling style he uses to evade defenders. His brother Beto, played by Diego Luna, is known as "El Rudo" [The Rough One] for his aggressive and brutal tactics as a goaltender. The film begins by showing the meagre circumstances of the brothers and their family in a small town where the only available work is on a banana plantation which produces fruit for export. Their luck changes with the unexpected appearance of the talent agent Dario Vidali, also known as "Batuta" [Baton], played by Argentine actor Guillermo Francella. When Batuta happens to observe a local soccer match involving the brothers, he immediately recognizes their potential but he is only able to invite one of them to be hired for a professional position in Mexico City. The brothers arrange an impromptu penalty kick to decide who will be selected, and Tato emerges successful, albeit after a certain amount of misunderstanding. Once installed on the roster of a team in Mexico City, Tato's talent is not fully appreciated until Batuta

manages to work out a way of incentivizing the team's corrupt coach by offering him a commission on Tato's salary. But even once he has proved his ability to excel on the field, Tato is preoccupied by his dream of becoming a grupera music star. Later on, Batuta finds a coach willing to add Beto to his minor league team (for a price), and the brothers are united once again.

Tato's soccer career continues its dramatic rise, and he soon becomes a national star who enjoys the rewards brought by fame, such as a new house and car. Due to his fantastic success, Tato manages to get Batuta to help him develop his musical career. Beto, too, enjoys significant success as he leads his team into the major league with a record-breaking streak of shutouts. However, the brothers' ascent into the exclusive world of wealth and fame presents a series of challenges: Beto's addictive personality draws him into elites gambling clubs where he not only begins accumulating massive debts but also develops a cocaine habit. Tato, for his part, becomes romantically involved with a Puerto Rican model and television personality, Maya Vega, played by actress Jessica Mas. The pressures of the high maintenance relationship, along with the frustrations of his failed musical pursuits, negatively affect his performance and pull him into a swift decline. The brothers eventually touch bottom when Tato's engagement to Maya falls apart, and Beto's gambling debts get so large that the casino owners, who are also tied to the drug business, threaten to resort to violence. The film comes to a close with a scene showing the brothers back in their hometown, having squandered their success. Beto's leg has been amputated after he was shot by the gangsters from the gambling club. To make matters worse, their sister, Nadia, is now married to a prominent leader of a narco gang.

The film picks up a pattern established in *Y tu mamá también* in which discrepancies are created through a contrast between the on-screen imagery and voice-over narration, in this case provided by the character Batuta. The opening sequence shows objects associated with the game

of soccer, such as cleats, gloves, goal posts, and balls, but always within a context of images conveying social decay and economic hardship. For example, a soccer ball is seen on top of a gravestone, or punctured and discarded in a pile of dried out coconut shells; a pair of gloves is hanging from a rusted metal faucet sticking out of a concrete wall; a laundry line is hung between goal posts; cleated boots dangle from telephone wires. While the film cuts between the images in this series of fixed shots, Batuta's voice-over relates an anecdote he once heard about the first game of soccer in history. He explains how a friend once told him that the first goal was scored when a soldier kicked the decapitated head of his enemy between two trees. Batuta says he was horrified when he first heard this story, and that he exclaimed to his friend how dreadful he found it, to which his friend replied, "Dreadful for the goalkeeper, but for the striker, it was glorious" ["Terrible para el delantero, pero para el arquero fue la gloria"]. This short narrative suggests the correspondence between sport and modernity's essential values, including militarism, the defense of national territory, discipline, cooperation, physical strength, and bravery. However, the images represent the national space as neglected and abandoned, as though there are no men left to play soccer and all that remains are slight traces.

From its outset, the film seems to be posing the following question: Why are Mexican national values are apparently still in effect when there are no bodies capable of performing them? The narrative traces the processes of disappearance of male bodies and the signifiers of *mexicanidad*. Similar to *Y tu mamá también*, *Rudo y cursi* is engaged in exploring the effects of neoliberalism on Mexico, and on Mexican men in particular. But whereas the earlier film depicted the effects of neoliberalism in terms of an external force invading the country, *Rudo y cursi* presents the politics of globalization as already established and generating lived contradictions directly in the bodies of the protagonists and their immediate social structures,

such as the family. In this regard, the emphasis in the opening scenes of *Rudo y cursi* on values of family unity and masculine supremacy creates the appearance of their continued prevalence in Mexican society, but the film's parodic discourse makes it clear that these values are performed without a semantic level or referent as a consequence of the social and economic changes that transnationalism in the country.

In one key sequence, Beto and Tato's entire family are shown eating a meal together. The camera's perspective is primarily focused on the men, who are engaged in an argument, while the women and children occupy a secondary position in the construction of the scene. However, the "natural" composition of the familiar space is destabilized when the dialogue discloses more information about the dynamics of economic responsibility between the men and the women of the household. The naturalized perception of the father as the head of the family collapses when Beto reveals that the individual seated at the end of the table is not related to him at all, but is rather a man who has been in a relationship with his mother for only two years.⁴⁷ In fact, the traditional ideal patriarchal father at the center of the family structure is absent, and Beto and Tato's mother changes partners regularly, as evidenced in that each of her children was born to a different man. The film creates the visual impression of the secondary importance of the female characters, such as Nadia and Beto's wife, by placing them in the background, as elements of the *mise-en-scène* more than as characters. For example, in the following shot, Nadia appears dressed in orange toward the back, in shallow focus and walking out of the frame (see fig. 4.3):

⁴⁷ I use the word "naturalized" to refer to the construction of the conventional images produced by commercial cinema, which Susan Hayward explains as "A process whereby social, cultural and historical constructions are shown to be evidently natural ... Naturalizing, then, functions to reinforce dominant ideology. Naturalizing discourses operate in such a way that class, race and gender inequalities are represented as normal. Images construct woman as inferior and object of the male gaze ... The working class gets fixed as naturally subordinate (intellectually and economically) to the middle classes."



Figure 4.3. *Rudo y cursi*. Film still.

However, this initial impression quickly proves false as the women are presented in the film as significant agents of transformation in this social context. We later learn that Nadia agrees to marry don Casimiro, the narco boss, on the condition that he build an elegant new house for her mother, which was something that neither Beto nor Tato could successfully provide for her. Similarly, Beto's chronic debt trouble, even after he "makes it" as a professional soccer player, is compensated for by his wife's good financial sense and business acumen.

These changes to the family structure already began to appear in *Y tu mamá también*, as is illustrated with the fisherman Chuy's family members who, as the narrator explains, will soon be forced to take work in the new hotels being constructed in the region. In *Rudo y cursi*, the effects of neoliberalism are shown as already having taken hold, manifested in the local economy's dependency on fruits harvested for export as opposed to the traditional reliance on fisheries for local markets. At the same time, the deterioration of the family and its former economic structures is presented as dangerously nostalgic as a result of the intertextual relationship the film establishes with *Y tu mamá también*. While Chuy and his wife Mabel provide the most prominent example of the old order which has disappeared from *Rudo y cursi*, it becomes possible not only to ignore this order's foundation in hierarchical structures of gender

and nationalist ideology, but also to convert it into an idealized organic model of traditional Mexico whose loss is lamentable. Furthermore, while in *Y tu mamá también*, the bar where the protagonists get drunk near the film's conclusion is a family business which benefits the local economy, in *Rudo y cursi* the cantina Beto visits in order to gamble becomes a massive drain on his finances. In the transnational context in which *Rudo y cursi* develops, Mexico's southern Pacific coast is no longer an exotic paradise which induces the transgression of sexual boundaries as in *Y tu mamá también*. Instead, it is a space dominated by mass media saturation, and the men are no longer participants in sexual relationships, but rather engage in fantasies based on female images broadcast over the television. When Maya Vega appears on the screen, Tato and his friends begin to shout, sing, and recite poems.

In *Rudo y cursi*, Tato and Beto's naturalized performance of the codes of *mexicanidad* prevents them from perceiving the existence of other economies, signifying systems, and structures of power in Mexico, including those associated with the narco gangs, and those related to transnational professional soccer, which offers an alternative model of masculine subjectivity incompatible with the national codes they are familiar with. The parodic discrepancies in the film are developed precisely in relation to the genre conventions of the sports film along with the paradigm of Mexican masculinity. For example, Batuta's remarks underline the connections between the discourse of sports competition, national unity, and the cultural ideology of *mexicanidad*. In one sequence (see fig. 4.4), the camera makes a full 360° pan without cuts in order to emphasize the idea of teamwork, equality, and cohesion.



Figure 4.4. *Rudo y cursi*. Guillermo Francella, Gael García & Diego Luna. Film still.

The cinematographic language initially coheres with Batuta's comments about the spirit of unity that defines sportsmanship: "In sports as in life, individual effort means nothing if it does not support a group effort. Teamwork can only be understood as a principle of generosity, one for all. That's the spirit that unites us and makes us brothers" ["En el juego como en la vida el esfuerzo individual no es nada si no es parte del esfuerzo colectivo. La colaboración no se entiende sin el principio básico de la generosidad. Todos nos brindamos por una misma causa, esa actitud nos une y nos hace hermanos"]. However, Batuta's words ring comically hollow as it is he who sows the seeds of disunity when he announces that only one of the brothers will be selected to join a professional team. The camera reflects the division from a standpoint behind Batuta which positions him directly between Tato and Beto; the opposite angle is also shown which re-emphasizes the fracture between the brothers (figs. 4.5 & 4.6).



Figure 4.5. *Rudo y cursi*. Guillermo Francella, Gael García & Diego Luna. Film still.



Figure 4.6. *Rudo y cursi*. Guillermo Francella, Gael García & Diego Luna. Film still.

This nature of this separation indicates an essential difference with the conventional sports film, in which the role of the talent agent gradually subsides after the initial discovery of the star athlete's potential and he/she often does not receive any direct benefit from his involvement.

Rudo y cursi's comic discrepancies are also constructed with reference to other conventions of the sports film genre. In *Sport and Film*, Crosson points out that an integral element of the genre is "the attempt of a marginalized or 'underdog' individual, or team, to achieve success through sport" (62).⁴⁸ According to Crosson, sport is presented as the path which permits transcendence of unequal social dynamics in relation to gender, race, and class, defining the narrative arc of most of these films in terms of the "American Dream"; of course, masculinity figures heavily into construction of the characters in these stories (8). For example, *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) and its recent remake, *42* (2013), are based on the life and career of the first black professional baseball player in the U.S. major leagues, and they highlight Robinson's role in challenging the official policies of segregation. The recent *Goal!* trilogy centers on the main character Santiago Muñez, a Mexican immigrant in Los Angeles whose talent for soccer is

⁴⁸ In recent decades, there have also emerged a number of sport films focusing on characters who do not possess extraordinary talent, or even basic competence, in the sport they practice. These narratives, highlighting the loser or failure, are predominantly comedies or parodies produced in the U.S. Crosson argues that the majority of these films, even when they question the conventional idea of success usually promoted in sports films, nonetheless tend to reaffirm the hegemonic values with a happy or triumphant ending (158-159).

discovered by an English scout who helps him begin a professional career in the European leagues. Both of these examples illustrate the pattern of the marginalized individual whose sporting ability creates opportunity for integration and escape from difficult circumstances, which is also the basic premise of *Rudo y cursi*, whose protagonists dream of a life different from the one they live in their coastal village. Tato holds onto his unlikely goal of becoming a grupera music star, while Beto's unrelenting gambling addiction keeps him fixed on the idea of striking it rich with one lucky bet. However, in contrast with the "American Dream" chased by protagonists in U.S. sports films, the pursuits of Beto and Tato are rooted in the national ideology and its cultural codes of *mexicanidad*.

Tato's illusory goal of succeeding in music can be traced to the models of Mexican masculine subjectivity portrayed in countless examples of melodramas from the Golden Age of cinema, particularly those that take place on a ranch or other rural setting. One of the key features of films from this era are the musical sequences, which are inextricable from the heterosexual romantic narrative following the Oedipal trajectory. Once Tato becomes a soccer star, he uses his new status to advance along the path toward musical stardom involving an absurd solo grupera performance and a video shoot, all of which is connected to his efforts to woo Maya Vega. There is a clear contradiction between Tato's interest in musical fame and romantic pursuits and the types of values necessary for the personality of a sports hero. In this regard, Whannel in *Media Sports Stars: Masculinities and Moralities* asserts that the difference between the hero and the star becomes evident in the forms of admiration which are applied to the individual: "the heroic deed has an existence separate and distinct from its circulation, stardom depends on circulation, on representation, on telling, on narrativisation" (47). For Tato, "el cursi," the narrative of fame and stardom propels him toward further pursuit of his dreams,

including his proposal of marriage to Maya Vega, who rejects him due to her preference for non-committal relationships. Tato's repeated performances of a grupera version of the rock song "I want you to want me" (by Cheap Trick) sung in Spanish, further emphasize his fruitless drive toward stardom.

The entanglement of Tato's dreams with the discourse of *mexicanidad* is presented in terms which highlight his disconnection with the model of masculinity inherent to the heroic ideals of sport. Moreover, it is the national codes of familial unity and homosocial bonding which contribute directly to the Tato and Beto's failure in the context of another key convention of the sports film narrative: the "big game." According to Crosson, U.S. sports films typically conclude with a familiar scenario in which underdog protagonist competes for a final triumph, and generally winds up successful (12). *Rudo y cursi*, for its part, also ends with a final contest between two opponents, "el Rudo" and "el Cursi."

During the film's finale, the two brothers' teams face off in a high stakes championship match and, uncharacteristically, the protagonists manage to embody the values of sportsmanship which they had previously only performed at the syntactic level. The game leads up to a dramatic crux when a penalty kick is awarded to Tato in the final minutes of the game with the score tied at zero and Beto must defend the net. The scenario echoes the earlier sequence in which Batuta offered to take only one of the brothers to Mexico City to join the professional league, and they decided who would go by facing off in a penalty shot. In the context of the enormous stadium in Mexico City, the brothers find themselves in the same situation, but this time they decide to unite and act like brothers instead of rivals rather than giving themselves over to the ruthlessness of professional competition. Yet the effort is counterproductive and results in both Tato and Beto ending up as failures.

In Carlos Cuarón's film, the characteristics of "rudo" and "cursi" are presented as inherent not only to the ideology of *mexicanidad*, but also to the bodies of Mexican men, and this becomes the main factor preventing the brothers from adhering to the masculine values and principles associated with professional sports, which Wellard sums up as: "the values of competition, valor, gentlemanly behaviour ... strength, virility and attractiveness" (21). The brothers' failure is further encapsulated in the film's final sequences. In one of the last shots (see fig. 4.7), the protagonists appear in a close-up and, despite their string of disappointments, appear to be in good spirits as they share a pleasant moment of fraternal bonding by singing happily together, "Quiero que me quieras" ["I want you to want me"]. In the background, it is possible to see their mother's house, constructed by the narco boss, don Casimiro. In addition to his triumph of Mexican masculinity, the drug lord also succeeds in taking economic control over the two brothers' lives, putting them to work in his businesses; Tato in a karaoke bar, and Beto as the technical director of a second division soccer team.



Figure 4.7. *Rudo y cursi*. Gael García & Diego Luna. Film still.

Another element of the image that stands out is Beto's crutches, which he now relies on to move around, having lost his leg after being shot for failing to pay his debts. His record-setting run of consecutive games without conceding a goal generated corporal value transforming his body into a commodity which could then become the payment for the gambling debt he owed

to organized crime. The loss of one of his limbs excludes him from participating actively in the world of transnational sport. This final outcome creates an allusion to the absence of bodies during the film's opening sequence, suggesting a pattern of consumption and disappearance in which Mexicans themselves are devoured by organized crime along with the national economy. Does this violent process signal the new norm of the socio-political context of contemporary Mexico resulting from the expanding power and influence of narco gangs? Or, perhaps, does the film suggest the codes of *mexicanidad* embodied by Tato are responsible for the fact that the Mexican body cannot survive intact under the conditions of transnational neoliberalism?

4.5 Narcos, Film and Sports Stars or Transnational (Mexican?) Masculinities

Rudo y cursi is not a film which attempts to call attention to the elements of its own cinematographic construction, but rather it provides a naturalized representation to the audience. In this regard, even though its principal intent is to mock the conventions of the sports genre, it nonetheless reproduces the privileged position of male characters. However, one noteworthy aspect of the film is that despite adhering to a linear narrative chronology in the classic Hollywood style, some of the actions which define the main characters are actually omitted. Batuta narrates the story of Tato and Beto not only because of their dramatic failure, but also because of their extraordinary talent. And yet, there is a remarkable absence of scenes in which the athletic skills of the brothers are actually shown on the screen. The brutality which characterizes Beto's style of goaltending is never manifested explicitly inside the frame, and in many cases, Tato's supposedly spectacular goals happen off screen. The characteristics which define their soccer playing become visible mostly in other contexts. Similarly invisible are the actions of the criminal organizations, the only masculine groups which successfully participate in the transnational economy while also performing codes of Mexican masculinity. The

representation of narcos is secondary in the film, even when they become the primary actors and the only ones capable of combining the patriarchal system of the family with the demands of global capitalism, which is the dominant ideological framework in the narrative. In consonance with the unofficial character of their profession and the illegitimacy of their businesses in the eyes of the state, the words and actions of don Casimiro and members of his organization only manifest indirectly.⁴⁹ Given that the codes of masculinity fail when performed within structures designed by the state, the male identity of the narcos is presented in *Rudo y cursi* as a viable model for *mexicanidad* just as the desires inherent to post-revolutionary ideology become feasible in correspondence with the active participation of Mexican men in the transnational economy.

Besides organized crime, the possibility of participating in the structure of globalization for individuals whose bodies or identities are defined as Mexican arises in a limited number of other contexts, including that of professional soccer, which has its own configuration of masculine subjectivity. But Tato and Beto's failures illustrate their incapacity to adapt their relationship to masculinity in ways that cohere with the ideals of sportsmanship. Even though the brothers' main obstacles are the values, codes, and ideologies of *mexicanidad* which they follow, their downfall comes from allowing the structures of the nation-state to configure them rather

⁴⁹ The first time the narcos are mentioned is when Tato and Beto return to their hometown after having been in Mexico City long enough to begin enjoying their initial success. Once they arrive in at the family home, Tato asks his sister "¿Oye y el camino ese pa' el pueblo qué?" [When did they build that new road] Nadia replies almost inaudibly, "Un tal don Casimiro vino y compró unos ranchitos y él lo hizo... dicen que es narco" [Some guy named Don Casimiro put it in. He bought up all the ranches. They say he's a drug lord]. The second time that organized crime is mentioned in the dialogue is when Tato and Beto's mother calls to invite them to their sister's wedding as she plans to marry don Casimiro. The news surprises Beto and he asks her: "Mamá, pero ese señor es narco ¿no?" [But the guy's a drug lord!] She replies rapidly: "No le digas así Beto ¿eh?" [Don't call him that]. Beto continúa: "Pues no dicen que el tiroteo que hubo allá en el pueblo era su gente y lo de los descabezados en el puerto ¿no?" [His guys were in a shootout back home, right? And those people they beheaded on the coast, too]. His mother responds: "Puro chisme, es rete buena gente, ya nos regaló una camionetita" [Gossip. He's quality. He already gave us a pick-up truck].

than attempting to validate their bodies in the transnational field of professional soccer. The codes of masculinity presented in sports films such as *Goal!*, whose main character is Mexican but forms his gender identity on the soccer pitch, are derived from the imperial ideology of nineteenth century Britain. In this context, men were expected to exhibit virtues such as “promptitude ... honor, cooperation and unselfishness” (Mangan 41), as well as perseverance, stoicism, and strength (18), since the colonial enterprise required individuals with “[the] characteristics of the British race—the power of government—the hope and honor of Empire” (41). The legacies of the British Empire’s values, politics, ideologies, and codes of masculinity remain in effect in the current transnational world. In this regard, Aaron Baker in *Contesting Identity: Sports in American Film* explains that the form of male identity that permeates the majority of sports films corresponds to that of the “heroic individual [who] overcomes obstacles and achieves success through determination, self-reliance, and hard work” (50). Furthermore, Baker stresses that, “The competitive opportunities offered to male athletes in most sports films justify patriarchal authority by naturalizing the idea of men as ... assertive and determining” (50). The continuities in the configuration of contemporary hegemonic masculinities with the gender paradigm of the British Empire as manifested in team sports such as soccer reveal the neo-imperial intentions of transnational capitalism. Likewise, the utopian character and multiculturalism of the politics of globalization as well as of transnational professional soccer are rooted, as Crosson shows, in the world’s most important sporting event, the Olympics: “For the founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, ‘sports offered as a peaceable lingua franca, a means by which the people of different nations could communicate and cooperate in a manner that would lessen the likelihood of war between <<alien>> entities’ ” (6).

I would add to this that the lingua franca of sports competition must be accompanied by a particular set of gender codes which privilege the masculine voices who speak it.

In *Rudo y cursi*, another possibility for active Mexican participation in the global neoliberal framework is manifested in the identities of the film's principal actors, Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna who have become stars of transnational cinema. It is worth noting that part of the explanation for the success of these performers both inside Mexico and internationally is that they have transcended the ideology of *mexicanidad*. Along these lines, Ignacio Sánchez Prado in "The Neoliberal Stars. Salma Hayek, Gael García Bernal, and the Post-Mexican Film Icon" explains that "García Bernal's iconicity lies in a different form of post-Mexican condition, where he is able to shed his Mexican markers of identity in order to become an empty signifier, both culturally and ethnically, that may be filled with a wide array of national and post-national cultural meanings" (153). While the actors may escape national identity codes, the roles they perform in *Rudo y cursi* clearly articulate a Mexican gender discourse which accounts for the characters' inability to find success in the world of professional sports. The difference is rooted in the biologically male body and performance of masculine identity.

The actors' white bodies and European features participate in the long tradition in Mexican cinema of giving starring roles to male performers whose physiognomy does not reflect that of the majority of the nation's citizens, particularly their skin tone. In Golden Age films, actors such as María Félix and Pedro Infante embodied feminine and masculine gender codes configured by national discourses and their white bodies became a seductive spectacle for the audience. As distinct from these films from a much earlier period, in *Rudo y cursi* there is a parodic discrepancy between the bodies of the protagonists and the Mexican identities which they perform. The comic aspect of their situation, however, does not derive from this

discrepancy, but rather from the Mexican characters' persistent inability to find success in a world configured by neoliberal politics. As a result, the discrepancy shows that if the white actors do achieve international success, they leave behind the codes of masculinity which must attach to another body: that of the brown Mexican male.

Since brown bodies in Mexico can be reduced to a set of attributes created by the post-revolutionary state, it is implied that it is their own essence which causes the failure of the neoliberal model in Mexico. For their part, the real-life success of García and Luna promotes what Schaeffer calls "the continued support of men by men" (52), but only inside the global framework of whiteness. The only other option the film presents for maintaining the power that comes from solidarity between men is that of narco criminal organizations. Although it is not directly underlined in the narrative, the change of power portrayed in the film is one in which the only active participants are men. If the new alignment includes biologically male bodies, it also excludes those who are not white and who are thus unable to personify the codes of transnational masculinity. The hypermasculine identity of the narco gangs becomes the implied default path for Mexican men to participate in the global economy.

4.6 Conclusion: Is there a Place for the Mexican Male in Transnational Cinema?

Y tu mamá también and *Rudo y cursi* are two films which not only share the same lead actors and whose directors are from the same family, but also explore similar thematic territory by highlighting issues of contemporary Mexican masculinity in the context of the global system of power. Analyzing these two films together helps to suggest the ways in which neoliberalism has entered into Mexico politically, ideologically, and corporeally. In my discussion of *Y tu mamá también*, I examined how the inclusion of the codes of Mexican masculinity in the circuit of transnational cinema configures the politics of consumption of the globalized masculine

spectator. In *Rudo y cursi*, I explored how traditional Mexican cultural codes linked to the patriarchal family are included into global networks of power as expressions of “otherness” in order to create a veil of multicultural ethics to conceal the practices of exploitation pertaining to new masculinities: “cosmopolitan” audiences, male identities defined in terms of the neo-imperialist codes inherent to team sports, and white bodies who succeed in transcending cultural or ethnic markers.

Also, the films provide a perspective on how transnational politics has contributed to the deterioration of *mexicanidad* to the point of making it obsolete in the globalized world. Both films deploy the codes of masculinity configured by the ideology of *mexicanidad*, in the framework of aesthetics external to the national cinema tradition and integrated into the commercial paradigm of Hollywood films, suggesting the Cuarón brothers’ concern with producing works for consumption in the global market. The genre conventions used in both films also show how codes of *mexicanidad* do not allow the male characters to achieve success in the terms which normally configure the narrative structures of the sport film and the road movie. Both directors appropriate the codes of Mexican masculinity and project them onto the screen as stereotypes which facilitate their recognition by transnational audiences. These include machismo, uncontrollable sexual impulses, and patriarchal family values. As these tropes contribute to the integration of Mexican cinema into global markets, they also fix Mexican culture as otherness, and for this reason as incompatible with neoliberal politics and globalized male subjectivity.

The participation of Carlos and Alfonso Cuarón into the global circuit of cinema does not take into account the asymmetries of geopolitical power; their films overlook the consequences of including Mexico as an “other” in global aesthetics. The problematic results of this oversight

are apparent in both films. The stereotype of the Mexican familial structure governed by a strong father figure does not simply suggest the importance of “family values”, but also implies the need for women to become subordinate members of the household and the justification of these dynamics of exploitation, which also form part of global processes of consuming women’s bodies. Furthermore, the projection of machismo and the values of the Mexican family as “otherness,” not only portrays Mexican codes as incompatible with neoliberalism, but also posits organized crime as an economic system outside of Western comprehension, morality, and politics. Due to the emphasis that narco gangs place on masculinity and family—as exemplified in the criminal organization known as “la familia michoacana”—they are configured in terms of an economic model that is organically rooted in Mexico’s cultural essence.

Mexican hyper-masculinity, then, is articulated as the negative side of the global binary, in which valid forms of transnational masculinity are represented by cosmopolitan subjects or bodies whose ethnicity does not determine their subjecthood and who are rooted in gender norms established with modernity, including the British imperial ideals of manhood embodied in the paradigm of sportsmanship. By situating men who are defined in terms of their *mexicanidad* on the other side of the global masculinity divide, the model of subjectivity and the consumptive patterns of the transnational cinema spectator can remain as the dominant forms of participation in the world of global film and neoliberal multicultural politics.

This framework of multiculturalism consists of integrating cultural “others” into globalized aesthetic productions and purports to articulate itself as an ethical and tolerant transnational network. However, such a process simplifies these cultural codes into stereotypes, which removes responsibility for the social problems depicted in these works (violence, disappearance, exploitation, racism, sexism, classism, etc.) by constructing them as contained by

their otherness and thus impossible to comprehend. It also creates justification for the integration of “other” bodies into the global network of power. The Mexican cultural imaginary which promotes traditional family values becomes the basis for an ideology and an economy that sustain the exploitation of women’s labor in terms of a global ethics of care. In this regard, it is pertinent to reflect on the place which Mexico occupies in the aesthetics of global cinema. The question is not whether there is space for representations of *mexicanidad* in the transnational marketplace, but whether it is appropriate to introduce the signifiers of nationalism into globalized cultural circuits. Is it possible to resist neo-imperialism and hegemonic masculinity by means of the difference expressed through codes of *mexicanidad*?

CONCLUSION

The question of how to register the violent (dis)appearance of the masculine body within Mexico's cultural imaginary suffuses the enigmatic installations and performance pieces of renowned Mexican artist Teresa Margolles. Margolles's artwork metonymically makes reference to the modes of abjection that violently shape male identities at the extreme margins of the nation. Her innovative recuperation of detritus left behind at crime scenes, including blood, bodily fluids, broken glass, and tainted soil, marks an absent presence whose unrepresentability evokes the politics of exclusion as the root of the surge in violence that has affected (mostly) males throughout Mexico.

Margolles work at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009 *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* [What else could we talk about?] implicates the contemporary global order in the brutal disappearance of thousands of Mexican males. One of her pieces exhibited in the pavilion in the historic Rota Ivancich Palace consisted in mopping the floor of the pavilion daily during the duration of the exhibit (see fig. 5.1).



Figure 0.1 from Teresa Margolles *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*

The water used in washing the transnational exhibition hall's floor contained dissolved material recovered from crime scenes in northern Mexico. To gather materials for this installation,

Margolles followed the headlines of the sensationalist press that, according to the artist, weave together a narrative of Mexico's daily tragedies: decapitations, "encobijados" (bodies left wrapped up in blankets), mass graves, bodies dangling from pedestrian bridges, etc. (Medina 88-89). She then went to the crime scenes after the police finished gathering their forensic evidence. The broken glass, blood, and other bodily fluids mixed with the elements of the environment, were soaked up with large rags, that were later left out to dry. Margolles describes this activity as cleaning the streets, since her performance prevents the remains of murdered people from ending up in the city's drainage system (Medina 90). Moreover, the mud mingled with detritus that dries into the fabrics points back to the specific locations where a majority of these bodies are found: underdeveloped and impoverished neighborhoods with unpaved roads. At the Venice Biennale, these rags were rehydrated with local water, which was then used to mop the pavilion's floor. Margolles wanted to impregnate the palace with the evidence of brutal death in Mexico. Thus, by creating an invisible layer over the floors, her work intends to implicate the museumgoers into the narrative of violence and disappearance that has been circulated widely through mass media.

As critic Rubén Gallo has pointed out about Margolles's earlier work (1994-2000) with the art group SEMEFO (whose name derives from the initials of Mexico City's Servicio Médico Forense): "It is as if the artist wanted her viewers to assume the role of detectives and go in search of the *corpus delicti*. But we don't have to look very far: There are no bodies in Margolles's installations, but there are plenty of corpses in recent Mexican history" (119). And the numbers of bodies have multiplied in the years since Margolles began her work in this vein. While Margolles is still pointing to the body by its absence, the geography that maps her

installations has radically changed. Her work with SEMEFO consisted of creating art using the bodily fluids of “unclaimed” and “unidentified” corpses deposited in a Mexico City morgue.

Margolles’s artwork during the 1990s was responding to the wave of violence that swept Mexico City as a result of political changes such as the NAFTA agreement, the end of the 75 year reign of the PRI – now back in power after Enrique Peña Nieto’s victory in the latest elections – and the rapid rise of drug-related murders. According to Gallo “in the year 2000, Mexico City’s SEMEFO received 5,855 bodies” (121). By creating artworks such as the contours of an unidentified corpse imprinted in blood onto a white sheet, Margolles was commenting on the state’s strategies of covering up the brutal effects of its socio-political agendas on the bodies of Mexicans. In order to further highlight the role that Mexican institutions were playing in the violence, Margolles exhibited her work in most of the city’s government-run museums (Gallo 117).

The work that the Mexican artist exhibited at the Venice Biennale is defined by a shift of power, in which the nation-state has been displaced by global capitalism. The transportation of the corporeal detritus from Mexico to Europe signals that death is part of the unequal economic relationships that make it possible to cross borders and oceans with the purpose of setting up a multinational art exhibit that represents the new transnational order. Thus, mopping the floor of the pavilion with water that has been mixed with the remnants of crime scenes in Mexico becomes a way of cleansing the exhibit, and global aesthetics in general, of its detachment from the politics of expulsion and death that are inherent to globalization.

Moreover, Margolles’s performance of cleaning up crime scenes after incidents of narco violence is a gesture towards rescuing bodies that might otherwise have been forgotten due to their perceived criminal association. The places where the crimes occur also reinforce the politics

of expulsion that are affecting the bodies of Mexican males, since the unpatriotic image of northern Mexico as it has been constructed in the national imaginary has contributed to the region's exclusion from nation-building projects. At the same time, the north of Mexico has also been subjected to colonial discourses developed from the perspective of the United States which configure other side of the border as lacking civilization or as barbarous.



Figure 0.2 from *Teresa Margolles ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*

The cleaning that Margolles undertakes is furthermore linked to the narratives of death and violence articulated by Mexican newspapers, but particularly in sensationalist crime dailies. By attending to the crime scenes after they have been appropriated by the tabloid press to sell advertising, Margolles is able to present the violent disappearance of male bodies in terms of its links to global capitalism. More than taking a moral stance on drug trafficking, Margolles's art reflects on complex questions of dispersed accountability in relation to the devastating effects of narco violence in Mexico, particularly for biologically male bodies.

Margolles's approach engages with rescuing the corporeal history of Mexico's recent transition to a neoliberal economic model. *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* is a significant piece because imbricates organized crime, the transnational face of globalization, and the disappearances of male bodies to the geopolitics of the north of Mexico. Northern Mexico's

cultural connotations are important in the construction of national identity, since the re-drawing of the border in 1848 was a pivotal moment in the creation of the modern order.⁵⁰ After Mexico's Independence, the Mexican-American War established a paradigm of power in which the Mexican nation defined itself in contradistinction to the nascent U.S. empire. Masculinity has been a crucial aspect of this process since, as I have demonstrated in my analysis of *El ejército iluminado* by David Toscana, the conquered *regiomontanos* (people from the northern city of Monterrey) were configured as the emasculated, defeated counterpart to the powerful and patriotic idealized Mexican male that venerated and defended the nation and also represented its state power. This configuration of the codes of Mexican masculinity has been articulated through what I call the paradigm of the border which, even though its origin lies in northern Mexico, has an impact in all biologically male bodies that inhabit the Mexican territory and have been subjected to its nationalist gender codes.

As the gender codes of Mexican masculinity were configured to overcome emasculation, the males of the north of Mexico were defined as biologically inferior, and for that reason excluded from narratives of modernization. My examination of northern males represented by Toscana shows that the constructed signifiers of inferiority have justified a wide array of discourses throughout the history of Mexico in order to manufacture gender codes that fit the requirements of dominant political models. As the masculine body strives to perform as a

⁵⁰ As Fernando Vizcaíno points out in *El nacionalismo mexicano en los tiempos de la globalización y el multiculturalismo* (2004), "La historia reciente del nacionalismo de Estado, que en México amaneció en la Independencia y en la derrota de 1848 con Estados Unidos, para luego ver su largo día con la Reforma, la Revolución y el cardenismo hasta el punto, ya poco sostenible, que en 1982 hizo decir a López Portillo que iba a defender el peso 'como un perro', al mismo tiempo que gritaba muertas contra los 'desnacionalizados'" [The recent history of state nationalism, which in Mexico was born with the war of Independence and in the defeat by the U.S. in 1848, and came of age during the Reform period, the Revolution, and "Cardenismo," arrived at a point of unsustainability, which in 1982 caused López Portillo to vow to defend the peso "like a dog" while at the same time shouting "Death to denationalization" (8).

Mexican male and to become intelligible, his performance is permeated with contradictions that undermine his own masculinity.

In Chapter 4, my analysis of *Rudo and cursi*, directed by Carlos Cuarón, suggests that narco identity is yet another model of masculinity that fits within the order of globalization due to the transnational economy that defines organized crime, while at the same time, includes gender codes configured by the discourse of *mexicanidad*. However, the criminal aspect not only condemns them to an inferior performance of masculinity, but also to a contradictory enactment of power in which their bodies are active agents in transnational negotiations and, at the same time, disposable.

It is due to this contradictory aspect of masculinity that I associate the paradigm of the border with the disappearance of male bodies as it is (not) represented in the work of Teresa Margolles, as well as with the recent case of the forty three students from Ayotzinapa. The painful framework of absent bodies has outlined the work that I have presented in this study: their brutal disappearance demands an engagement with the gender politics in Mexico that provide conceptual justifications for corporal violence. I have focused on masculinity not only because male corpses are adding up most rapidly, but mainly because masculinity is the system of oppression most intrinsic to the roots of the modern Mexican nation. Moreover, masculinity is the principal axis for the violent gender system as a whole. Thus, masculinity as I conceptualize it, also accounts for the mass killings of women in Ciudad Juárez as well as in other areas of the Mexican republic.

The corporeal contradictions that define the males of the border region and under the border paradigm, help to describe the mechanism of masculinity as a system of oppression. I argue that masculinity is designed to subjugate biologically male bodies, especially if they are

impoverished and/or brown. The failure to perform a legitimate modality of masculinity crystallizes in the determination of Mexican bodies as inferior, which eases the exploitation of their labor. My investigation shows that the valid venues for the performance of masculinity are determined by factors such as geopolitics and race, and that they are configured as a form of disciplining the failed body.

By looking at the performance of the brown male body in Reygadas's *Battle in Heaven*, I have traced how this body is read through the lens of a denigrating discourse of indigeneity that positions him outside modern temporality and in need of urgent discipline. The gender codes of *mexicanidad*, as well as religion are presented as the two main identities that would redeem the brown body from his purported inferiority.

Other disciplining systems that I have unexpectedly come across are offered via sports. In both *El ejército iluminado* and *Rudo y cursi* the models of the marathon runner and soccer player are imbued with values and characteristics that are inherent to Western hegemonic masculinity. Both models are also linked to militarism and conquest. The codes of masculinity associated with sportsmanship are presented as models of male identity that, due to their globalized prominence, are articulated as a common language that helps create transnational harmony. However, in Toscana's novel as well as in Cuarón's film the failure to perform appropriately the gender codes of soccer or the marathon is presented as a result of the codes of *mexicanidad* that define the characters' masculinity as inferior, which in the case of males that inhabit the north of Mexico is perceived as part of the legacy of the Mexican-American war.

I have argued that neoliberalism is an economic model that was put to work in Mexico with the assumption that opening the borders as well as weakening the state's power would benefit all Mexicans. However, as I have intended to show, by relying on a system of power

configured by the failed performance of national gender codes, neoliberal politics justifies and facilitates the exploitation of the male bodies and their labor, often times with deadly consequences. Through my reading of *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, I have demonstrated how the paradigm of the border underlines the inferiority of *regiomontanos* due to their lack of patriotic masculinity, and relegates them to subordinate roles in the American industries that are operating in Monterrey. In a similar vein, *Y tu mamá también* shows that neoliberal ideology frames Mexican territory as lacking civilization, and therefore, as the ideal setting to formulate new utopias. The process involves consuming the bodies that perform on Mexican masculinity with the intention of creating a new form of subjectivity at the transnational level. Furthermore, it reveals the assumption that the patriarchal family is naturally inclined to accommodate and care for others, which is used to justify additional modes of exploiting Mexican bodies and their emotional and physical labor.

As the neoliberal economy dismantles the already precarious condition of state support and benefits, and as the economy worsens due to the unfit neoliberal model in a country like Mexico—where the informal economy has been one of the major sources of employment—poverty and precarity become normalized. Moreover, neoliberal politics disintegrates the fabric of different kinds of male-centered communities, such as those based on the patriarchal family and forms of homosociality. The breakdown of these social structures increases the vulnerability of brown, impoverished bodies, because they are isolated from their support network. The long working hours, solitude, as well as the determination of the brown male body as inferior, configure Mexican masculinity as passive and mute under the neoliberal framework. My reading of *Battle in Heaven* furthermore, shows, that the lack of an intelligible male voice prevents brown bodies from creating a politics of resistance. Another direct consequence of neoliberalism

on the male body is that it creates tension. The constant disciplining of the male body through different discourses in order to ensure efficient exploitation produces a bodily tension that is prone to violent outbursts, which further confirms its inferiority as well as its disposability. In this sense, my reading of *Battle of Heaven* illustrates how the effects of neoliberalism at the center of the Mexican republic, Mexico City, can account for the disappearance of male bodies throughout the country.

In *Rudo y cursi* the disintegration of family unity is also a factor that facilitates the exploitation of male bodies. As the main characters strive to become famous soccer players, their “traditional” family falls apart. The vulnerable bodies, moreover, are determined as inferior when they try to incorporate the gender codes associated with transnational soccer, as well as those configured by the discourse of *mexicanidad* in their performance of masculinity. Through their failure, transnational soccer and mass media profit from their physical efforts on the soccer field, while they wind up more deeply impoverished and deprived of corporeal integrity.

One of the main arguments of my dissertation is that the effects of neoliberalism on the Mexican male body delineate the politics of global capitalism as a hegemony with no place for empathy, but rather only for cruelty through consumption, exploitation, and death. The analysis that I offered of Mario Bellatin’s *Salón de belleza* illustrates how global politics have contributed to a ubiquitous system of expulsion. Even though Bellatin is describing a dystopian or post-apocalyptic world, the horrifying images he creates of cadavers on the streets certainly bear resemblance to contemporary Mexican reality. As empathy is excluded from global hegemony, I have argued that it is configured in terms of masculine codes. Drawing from a western model of subjectivity that defines rationality as inherent to the masculine individual, while the female subject is relegated to reproduction and caretaking, I have proposed that the exclusion of

empathy from the hegemony of the global network of power defines this system as hyper-masculine. My dissertation shows how gender categories are not accessible for bodies that are condemned as inferior to resist the politics of death that threaten them. Thus, the communities that Bellatin portrayed in the novella fail in their attempt to resist global hyper-masculinity by enacting an ethics of care, or the codes that formulate alternative configurations of subjects but maintain the distinction between male and female.

Hyper-masculinity is a characteristic inherent to the globalized Western structure of power, and as the lack of empathy shown by the narcos coheres with this paradigm a few of them have been able to prosper within the transnational economy. I argue that a parallel process occurs in relation to globalized aesthetics in which artists create works which cannot engage in empathy with Mexican subjects. This is what is so significant about Teresa Margolles and her installations that implicate the European and transnational audience in the production of violence and death in Mexico and draw connections between the world of high culture and the global order of hyper-masculinity.

As the masculine codes of *mexicanidad* are presented as the heart of the system of oppression that benefits the global order, my analysis of the films of the Cuarón brothers shows an escape route followed by the actors Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna. However, the masculine body can escape oppression only insofar as its whiteness and Western characteristics bracket the subject's *mexicanidad*. As the majority of Mexicans are brown and have non-European features, eluding the subjugating forces of masculinity is not a plausible possibility. As the intention of this work has not been to identify possibilities of resistance to the interaction between the politics of masculinity, the gender codes of *mexicanidad*, and the effects of neoliberalism, I have not posited alternatives to the dominant hegemony. Rather, the objective of

my examination has been to develop a better understanding of how cultural productions are addressing these systems in the context of Mexico's current period of transition.

This study argues that the performance of Mexican masculinity as delineated by post-revolutionary nationalist ideology is contested by its immediate reality, which unveils the brown, biologically male body—from the perspective of the neoliberal state—as inadequate to the gender identities that form the basis of modern subjectivity. As the nation's racialized gender discourse appears as the only instrument available to construct a coherent male self, racism and machismo can operate openly yet invisibly, and in concert with neoliberal forces, to oppress brown Mexican men.

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