

READING KILLER WOMEN:  
NARRATIVES OF TWENTIETH CENTURY LATIN AMERICA

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In this study I examine Latin American representations about women who kill. The analysis of portrayals of female killers, who exist not just outside the law but also outside of traditional understandings of womanhood, reveals tensions of class, race, gender, and national identity. In chapter one, I explore the way *La Quintrala* has been represented and negotiated in the contemporary Chilean popular imagination through an analysis of a 1986 *telenovela* and a 2008 comic based on this figure. Furthermore, I examine Mercedes Valdivieso's novel *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* (1991), a feminist reconstruction of the legend of *La Quintrala*. I argue that *La Quintrala* has been positioned as a perverse mother to the nation, constantly evoked in the Chilean imagination only to be overcome/forgotten. In chapter two, I explore the language used in the contemporary media's sensationalist coverage of the case of *Las Poquianchis* and the social critique of Felipe Cazals's 1976 film. Additionally I study how Jorge Ibargüengoitia's novel *Las muertas* (1977) recontextualizes these working class women and their acts, using domestic details and mundane elements to ground the violence. However, the incongruous juxtaposition of the domestic and the intimate with the violence of the female characters creates a new perverse threat to replace that produced by the media. In chapter three, I discuss Jorge Franco Ramos's aesthetic appropriation of the image of the *sicaria* (female contract assassin) and the cultural and social factors that surround her through an examination of his novel *Rosario*

*Tijeras* (1999). I investigate the ways in which this figure has come alive in the Latin American imagination as a popular icon of working class violence by engaging with class and social reality both in the novel and in the public's perception of the recent 2005 film *Rosario Tijeras*, directed by Emilio Maillé. I argue that Franco's representation of the *sicaria* inscribes her both within *novela negra* and formula romance genres, which allows him to toy with, but also contain the idea of a female killer. In chapter four, I utilize Gioconda Belli's novel *La mujer habitada* (1988) to comment upon the perception of murder committed by women within political movements. I argue Belli casts her main protagonist as a sacrificial soldier, one who is willing to die for this new imagined nation. It is Lavinia's willingness to sacrifice herself for her country that lends legitimacy to her violence, rewriting it in positive terms, and allowing her to be embraced as part of that national history. I further explore the media's representation of Nora Astorga and the Sandinista's combative motherhood discourse.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alicia Muñoz is originally from East Los Angeles and is the daughter of Mexican immigrants. She completed her B.A. in Spanish literature with a concentration in Women's Studies at Swarthmore College in 2003, graduating with High Honors. At Cornell she finished her Ph.D. in the Department of Romance Studies with a minor in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

*Para mis padres y para Ben*

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## INTRODUCTION

While working as a journalist in the 1980s, Colombian writer Laura Restrepo interviewed a woman imprisoned for killing her lover, quartering his dead body and distributing his parts in plastic bags all around Bogotá. Restrepo's story "Amor sin pies ni cabeza" recounts the details of this interview, beginning with her arrival at *El Buen Pastor*. As she attempts to gain entry into the women's correctional facility, Restrepo encounters her first surprise; there is a strict dress code to which her attire does not conform. She surmounts this problem with the help of street vendors equipped for just such predicaments, enters the facility and meets with the prison's social worker before her interview with eighteen-year-old inmate Emma Vélez Mojica. The social worker informs Restrepo that almost all of the women imprisoned for murder killed their husbands or lovers after being subjected to physical abuse. As Restrepo's interview reveals, Emma was no exception; she killed in self-defense. However, Emma's dismemberment of her dead lover's body made her particularly famous. In the eyes of the media, she was more than just a killer; she was a cruel, cold-blooded monster.

Towards the end of her interview Restrepo dares to ask the obvious question, "¿por qué fue que lo cortaste...?" Emma is not bothered by the question but she does remark upon people's desire to know *why* she dismembered her lover's body: "Eh, Ave María, cómo le meten de misterio a eso, ¿no? —me responde sin tensión." She then proceeds to take control of the interview, interrogating Restrepo:

- Ahora contestame vos a mí, ¿vos sos rica?
- ¿Cómo? —me sorprende su pregunta.
- Que sí sos rica.
- Pues, ni rica ni pobre.
- Pero carro propio sí tenés, no me lo vas a negar.

--Sí, carro sí tengo.  
 --Por eso no entendés nada.  
 --¿Cómo?  
 --Supongamos el caso de que es a vos a la que le cae la malparida hora y tenés que matar a tu man.  
 --Supongamos.  
 --Lo metés en el baúl de tu carro, lo tirás bien lejos y santo remedio, ¿no?  
 --Tal vez.  
 --Bueno, hija, a mí me tocaba en bus. ¿Entendés? ¿Qué hacés si te toca trastear el difunto en bus? Pues te deshacés de él por pedazos, uno en cada viaje, ¿sí o qué? (Restrepo 269-279)

Emma's reply to Restrepo's inquiry challenges the reader's previous assumptions and calls attention to her socioeconomic reality and reasoning. The media represented Emma as a cruel monster, an inherently evil woman who would not only kill a man, but also cut up his body. However, the contextualization of her violent acts disturbs our reading of her. She killed her lover in self-defense and the most troubling aspect of her crime had more to do with her lower social class than her character. She dismembered the body for practical reasons: 1) she had a body to dispose of and 2) she had no car. Emma's reasons for disposing of the body in this manner are logical rather than emotional, adding another level of unexpectedness. The dismemberment was not an act of hysterical fury, a *female* crime guided by emotion, as the reader might suppose. Instead, it was a rational (masculine) act.

The case of Mexican serial killer Juana Barraza Zamperio,<sup>1</sup> called "*mataviejitas*," like the previous narrative, complicates our understanding of women's relationship with violence. An article in Mexico's newspaper *La Jornada* titled "Cae *mataviejitas* tras consumir otro de sus crímenes; es mujer" (January 26, 2006) reported that Barraza, who worked as a professional wrestler known as *La dama del silencio*, was arrested on charges that she murdered at least 10 elderly women over the

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<sup>1</sup> This story made international headlines, appearing in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Miami Herald*, *La Nación* (Argentina), and *El Mundo* (Spain), to name a few.

previous two years through bludgeoning or strangulation, and invariably robbed the victims.<sup>2</sup> During the course of her murders, Barraza gained entry into elderly women's homes by presenting herself on some occasions as a social worker, complete with papers and uniform, and on other occasions as a health professional, donned with a stethoscope. The subheading of the article's title "*es mujer*" references the previous assumptions of the killer's gender. In earlier investigations of this case the authorities assumed, based on physical descriptions, that the killer was a man or a transvestite. Barraza's untraditional physique and the violent, physical nature of the crimes made it difficult for authorities to suppose a *woman* was committing these murders.

Within the realm of the wrestling arena, Barraza's penchant for violence forms part of her character. Her wrestling name *La dama del silencio* reinforces her femininity and the stealth of her actions, countering her "masculine" build. Outside of this space, the violence committed by Barraza surprises the public. Bernardo Bátiz, the chief prosecutor of Mexico City, comments on the careful execution of these murders by Barraza: "Fue un trabajo muy a fondo, muy profesional, muy técnico. Imagínense que el patrón de los homicidios era atacar a personas con las que no tenía relación previa [...] tenía la paciencia de buscar quién estaba solo, hacía su trabajo con mucha habilidad" (Salgado and Servín 2006). His words highlight the premeditated nature of her violence; Barraza was a skilled and calculated killer who did her best to not get caught.

These anecdotes surprise as they reveal and violate the preconceptions delineating society's interpretation of women who kill.<sup>3</sup> This project seeks to explore

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<sup>2</sup> As another article from *La Jornada* states, "El más común es que asfixiaba a sus víctimas con objetos que se encontraban en el domicilio, como un lazo de cortina, medias o el cable de un aparato electrodoméstico o de teléfono" (Salgado and Servín, "A Juana").

<sup>3</sup> Female killers have been a source of fascination within the Latino population. The popular Argentinean show *Mujeres asesinas*, which is based on real-life crimes, received the "Martín Fierro de Oro" award given by the Asociación de Periodistas de Televisión y Radiofonía de la Argentina (APTRA) for best television mini-series in 2006. It has also since been broadcast in other countries:

the multiple layers of responses surrounding female killers, from the primary stereotyped rhetoric found in some newspaper and historical accounts through the archetypes of femme fatale, witch, and avenging victim, to the literary re-interpretations that display an acute awareness of the limitations of the primary discourse and seek to create an alternative reading of the female killer. As a framework I have selected contemporary writings (1977-1999) from four Latin American countries including works by Jorge Ibargüengoitia, Jorge Franco Ramos, Gioconda Belli and Mercedes Valdivieso. These selected texts constitute aesthetic re-appropriations of social, cultural, and historical events involving female killers by offering a direct interpretation of a historical figure (“*Las Poquianchis*” in *Las muertas* and “*La Quintrala*” in *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*) or creating a fictional character from a specific social reality (Colombian female contract assassins in *Rosario Tijeras* and female soldiers in the Sandinista revolution in *La mujer habitada*). Furthermore, in each chapter I draw upon fictional, non-fictional, and visual accounts of these killer women. Much of what has been written on the larger subject of women who kill comes from the fields of sociology, psychology, criminology, and history. While my dissertation is a literary and cultural study, the real life context of my chosen novels leads me to provide an overview of such critical discourses.

Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero’s classic study *The Female Offender*, originally published in Italian in 1893 and translated into English in 1895, has been a consistent point of reference in the study of female crime.<sup>4</sup> The book argues through *atavism*, “a concept that views deviant behavior as a ‘throwback’ to an earlier

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Mexico and Colombia. The recent production of other shows such as *Cárcel de mujeres*, produced by TVN (Chile), and HBO Latino’s *Capadocia* further reflect society’s interest in violent women.

<sup>4</sup> “His [Lombroso’s] central idea of the born or genetic criminal continues to attract adherents, and the main legal implications of his work—that some offenders are not fully responsible for their acts—remains key in criminal jurisprudence” (Rafter and Gibson 3).

evolutionary stage in human development” (Belknap 23), that female criminals, like their male counterparts, were biologically distinct from normal examples of their sex. In other words, those women who are criminal are predisposed to their delinquency due to physical and psychological traits.

Lombroso and Ferrero devote a large portion of their book to measuring and documenting female criminals’ and prostitutes’ craniums, heights, weights, hair color (and baldness), moles and tattoos, as observed by them and others, in order to find correlations with degenerative behavior. This “scientific” analysis amasses an impressive collection of numbers and statistics, but ultimately relies on subjective and arbitrary measurements of random physical traits to find explanations for women’s psychology and behavior. They interpret this data through a misconstrued use of evolutionary theory that relies on misogynist assumptions of woman’s primitive evolutionary state and biological role. Lombroso and Ferrero argue that since women had not evolved far from their origin they thus would also reveal fewer signs of degeneration than their male counterparts; the criminals amongst them would not be highly visible considering all women are relatively “primitive.” Furthermore, according to the authors, the lives women *naturally* lead accounts for their lesser development. Women’s biologically determined role as caretaker results in a more sedentary life with less exposure to varying conditions of environment, while men’s role as providers results in more active and challenging lives, making them more evolutionarily advanced than women. In accounting for the lower rate of female criminality as compared to that of males, Lombroso and Ferrero manage to also (il)logically deduce that this is due to basic feminine limitations. As Carol Smart explains, “Lombroso and Ferrero maintained that conservatism in women has led them to be more law-abiding than men. This conservatism was not thought to be culturally induced however; on the contrary Lombroso and Ferrero argued that it has organic

origins” (32). In their study the two authors conclude, “Compilers of public statutes have also noted the conservative tendency of women in all questions of social order; a conservatism of which the primary cause is to be sought in the immobility of the ovule compared with the zoosperm” (108-109). In spite of the rarity of female crime, Lombroso and Ferrero find a great threat in the “born” female criminal. These women, absurdly defined by the presence of “four or more of the characteristics of degeneration” (103), pose a greater threat even than their male counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

The “born” female criminal is characterized as more like a man than a woman. Muscular and strong, with thick hair and an “essentially virile” face (95-96), she was also said to lack the qualities associated with the feminine; she was devoid of maternal and religious feelings, masculine in her style of dress and “excessively erotic” (187).<sup>6</sup> The characteristics described are all based on societal expectations of a woman’s proper role and attributes; these born criminals are found to violate those expectations. Simultaneously, combining these virile characteristics with the “worst qualities of women”—namely vengefulness, cunning, cruelty, deceitfulness—the “born” female criminal is condemned as the embodiment of wickedness (187-188). Lombroso and Ferrero go beyond their initial interest in numerical correlations to draw their conclusions about the nature of female criminals from anecdotes and misogynist stereotypes. Consider the following passage that comments on the genesis of a female criminal:

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<sup>5</sup> Lombroso and Ferrero also include in their analysis a discussion of what they term the “occasional” female criminal, which included “milder sorts of ‘born criminal[s]’ ” through to “normal women in whom circumstances ha[d] developed the fund of immorality which is latent in every female” (216).

<sup>6</sup> I must note that the authors’ make a point to tell the reader that people do not find ugliness in these physical features. They even consider a ray of beauty can be found among these women, but “when this beauty exists it is much more virile than feminine [...] see how hard, cruel, and masculine are these lines, which yet are not wanting in grace” (93-94). They further write, “let a female delinquent be young and we can overlook her degenerate type, and even regard her as beautiful; the sexual instinct misleading us here” (97).



We also saw that women have many traits in common with children; that their moral sense is deficient; that they are revengeful, jealous, inclined to vengeance of a refined cruelty.

In ordinary cases these defects are neutralised by piety, maternity, want of passion, sexual coldness, by weakness and an undeveloped intelligence. But when a morbid activity of the psychical centres intensifies the bad qualities of women, and induces them to seek relief in evil deeds; when piety and maternal sentiments are wanting, and in their place are strong passions and intensely erotic tendencies, much muscular strength and a superior intelligence for the conception and execution of evil, it is clear that the innocuous semi-criminal present in the normal woman must be transformed into a born criminal more terrible than any man. (151)

They cast the criminal woman as wicked, vengeful, and unnatural whereas the good woman is contained by her piety and maternity. This unleashed woman is a terror to behold with her “passion for evil for its own sake” (158) and “the refined, diabolical cruelty with which she accomplishes her crime. To kill her enemy does not satisfy her, she needs to see him suffer and know the full taste of death” (148). The authors’ assumptions and stereotypes color the way they view female criminals, leading them to make biased conclusions presented as objective fact.

Even though Lombroso and Ferrero’s study is ill founded and discredited it has had a continuing influence. Smart explains the legacy their ideas have had in the study of female crime:

Lombroso and Ferrero’s work on female criminality has served to create an ideological framework in which later, more contemporary studies have developed. Variations on the belief in biological determinism, both of crime and the nature of women, on sexist beliefs in the inferiority of women and an implicit support of double-standards of morality, along with the failure to take account of the socio-economic, political and legal context in which ‘crime’ occurs, all appear in later works on female criminality. (36)

The language used to describe violent women has not changed much over the years, as many scholars continue to build on stereotypical notions of women’s nature. Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck (1934) and Otto Pollak (1950), among others, reiterated

the idea that criminal women were naturally devious (Scott 22). Pollak writes: “In general, it can be concluded that homicide committed by women can be called secret murder and that the general observations about the highly masked character of female crime are well substantiated by the modus operandi of the woman who kills” (19). Echoing Pollak’s idea of “secret murder” and the masked character of female crime are sociological, historical, and criminology studies that have described women as “quiet killers” who remain undetected for a significantly longer period of time than their male counterparts, often “cloak[ing] themselves in their vulnerability” (Kelleher, 1998; Hickey, 2006; Scott, 2005). Many current studies continue to highlight women’s use of more “subtle” methods of killing such as poisons or drugs (Scott 107) and “covert” methods such as suffocation (Schurman-Kauflin 10). These studies reflect the authors’ preconceptions about women as they paint a portrait of a female killer that is inherently deceitful, calculating, and highly dangerous.

Combined with these sociological, legal and psychological theories of female violence is the recognition that women who kill disrupt traditional notions of gender.<sup>7</sup> Acceptance of murder committed by females requires a suspension of commonly held beliefs about violence and femininity. Anna Motz states, “female violence is often ignored or denied, because to accept it, particularly in relation to maternal abuse, would be too threatening to traditional and idealized notions of motherhood and femininity” (259). This denial of female violence and the preferential or discriminatory treatment<sup>8</sup> experienced by many female offenders has led some scholars to ask whether women are literally getting away with murder. Deborah

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<sup>7</sup> In his study *Delincuencia femenina en España* (1990) Andrés Canteras Murillo concludes that the figure of the female killer is rejected by society because she embodies the most terrible social transgression; her behavior is perceived as the antithesis of traditional motherhood and domestic-social values (411, 416, 422).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the differential treatment of male and female defendants in the criminal justice system, see Kathleen Daly, *Gender, Crime, and Punishment* (1994).

Schurman-Kauflin (2000) writes: “until the public realizes what a danger female predators present, essentially, a free pass for killing is offered to those females who choose to engage in this behavior. If nothing is done, more and more females will take advantage of that” (14). Thibault and Rossier (1992) also fear that women will kill without punishment:

Although some women may kill in the home in self-defense, female killers in the home also plan to kill and kill because they want to. We need to take a close look at the courts that are letting these women get away with murder. Has our sexist society, by defending these female murderers, made it open season for women to kill men, as long as the killing is in the home? (qtd. in Hickey 221)

However, this fear of a plague of un-persecuted murderesses is generated by the perception of a threat specifically directed at the *man* in the house. As Coramae Richey Mann insists, “An essential part of the argument that women are getting away with murder is gender based. Those making such a claim are really insisting that women are getting away with the murder of men” (161).

The characterization of violent women reflects the fear and anxiety these women produce. Hannah Scott comments that in the eyes of society these women “are ‘unnatural’ or ‘abhorrent’ whereas men are simply exacting their masculine role illegally” (6). In her criminology study Schurman-Kauflin uses bestial language to describe the danger female killers pose:

Like the jaws of an oversized great white shark, female multiple murderers can be lethal...Those who have managed to survive an attempted murder by these killers have described being poisoned as the equivalent to being eaten alive, much like a shark biting a person in half. This is a horrible visual, yet it is remarkably accurate. (51)

Despite Schurman-Kauflin’s claim to the accuracy of her shark imagery, it is an image constructed around her own preconceived notions. She takes a victim’s description of being poisoned as license to use the image of a man-eating shark. In doing so she bestializes and sensationalizes the image of a female killer, echoing the vilification of

violent women by contemporary media discourses. These historical, sociological, legal, and psychological studies show the frameworks employed in discussing these women as critical objects of study. In reading them, we learn as much about researchers' preexisting stereotypes as we do about the women themselves.

Josefina Ludmer's chapter on women who kill from *El cuerpo del delito* (1999) is the best-known work on female criminals in Latin American fiction.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on a series of Argentine narratives from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, Ludmer reveals the story of women who kill men, dividing the figures according to their roles/professions. Male characters kill prostitutes and adulteresses, while female characters, depicted as mothers and virgins, kill men of power and influence: policemen, doctors, factory owners, politicians. Further, Ludmer connects literary characters to sociopolitical developments, proposing that these stories (with their respective killer women) enter into almost direct correlation with "ciertas irrupciones femeninas en la cultura argentina: las primeras universitarias, las primeras obreras, actrices, guerrilleras y otras pioneras" (368).

In this chain of women who kill, female crime is not prosecuted and the meaning of this exemption varies "según cómo se la lea, o cómo se la cuente, desde qué yo (desde la víctima, desde el cronista, o desde la que mata), o según desde dónde se mire la cadena [...] porque en las que matan el género es el que decide el sentido de la representación" (370). The conclusion Ludmer draws from the stories she examines is that when told from a male perspective, the killer becomes a neurotic and mad woman, socially and medically condemned. When the story is told from the female voice, the woman who kills is politically and sexually justified.<sup>10</sup> The representation

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<sup>9</sup> Apart from this chapter, studies on Latin American fiction are limited to critical articles on a few novels about women who kill.

<sup>10</sup> In Argentine stories the woman who kills speaks through others because they are narrated in the third person while the male criminal assumes the first person (Ludmer 369).

of women who kill is largely determined by the gender of the narrator; in neither case is the killer prosecuted. Moreover, the gender of the criminal also problematizes the genre of the narration, dictating its form.

Ludmer further contends: “la ‘realidad’ de la literatura dice más que cierta ‘realidad’ que funciona como su correlato directo, porque las que matan en los cuentos encadenados no sólo actúan la pasión femenina desencadenada en la realidad del crimen doméstico, sino que además parecen condensar todos los ‘delitos femeninos’ en el campo de lo simbólico [...] Son delincuentes de la verdad y de la legitimidad, los valores del estado” (371). In other words, these “cuentos” arise out of societal preconceptions about women, but in literature the representation of a female killer can offer a more complex counterpoint to reality; the realm of the symbolic captures other possible “female crimes.” As Ludmer highlights, these women are “delincuentes *de* la verdad y *de* la legitimidad” (my emphasis). Ludmer plays with the meaning of “de” suggesting these women function as criminals *of* truth (that “truth” conceivably being those set categories underlying society’s understanding of women, which these females challenge) and *from* truth (they’re escaping that reality). Similarly, they are criminals *of* and *from* legitimacy (the term invoking laws/rules).

In these fictions women who kill *perform* feminine signs (passion, jealousy, vengeance, hysteria) and “a la vez les aplican una torsión, porque se valen de los ‘signos femeninos’ de la justicia, como el de ‘mujer honesta’, para burlarse y para postularse como agentes de una justicia que está más allá de la del estado” (371-372). Most pertinent to my analysis is Ludmer’s identification of this “torsión” of signs, which familiarizes these female crime narratives while simultaneously circumventing statutory justice in exerting a justice of their own.

My selected texts explore what happens to notions of femininity when negative and violent elements come to the fore. More importantly, they offer a broader portrait

of killer women that supplements and expands Ludmer's concepts, examining the *torsión* of various feminine signs: domesticity, seduction, the formula love story, the mother to the nation. I further place these written narratives in dialogue with alternative interpretations that seldom engage each other, from film, tabloids, and contemporary culture. The most referenced version of a female killer is the *femme fatale*<sup>11</sup>, the seductress killer, but my study is not a direct exploration of this archetype. The narratives I bring together in dialogue reveal a more complicated portrait of a woman who kills through a contextualization of her history and violence. By examining representations of women who kill we can explore certain societal anxieties because these women challenge traditional notions of femininity and societal law.

Although their authors are not typically grouped together in the same literary movements or ideological camps, this set of narratives does reflect constructions of national identity. The female killers on which these works are based, function as representatives of their respective countries. The Mexican media feared that *Las Poquianchis* of Mexico could come to be equated with Mexico the way Jack the Ripper has come to define England. *La Quintrala* is a mythical and historical figure of Chilean culture and national identity. The figure of Rosario Tijeras stands as a symbol of Colombia's drug trafficking period. Lastly, the female protagonist of Gioconda Belli's novel, loosely based on Sandinista guerrilla fighter Nora Astorga, can be read as a symbol of the Movimiento, and as such, a figure of Nicaragua. In this manner, they apply a national twist (a "*torsión nacional*"), to adapt Ludmer's term, to more traditional representations of a (non-criminal) woman as emblem of a nation.

Each of these chapters examines how different narratives (consciously or not) employ various strategies of containment in their particular representation of a female

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<sup>11</sup> There have been numerous studies on this figure of feminine evil. Among the most cited are Mary Ann Doane's *Femme fatales: feminism, film theory, and psychoanalysis* (1992) and Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siecle Culture* (1986).

killer as they attempt to reconcile her violence and gender. The figure of *La Quintrala* is contained by a confessional structure that allows her crimes to be recalled, but also be forgotten/erased. Valdivieso employs this same structure, but subverts it through *La Quintrala*'s unrepentance, constructing a narrative in which her actions are justified and affirmed. Contemporary newspaper and tabloid coverage negates the problematic gender of *Las Poquainchis* by casting their violent acts as diabolic and bestial. Ibargüengoitia responds to this coverage by contextualizing it as ordinary and accidental, and containing their violence through his use of domestic metaphors/elements. The violence perpetrated by Rosario Tijeras is told from a formula love story and connected to her sexuality, and is thereby nested within an acceptable feminine realm. However, that sexual body is also depicted as waste: *miserable y desechable*. Lastly, Belli's use of an indigenous spirit displaces the primary agency for her fictional female *guerrillera*'s violence, while Nora Astorga is defined by the U.S. media through the simplistic and familiar archetype of the femme fatale.

In chapter one, I analyze depictions of the historical figure Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer or "*La Quintrala*," a seventeenth century Creole from Santiago who was accused of torture, murder, and witchcraft. Using Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna's *Los Lisperguer y la Quintrala* (1877) and other historical accounts, I explore the way this killer woman has been represented and negotiated in the contemporary Chilean popular imagination. In my analysis, I examine the 1986 *telenovela*, produced by Chile's state-owned television station (TVN), Chilean newspaper *Las últimas noticias*'s 2008 comic book episode about this figure, and Mercedes Valdivieso's novel *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* (1991), a feminist reconstruction of the legend of *La Quintrala*. I argue that *La Quintrala* has been positioned as a perverse mother to the nation, constantly evoked in the Chilean imagination only to be

overcome/forgotten.

In chapter two, I examine the case of three Mexican sisters whose murderous crimes were discovered in the 1960s. I analyze the language used in the contemporary media's coverage of the case. Additionally I study how Jorge Ibargüengoitia's novel *Las muertas* (1977), a fictionalized interpretation of the crimes of "*Las Poquianchis*," engages with these popular discourses. I argue that Ibargüengoitia recontextualizes these working class women and their acts, using domestic details and mundane elements to ground the violence. As a result, his characterization of these women is not as sensational as that of the media. However, the incongruous juxtaposition of the domestic and the intimate with the violence of the female characters creates a new perverse threat to replace that produced by the media. Ibargüengoitia alarmingly brings the violence into the domestic sphere generating a more intimate threat and an even more disturbing picture of these women.

In chapter three, I discuss Jorge Franco Ramos's aesthetic appropriation of the image of the *sicaria* (female contract assassin) and the cultural and social factors that surround her through an examination of his novel *Rosario Tijeras* (1999). I investigate the ways in which this figure has come alive in the Latin American imagination as a popular icon of working class violence by engaging with class and social reality both in the novel and in the public's perception of the recent 2005 film *Rosario Tijeras*, directed by Emilio Maillé. I argue that Franco's representation of the *sicaria* inscribes her both within *novela negra* and formula romance genres, which allows him to toy with, but also contain the idea of a female killer.

In chapter four, I utilize Gioconda Belli's novel *La mujer habitada* (1988) to comment upon the perception of murder committed by women within violent political movements. In contrast to the previous chapters, this study offers a positive portrait of a woman who kills. I argue Belli casts her main protagonist as a sacrificial soldier,



one who is willing to die for this new imagined nation. It is Lavinia's willingness to sacrifice herself for her country that lends legitimacy to her violence, rewriting it in positive terms, and allowing her to be embraced as part of that national history. Since there are elements in the novel that can be traced to experiences of the Sandinista Nora Astorga, whose use of "feminine wiles" and knowledge of architecture led to the capture and death of General Pérez Vega, I further explore the media's representation of Nora and the Sandinista's combative motherhood discourse.

## CHAPTER 1

### CONFESSIONS OF A KILLER: “LA QUINTRALA” OF CHILE

Chile’s most infamous violent woman is undoubtedly Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer (1605-1665), known as “*La Quintrala*,” a wealthy colonial woman of mixed Spanish, German, and Indian blood.<sup>1</sup> The web of mystery, sorcery and crime that surrounds her has made her a popular figure in the Chilean national imaginary, continually appearing in movies, plays, soap operas, and musicals of the twentieth and twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> These various interpretations speak to the endurance of *La Quintrala* myth, both positive and negative; she has been a figure that has repeatedly entered into dialogue with popular discourse.<sup>3</sup> This chapter discusses the presence of *La Quintrala* in the Chilean imagination, analyzes the 1986 soap opera *La Quintrala*, and provides a close reading of Mercedes Valdivieso’s novel *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* (1991). These three narratives serve multiple purposes in different generations and contexts, but they always exist in reference to a framework of a shameful past that must be overcome/forgotten.

Historian Cecilia Salinas has admitted the difficulty of separating the historical colonial woman from the legend, opting not to include Los Ríos’s story in her book on

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<sup>1</sup> She is nicknamed as such “por el quintral o planta de flores rojas que mata al árbol que lo sostiene” (Valdivieso 16).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the numerous books written on the Quintrala there is a 1955 Argentinean film directed by Hugo del Carril. The 1986 TVN miniseries on Chilean television, based on the Quintrala legend, was one of the most successful soap operas about this woman. More recently, Danish composer Lars Grangaard staged the opera *La Quintrala* in Copenhagen in 2004. That same year there were rumors that Chilean actress Chela Bons had plans for a movie about the Quintrala and that the script would be written by novelist Gustavo Frías. In 2005, the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes staged a play titled “Quintrala o la mixtura del quiltraje nacional.”

<sup>3</sup> The figure of the Quintrala continues to captivate the attention of Chileans. In 2001 Gustavo Frías published the first of his *Tres nombres para Catalina* trilogy, “Catrala.” The work received the *Premio Consejo Nacional del Libro’s Mejor Novela* 2002 award. This novel was later followed by the second work “La doña de Campofrío” in 2003; the third work in the series has yet to be published. Moreover, in November 2008 a woman by the name of María del Pilar Pérez, accused of masterminding the murder of three men and beating her daughter-in-law, was nicknamed “*La Quintrala*” by her neighbors and the Chilean news media.

colonial Chilean women. *La Quintrala*, she writes, is “a feminine stereotype which has, to date, shown itself to be difficult to dissect and easy to manipulate with sparse historical rigor” (20). Nonetheless certain details define her life.<sup>4</sup> Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer, an *encomendera* and slave owner, was the descendent of Bartolomé Blumenthal (or Flores), a German who accompanied Pedro Valdivia’s expedition at the beginning of the Spanish conquest of Chile, and Elvira de Talagante y Malloco, the only daughter of the Cacique of Talagante. The daughter of Bartolomé and Elvira was baptized with the name of Águeda Flores; she married Pedro Lisperguer and gave birth to Catalina Lisperguer, *La Quintrala*’s mother.<sup>5</sup> Upon the death of both parents, Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer was placed under the care of her grandmother Águeda Flores. In his 1983 study on daughters of the conquistadores, Luis Martín describes Catalina as follows: “Pampered by an overindulgent grandmother, the child grew up in one of the wealthiest households of Chile like an untamed animal, led by instincts and blind passions” (54). Needless to say, his description of her as an “untamed animal” borders on the sensational.

Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer, recognized as one of the richest women in colonial Chile, was accused of poisoning her father Gonzalo de los Ríos, ordering the murder of her lover Don Enrique Enríquez de Guzmán, a knight of the Order of St. John, and torturing/murdering slaves for many years. Catalina married Don Alonso de Campofrío y Carvajal in 1626 and had a son, but he died at the age of ten. Although the bishop of Santiago first denounced her in 1634, her membership in the local elite

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<sup>4</sup> The background information pertaining to this woman comes from the following sources: Charles Ralph Boxer, *Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415-1815* (1975); Sor Imelda Cano Roldán, *La mujer en el reyno de Chile* (1981); and Susan Migden Socolow, *The Women of Colonial Latin America* (2000).

<sup>5</sup> According to Charles Ralph Boxer, *La Quintrala* “inherited a tendency to sadistic violence from her parents on both sides” (45). Her mother tried to poison Governor Alonso de Rivera and flogged to death a natural daughter of her husband; her grandmother María de Encio Sarmiento killed her own husband and made her indigenous servants perform diabolical dances in the intervals of flogging them; her grandfather Bartolomé Flores was accused of poisoning one of his own daughters (45).

allowed her to avoid trial for many years. Her husband died in 1650. In 1662 judges of Santiago's royal court imprisoned her after an inquiry into the violence perpetrated on one of her rural estates. However, she was never punished, for she died under house arrest awaiting the results of her appeal to a higher court back in Spain. Upon her death in 1665 she was buried in the local Augustinian church and under the terms of her will, dressed in the habit of a nun; her donation to the church demanded 20,000 mass services be delivered in her name.

The more familiar elaboration of Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer's life story is dominated by the thrilling and sensationalistic account found in historian Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna's *Los Lisperguer y la Quintrala* (1877), which despite its flaws has become the definitive version.<sup>6</sup> The opening page introduces doña Catalina as an evil and dangerous woman the public must fear:

Entre las tradiciones y leyendas de pasados siglos que ha conservado indeleble la memoria de las generaciones, existe una, sombría, terrible, espantosa todavía, y digna, por lo mismo, de ser investigada y de ser dada a luz.

Esa tradición es la de la siniestra *Quintrala*, la azotadora de esclavos, la envenenadora de su padre, la opulente e irresponsable Mesalina, cuyos amantes pasaban del lecho de lascivia a sótanos de muerte, la que volvió la espalda e hizo enclavar los ojos al *Señor de Mayo*, la Lucrecia Borgia y la Margarita de Borgoña de la era colonial, en una palabra. Esa tradición existe viva, aterrante, manando sangre todavía. (13)

Vicuña Mackenna amazes his readers, framing his study of the Lisperguer family as a drama of intrigue and deceit. Written at a time of political transition, his work drew a parallel between one family's story and the nation's history. As Olga Grau has asserted, "La Quintrala vendría a ser la figura recortada de las relaciones políticas, sociales y económicas de la Colonia

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<sup>6</sup> The history of *La Quintrala* is derived from letters written by Bishop Francisco de Salcedo. According to Olga Grau, Vicuña Mackenna first published accounts about *La Quintrala* in Santiago's newspaper *El Ferrocarril* ("Benjamín" 129).

concentrando en ella misma todo lo que se quiere expulsar” (“El mito” 496).

Vicuña Mackenna’s contradictory need to expel, but also bring to light the figure of this aristocratic *mestiza* deserves to be explored.

In *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson discusses the tension inherent in Ernest Renan’s words: “For, the essential element of a nation is that all its individuals must have many things in common but it must also have forgotten many things. Every French citizen must have forgotten the night of St. Bartholemew and the massacres in the thirteenth century in the South.” As Anderson points out, Renan does not explain what St. Bartholemew or the massacres in the thirteenth century in the South of France meant, but assumes there is no need to explain because any French person would have understood. In essence then, “Renan’s readers were being told to ‘have already forgotten’ what Renan’s own words assumed that they naturally remembered!” (Anderson 200). This type of paradox, highlighted by Anderson, similarly occurs in Vicuña Mackenna’s treatment of *La Quintrala*; a contradiction exists between Vicuña Mackenna’s need to invoke this woman, “da[r] a luz,” and expel her from the ideal image of the Chilean nation.<sup>7</sup> His understanding of Chilean national identity is based on a Europeanizing ideal that seeks to erase its indigenous past. The racial and moral anxiety stirred by this woman is manifest in a back and forth need to recall, in order to forget.

This type of paradox continues to shape popular discussions of *La Quintrala*. According to Ronda Ward, the confidence in Vicuña Mackenna’s interpretation has led others to reinforce the particularly negative image of *La Quintrala* as it appeared in his work (86). In 1932 historian Aurelio Díaz Meza wrote *La Quintrala y su época* arguing that “el estudio de la triste personalidad de doña Catalina de los Ríos y

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Vicuña’s treatment of *La Quintrala* in relation to the nation, see Lee 105-112; Ward 87-102; and Grau “Benjamín” 132-156.

Lisperguer está aún en sus comienzos para la ciencia histórica y que no ha empezado todavía la investigación y el análisis del caso fisio-patológico que ofrece la existencia de ese desgraciado ejemplar de ser humano” (7). In other words, it is medical sciences’ duty to bring forth this woman (investigate) and ultimately reject her (disgraced example of a human being). Magdalena Petit’s novel *La quintrala* (1932) was the first text on *La Quintrala* written by a woman, but it does not differ from previously published patriarchal versions of a sadistic and deadly Catalina. As Bernardita Llanos explains, “su Quintrala aparece dentro de un contexto social que interpreta su comportamiento como la desviación de una poseída por el demonio” (1027). Other fictional works that have been published on this figure include: Raúl Lillo Montenegro’s *La Quintrala* (1955); Olga Arratia *La tragedia sexual de la Quintrala* (1966); and Lautaro Yankas’s *Doña Catalina. Un reino para la Quintrala* (1972).<sup>8</sup> Among this body of literature, Mercedes Valdivieso’s *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* (1991) stands out for its feminist revindication of this historical figure.

The story of *La Quintrala* reached a different mass audience through the 1986 *telenovela*, produced by Chile’s state-owned television station (TVN) and written by Telmo Melendez. The series *La Quintrala*, primarily based on Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna’s 1877 account of Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer, entertained the Chilean public by depicting a rebellious, sadistic and lustful Quintrala who made a pact with the devil and committed sensational acts of witchcraft, torture, and murder. At the same time, these acts are matched with scenes of confession and repentance that combat her bellicose nature, her uncontrolled passions, and her refusal to submit to patriarchal authority.

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of many of these works see Ivonne Cuadra, *La Quintrala en la literatura chilena* (1999).

The *telenovela* roots *La Quintrala*'s wickedness in the influence of her attendants, perpetrating the association of barbarity with indigenous culture found in Vicuña Mackenna's account. According to the *telenovela*'s press book, *La Quintrala*'s lack of affection "hace que [...] se apegue fuertemente a dos esclavas: Rufina y Catana. Ambas, producto de las supersticiones de la época, practican la hechicería y los cultos demoníacos, influenciando a la Quintrala e induciéndola al camino del mal (n.p.)." Rufina and Catana function as the purveyors of this alternative indigenous practice and are charged with imparting its power to doña Catalina. With their help, she makes a pact with the devil, solidifying the evil nature of indigenous rites for the *telenovela*'s viewers. The scene that marks doña Catalina's induction into the black arts mixes sensuality and barbarism. Doña Catalina sits on her heels, knees spread wide and the side of one leg exposed to the hip, inside concentric circles of candles and runes. Her two indigenous attendants invoking *Belcebú*, doña Catalina slits the inside of both elbows and allows her blood to drip into a bowl. As she raises the offering, her breathing deepens and quickens, her lips curl and her jaw works from side to side until an orgasmic release, whereupon her eyelids droop and she exhales and lowers the bowl. The sexual overtones contribute to the illicit characterization of the rite. Classifying this lord as "*Belcebú*," a Christian figure, expunges indigenous gods from the nation's cultural consciousness while cementing indigenous practices as "other" and hence diabolic.

It is not just her satanic practices that make *La Quintrala* susceptible to evil. Vicuña Mackenna's 1877 account attributed doña Catalina's mixed blood as the cause of her "predisposición al crimen y al mal" (85); her violence seeks to "satisfacer el apetito dominante de su naturaleza de india: la crueldad" (121).<sup>9</sup> Vicuña Mackenna's

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<sup>9</sup> Although Vicuña Mackenna mentions the murder committed by Catalina's paternal Spanish grandmother doña María de Encío (78), he insists on the influence of Catalina's mestiza mother: "le había enseñado bien su infame oficio" (85).

vilification and subsequent rejection of Indian blood befits the times and his personal agenda. During the nineteenth century, territorial struggles with Bolivia and Peru (the *Guerra del Pacífico* 1879-1883) provoked anxieties about the nation's identity and borders. As Rebecca Lee explains, "There was a growing sentiment among Chilean citizens that they needed to defend themselves from a darker/indigenous influence coming from Bolivia and sought, through campaigns such as Vicuña Mackenna's, to map a white Europeanizing ideal onto the national cultural imaginary" (108). This desire to perpetrate the myth of a White Chile continues in Chilean society. As part of her analysis of *el mestizaje chileno*, Sonia Montecino (1991) examines the work of three Chilean historians (Francisco A. Encina, Jaime Eyzaguirre, and Nicolás Palacios) who have contributed to the construction of *chilenidad*. In her discussion of Palacio's *La raza chilena* (1904), she makes the following assertion about Chilean identity:

Destacar la forma en que Palacios nombra al mestizo como sinónimo del roto, es poner en escena un problema que toca a la forma de pensarse del chileno. Nadie quiere ser mestizo, ni menos roto. Mestizo es tener que ver con lo indígena, roto es ser pobre, estar en el "bajo fondo social". Mestizo y roto aluden a una realidad que debe ser tachada, cubierta por esa "unidad nacional", por el "blanqueamiento" que propone Encina: mestizos sí, en algún remoto lugar de nuestra historia, pero ahora, civilizados, modernos, europeos. Los chilenos somos "los ingleses de Latinoamérica." (126-127)

Her words mark Chilean's powerful valuing of whiteness within their cultural identity and the displacement of their indigenous past. The 1641 Treaty of Quilín recognized the independence of the indigenous Araucanians (also known as Mapuches) and they successfully warded off attacks, maintaining an independent nation until the 1880s. After the *Guerra del Pacífico*, the Mapuches and their territory were subsumed into the Chilean nation, promptly contained in small settlements of poor condition. Although marginalized, the



Mapuche continue to assert their presence politically, challenging the myth of a homogenous Chile.<sup>10</sup> The figure of *La Quintrala* stands as a reminder of this past and although depicted as white-skinned and red haired in the *telenovela*, her Indian blood taints her and remains the real source of her malevolence. As Rufina exclaims in a later scene, “La Quintrala lleva el mal en la sangre.”

*La Quintrala*’s first demonic rite is followed immediately by the depiction of her patricide, for which the *telenovela* offers the oversimplified motivation of satanic influence. The *telenovela* depicts Catalina at her ailing father’s side, promising to bring him his favorite lunch, which Rufina has prepared. The viewer then sees don Gonzalo choking and subsequently learns that he has been poisoned. The flash-forward to a dying and repentant Quintrala confirms her responsibility for the murder:

Él me dijo: “Destruya lo que más amas.” Y yo le obedecí. Dios del cielo, ¿Por qué hice daño a mi padre si yo lo amaba? ¿Por qué ese pacto con el demonio? Por qué mi Dios? Papá, perdóname. Yo del cielo me arrepiento. Perdón, quiero el perdón. Perdóname papá. Perdóname. Dios mío perdón, me arrepiento Dios mío. Papá, perdóname. Me arrepiento. Perdón, Dios mío, perdón.

The placement of *La Quintrala*’s confession, immediately after we learn of her father’s death, functions to deny her agency and confirms the absence of justification for her actions. The responsibility for the crime rests on the devil; her father did not commit any wrongdoing that would warrant his death.

Similarly, the *telenovela* negates *La Quintrala*’s power in another scene. Upon visiting doña Catalina, Fray Juan discovers her intention to punish one of her servants, who was in love with the same man as she. He attempts to dissuade her, but is met with resistance:

--Catalina, sé cómo te sientes. Sé lo que ocurre en tu corazón. Catalina, niña, debes orar. Vamos.

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<sup>10</sup> For a complete history of this population and its struggles, see Leslie Ray, *Language of the Land: The Mapuche in Argentina and Chile* (2007).

--Oraré cuando yo quiera hacerlo.  
--¿Es que quieres hacer esperar a Dios, hija?  
--Nadie me da ordenes en mi casa.

With these last words doña Catalina plunges her knife into Fray Juan's shoulder, then steps back in alarm, drops it and rushes out of the room. The image of Fray Juan, wounded and praying for *La Quintrala*, dissolves into a shot of an aged Quintrala repenting for the violent act: "Fray Juan, perdóneme. Yo no quise hacerlo. Algo horrible me ocurrió ese día. Debe perdonarme, Fray Juan. Fue el demonio. Él quería destruirlo. Y ahora me quiere llevar. Ayúdeme, Fray Juan. Yo no tuve la culpa. Él me obligó." The *telenovela* rewrites doña Catalina from willful and powerful, to submissive and scared, as she displaces the responsibility from herself to the devil's influence. By exclaiming "Nadie me da ordenes en mi casa," doña Catalina asserts her independence and challenges the authority of Fray Juan. However, this autonomy disappears as she makes excuses for herself and begs for forgiveness and help from the Church.

In the instance of *La Quintrala*'s attempt to kill her servant Francisca, her repentance is contemporary with the crime. Doña Catalina forces Francisca to ride horseback with her with the intention of knocking her off and killing her. When Francisca is not harmed by the fall down a steep slope, doña Catalina believes her survival to be a miracle of God. As Francisca rises, brushing herself off, doña Catalina falls back against the slope in fear and astonishment; doña Catalina's theme music switches to Church organ instrumentation to ensure the audience understands the holy significance. Doña Catalina returns to town and immediately heads to the Church, entering and kneeling in the aisle. Her slow and laborious kneeling walk to the altar exudes her defeat and submission to the Church. Fray Juan approaches doña Catalina at the altar and encourages her to find comfort in confession:

--Hable con Dios. Confiésese. Hable con Dios.

--He tratado de encontrar al Señor pero nunca lo vi. Cuando Francisca cayó de mi caballo debió morir Padre Juan y está viva. Está viva.  
 --Los caminos del Señor son desconocidos para nosotros. Puede tomarlo como un milagro pero quizás sólo sea una pequeña luz en su alma que la llevará por la senda del arrepentimiento.  
 --Esta bien. El mal...¿cuál es la verdad Padre?  
 --La única verdad es el Señor. Sólo por la senda del arrepentimiento encontrará la vida eterna. Hable con Dios hija, confíese. Hable con Dios y quedará liberada.

Fray Juan proceeds to the confessional and doña Catalina slowly and heavily follows. The scene marks her return to living a “good” Catholic life. The absolution of sins, central to the religious tradition of confession, allows for a clearing of the past and a fresh start: *borrón y cuenta nueva*. As Richard Terdiman writes, “the rituals of confession [...] are designed to free the future from the past” (76-77). The past is narrated, he goes on, “not in the service of memorialisation, but of erasure [...] The condition of confession’s existence is that the object of its narration ceases to exist” (77). By submitting herself to the judgment of the Church and recalling her sins through confession, doña Catalina can erase her past self.

However, as the *telenovela* continues, *La Quintrala* is repeatedly pulled back to wickedness by Rufina’s invocations of the devil and her son’s death. The final sequence of the *telenovela* depicts *La Quintrala*’s foiled attempt at ultimate confession. The day that her pact with the devil comes due, doña Catalina awakens to find herself drastically aged and dying. She seeks God’s protection from Satan, repenting for her sins and sending for Fray Juan to take her confession. The scenes of Fray Juan’s journey to see her are intercut with doña Catalina’s lamentations. As she sits in her litter placed next to the *Cristo de Mayo* inside her chapel, *La Quintrala* recalls her original demonic pact with fear, and the viewer contextualizes the scene of repentance as that which we have seen fragments of previously in flash-forwards.

The tension generated for this final sequence stems from the necessity of Fray Juan’s presence to provide legitimacy to *La Quintrala*’s confession. To be saved, she

must embrace the ritual and hierarchy of the correct religion. While she waits for the man that can absolve her, the camera shows doña Catalina physically closed off from Christ; she sits inside her walled litter, in a box shut out from the *Cristo de Mayo* next to her. The *telenovela* ends as a morality tale; the rebellious and malicious woman repents too late and cannot be saved. The devil sets many obstacles in the way of Fray Juan as he travels to offer her salvation (misdirections, a broken axle, townspeople who try to deter him, a door that will not open, and lastly a localized earthquake as he approaches her). When he finally reaches *La Quintrala*, she expires. In this manner, the *telenovela* casts this killer woman as a lost soul too proud to be saved in time.

The story of *La Quintrala* was again repackaged for a mass audience in June of 2008, but this time with a pretension to historical accuracy. The Chilean newspaper *Las últimas noticias* published “La Quintrala y el Cristo de Mayo” as episode XV of their special series *Historia de Chile en Cómic*, supported by the Instituto de Historia of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. This project began circulation in May 2008 as a supplement included in the newspaper’s Saturday edition and was designed to re-engage youth with Chile’s history using comics to teach in an entertaining format.<sup>11</sup> In an interview, Francisco Ortega, a writer for the comic, comments on the project’s challenges: “lo más complicado creo que no ha sido la adaptación, sino aceptar la idea de LUN [*Las últimas noticias*] de que más que un cómic el producto sea un libro de historia dibujado, que sea didáctico y educacional a la par de entretenido.”<sup>12</sup> With this purpose, the production staff intermixed supplementary text boxes with the comic’s dialogue and images. According to Ortega, the university “se

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<sup>11</sup> This national newspaper, owned by *El Mercurio*, is predominantly recognized for its sensational coverage of entertainment news aimed at the working class and for being one of the most popular newspapers in Chile. *You Tube* features a commercial, created by Maria Films for Proximity Agency, used to advertise *Historia de Chile en Cómic*.

<sup>12</sup> “Historia de Chile en Cómic: Francisco Ortega,” *Womics* 30 May 2008  
<http://www.womics.cl/blog/articulos/historia-de-chile-en-comics-francisco-ortega/>.

involucró en el proyecto, asesorándonos de dos formas: primero enviándonos un paper de lo que tenía que aparecer en los capítulos y segundo revisando el guión previo a ser dibujado.”<sup>13</sup> Five university historians were included in the project and played a key role in the comic’s construction of Chile’s history.<sup>14</sup> So, what has been featured? Episodes have included “El Reino de Chile I,” “Los Conquistadores del Fin del Mundo,” “O’ Higgins, el hijo,” and “Simón Bolívar.” My interest lies in episode XV, an eight-page version of the legend of *La Quintrala*. Particularly striking is that while it’s purported to be a historically based account, it parallels the main points of the *telenovela* discussed above.

The episode “La Quintrala y el Cristo de Mayo” opens with the 1647 earthquake that shattered Santiago. Among the ruins, a conversation between priests recalls *La Quintrala* and we are transported into the story of her life. With the final page, we return to the priests one month after the earthquake, and learn of Santiago’s reconstruction and *La Quintrala*’s repentance over subsequent years. Four pages are devoted to *La Quintrala* in her youth, bookended by the earthquake and the reconstruction. According to the comic’s omniscient narrator<sup>15</sup>, the people of Santiago, dominated by superstition, viewed the great earthquake as a divine punishment for their sins; many self-flagellated to atone for their wrongdoings. The discovery of the miracle of the *Cristo de Mayo* recalls the expulsion of the crucifix by *La Quintrala*.<sup>16</sup> The structure of the comic insinuates a causal link between *La*

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<sup>13</sup> “Historia de Chile en Cómic: Francisco Ortega,” *Womics* 30 May 2008

<<http://www.womics.cl/blog/articulos/historia-de-chile-en-comics-francisco-ortega/>>.

<sup>14</sup> According to the university’s webpage, the following history professors participated in the project: Olaya Sanfuentes, Lucrecia Enríquez, Fernando Purcell, Hugo Rosati and Pablo Whipple. See “Historia de Chile en Cómic,” Instituto de Historia, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile 9 May 2008

<[http://www.hist.puc.cl/noticias/2008/1\\_sem\\_2008/comics.html](http://www.hist.puc.cl/noticias/2008/1_sem_2008/comics.html)>.

<sup>15</sup> The voice of the narrator is contained within light blue text boxes. The word balloons are white and occasional yellow boxes communicate extra information.

<sup>16</sup> The earthquake that struck the city on the night of May 13<sup>th</sup> brought virtually every building to the ground. However, one crucifix (originally named “Cristo de la Agonía”) remained intact with the exception of its crown of thorns, which had inexplicably slipped from his head to his neck despite the figure’s head being larger than the diameter of the crown. After this perceived miracle Chileans began

*Quintrala*'s sins and the earthquake; the townspeople's inward search for blame was misdirected, or at least inadequate.<sup>17</sup> This connection is mirrored in the final page. As we move forward in time, the reconstruction of Santiago is interwoven with *La Quintrala*'s repentance. Although captions inform us of jumps of thirteen, fifteen, three hundred forty-three years, the page retains a thematic cohesion. Visually, the background colors transition from red and white to warm cream and peach tones, overlapping across time and location. Lastly, the frames are overlapped, providing a bridge between themes and periods. These aesthetic links lead the reader to couple the parallel plots of national reconstruction and repentance.

What has *La Quintrala* done to induce God's wrath? The next comic page presents a series of non-sequential frames depicting *La Quintrala* dancing with the devil, riding her horse bareback, stabbing one man, preparing to whip another, practicing witchcraft, and being ogled by a courtier. An "aspect-to-aspect" transition allows the eye to absorb the different details of *La Quintrala*'s character, giving us a montage of her life and forming an understanding of who she is (McCloud 72). The top frame, portraying *La Quintrala* dancing with the devil, dominates in space and

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to refer to this figure as "Cristo o Señor de Mayo." According to the comic, the Quintrala previously expelled the figure from her home because of the way it looked at her: **"No quiero en mi casa hombres que me pongan mala cara. ¡Afuera!"**

<sup>17</sup> In the *telenovela*, the earthquake immediately follows a dream sequence in which *La Quintrala* is confronted with images of the numerous people she has wronged.

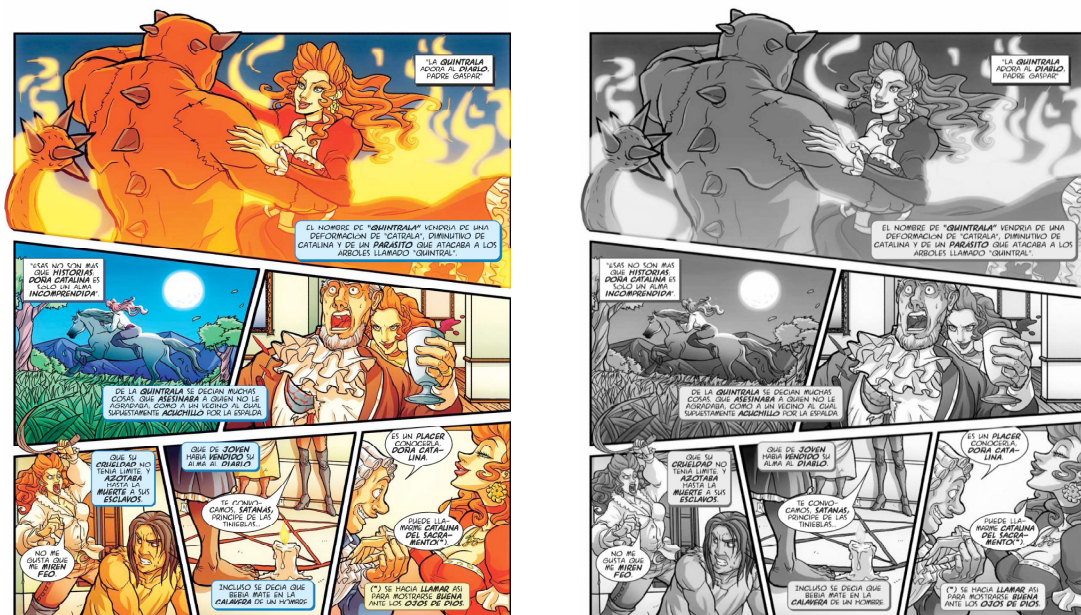


Figure 1.1: Page 5 of “Episodio XV: La Quintrala y el Cristo de Mayo,” *Historia de Chile en Cómec*.

colors the reader’s perception of the frames beneath. *La Quintrala*—depicted here, and in most of the subsequent frames until the last page, as a large busted young woman with fiery red hair wearing a blood red dress and red lipstick on her sensual, upturned lips—dances ballroom style with the hulking, spiked form of the devil.<sup>18</sup> The devil’s back is towards us so we see *La Quintrala*’s face; her sharp eyes fixated on her mate, an approving and devious smile on her lips. The text, not so subtly, informs us that “La **Quintrala** adora al **diablo** (original emphasis).”<sup>19</sup> This and the other frames on the page encapsulate the sins of *La Quintrala*’s character: her forsaking of God, her overt sexuality, her power and independence, and her acts of physical violence.

*La Quintrala*’s direct rejection of God is shown through her literal embrace of the devil, her expulsion of the *Cristo de Mayo*, her refusal to forgive God for her son’s

<sup>18</sup> Her fiery red hair is a marker of her difference.

<sup>19</sup> The comic uses bold print to stress certain words throughout the text. When I cite the comic I will reproduce the emphasis given to these words as they appear in the original.

death, and her satanic rituals. Particularly striking is the route through which *La Quintrala* is introduced to the dark arts in the comic. The only frame depicting *La Quintrala* as a child portrays her playing with a working class dark skinned girl while her mother and dark skinned caretaker observe in the background. “Pronto la iniciaremos en nuestras artes, doña Catalina,” says the caretaker. “Así debe ser...Mi hija será reina de estas tierras,” responds *La Quintrala*’s mother. With these words, the comic hints at a transgenerational practice passed down from mother to daughter, a female conspiracy in opposition to the patriarchal Church. The black magic is illustrated as distinctly non-European, possibly indigenous, in origin; *La Quintrala* learns this practice through her association with a non-white working class. *La Quintrala*’s explicit sin was her worshipping of Satan and rejection of a Catholic God, but an implicit problem of her character raised by the comic is her roots in an indigenous culture. The comic does not identify *La Quintrala* as a *mestiza*, in fact drawing her as an extremely White figure, fair skinned, red hair, and green eyes. It is the root of her evil that gives this comic history an indigenous t(a)int; her *mestiza* identity is communicated indirectly through her “artes” and her associations. This modern comic resurrects the colonial perspective wherein non-Christian religions are interpreted within the confines of a Christian worldview; if you are not worshipping Jesus, you must be worshipping Satan.

The sexuality and power of *La Quintrala* is radiated by her illustration. “La **belleza** de su porte, el **rojo** de sus cabellos y **verde** de sus ojos, hicieron de la Quintrala **objeto** de deseos y admiraciones. A los 15 **años**, era nombrada como una de las mujeres **más hermosas** de Chile,” the narration declares. She is drawn in this light as highly sensual: red hair, lips and dress, shapely curves and a mischievous smile. *La Quintrala*’s sexuality and lack of shame is emphasized in one frame showing townspeople talking about her on the street. “Ahi va la **Quintrala**, dicen que se ha



**acostado** con todos sus esclavos,” says one. “Y que se frecuenta con el mismo **Satanas**,” responds the other. Her grandmother tells her, “Tienes **más poder** sobre los hombres que el que **jamás** tuvo **tu madre**, niña Quintrala.” Through these comments *La Quintrala* is shown striding confidently, immodest, unfazed, and proud, as her cleavage turns a man’s head. Included among the initial set of frames that introduce her character is an image of her riding a horse bareback through a moonlit countryside. The picture, in isolation, invokes what could be positive qualities of strength, independence, and virility. However, the frame is located on the same plane as her acts of murder and torture, overshadowed by the figures of her and the devil dancing among flames, suggesting that her feminine independence poses an equal threat.

The various transgressive elements of *La Quintrala*’s character, her forsaking of God, her overt sexuality, and her power and independence, coincide with the presentation of her violent actions. The narration exclaims: “De la **Quintrala** se decían muchas cosas. Que **asesinaba** a quien no le agradaba, como a un vecino al cual supuestamente **acuchilló** por la espalda [...] Que su **crueledad** no tenía límite y **azotaba** hasta la **muerte** a sus **esclavos**.” A frame depicts a mischievous Quintrala thrusting a knife into her neighbor’s back.<sup>20</sup> The phallic knife protruding from the man’s chest emphasizes the masculinity and sexuality of her violence. Another frame, depicting her once more stabbing a man, is a confluence of violence, sexuality, and religion. *La Quintrala*, wearing a red slip and crouching on a bed next to her victim, plunges a knife into the chest of a knight of Malta who has turned down her sexual advances, declaring “Hombre que no me **desea**, es **hombre muerto**.” The knife penetrates the red cross of his garment, symbolically assaulting Christianity.

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<sup>20</sup> The language used expresses uncertainty (“*se decían* muchas cosas,” my emphasis), but the picture leaves no doubt about the veracity of the accusation: the Quintrala killed him.

I would like to draw attention to the reader's role in the construction of her violence. Included among *La Quintrala's* introductory sins is a frame showing an enraged Quintrala with an open mouth, a raised whip above her head, and a slave kneeling in front of her. In his discussion of comics, Scott McCloud writes:

Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader. I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style. All of you participated in the murder. All of you held the axe and chose your spot. (68)

The above referenced Quintrala comic frame is very deliberate in its message, relying on the narrator's words, "Que su **crueledad** no tenía limite y **azotaba** hasta la **muerte** a sus **esclavos**," to explicitly suggest the extent of her actions. However, the reader reinforces *La Quintrala's* sinister nature by providing *closure* to the image.<sup>21</sup> We make the whip fall. Two other frames similarly use language to suggest even more sensational actions than what the illustrations provide, invoking the reader to participate in the construction of the violence. In one, *La Quintrala* twirls a whip over her head as she gallops after two servants who are running away, exclaiming to her new husband, "Si lo atrapas Alonso, te enseño a **destriparlo vivo**." In another, *La Quintrala* walks, almost glides, among dead bodies, accompanied by two dark skinned women. The narrator's voice adds: "Se decía que en su propiedad de **La Ligua**, La Quintrala había desatado una **carnicería** en honor al **diablo**." Both images are striking, but not as vile as the graphic illustrations of decapitation, brutally broken or dismembered bodies, and thick, dripping blood encountered in many popular manga

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<sup>21</sup> "This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It's called closure. In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience" (McCloud 63).

comics and graphic novels.<sup>22</sup> The illustrators, although most likely familiar with these traditions, paint a relatively tamed picture of this “carnicería.” The intended audience, schoolchildren and families, as well as the Catholic Church’s sponsorship, elicit a different visual stylization of violence. Instead, the creators give a cartoonish image of death and rely on provocative words to lead the reader down the darker avenues of her own imagination.

The comic adopts the legend of *La Quintrala* as an independent, sexual, female killer and torturer, but places the non-violent and violent elements of her character on equal footing with each other. The last page of the comic replaces the frightful seductive image of *La Quintrala* with a docile, contemplative old widow. Her fiery colors gone, *La Quintrala* is drawn as a white haired woman wearing a modest turtleneck white dress with a cross around her neck. The shift is sudden, offering no explanation for her newfound repentance. As the country heals, *La Quintrala* becomes a “good” woman, seeking forgiveness and donating to the church in her last days; her redemption mirrors the Chilean nation’s renewal.

The creators of this comic were faced with the task of producing an abridged representation of this complex female killer’s story. In doing so, they create a dramatized version of *La Quintrala* that details her transgressions against society and connects her personal story with the nation’s earthquake and renewal. The comic’s narration allows us to read *La Quintrala* as a perverse mother to the nation, whose sins gave birth to the destruction that would give rise to modern Chile. The elevation of her story to such national importance necessitates the remembrance of her character. At the same time, her story is wrapped up in a morality tale of Catholic doctrine that sweeps away her youthful “indiscretions” with a final page of repentance, reflecting

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<sup>22</sup> A prime example can be found at the beginning of chapter 12 of Alan Moore’s graphic novel *Watchmen* (2005). Here an apocalyptic scene, depicting dozens of bloody bodies spread throughout a city block, provides a brutal image more befitting a true “carnicería en honor del diablo.”

the conflicting desire to forget. The reader is left with the power of *La Quintrala*'s redeeming confession, which displaces her violence and indigenous roots.

Published in 1991, Mercedes Valdivieso's novel *Maldita yo entre las mujeres* is a marked contrast to other works produced about *La Quintrala* for its attempt to rewrite the national allegory from a feminist perspective. Beginning with the title, *Maldita yo entre las mujeres*, Valdivieso seeks to undermine accusations against doña Catalina through a reinterpretation of events and an appropriation of this pejorative classification. According to Celia Ojeda, the title pointedly references one of the many rumored sexual exploits of doña Catalina: "La acusación más dramática y el título de la novela vienen de don Gonzalo de los Ríos, quien dictamina el maldita yo entre las mujeres impulsado por la ira de saber que su hija ha sostenido relaciones sexuales con don Alvaro Cuevas, enemigo de la familia paterna" (93). Ojeda highlights just one of the many rumors to which the legend of *La Quintrala* has been bound and which Valdivieso must confront in her own interpretation of this woman.

Using 17<sup>th</sup> century and modern-day Spanish, Valdivieso's novel describes the life of doña Catalina primarily through a first-person narrative voice: doña Catalina recounts details of her life and family, in non-chronological order, before her marriage to don Alonso de Campofrío y Carvajal. The interjection of another voice, the rumors of the *pueblo* signaled by the narrative cue "Dicen que," transmits the heresy, sins, and lust for which *La Quintrala* is famous. According to Rosa Sarabia, "Rechazo y atracción suele ser simultánea respuesta del monstruo [Quintrala], por ser representación de lo prohibido y por la fuerza erótica y sexual que mana de su cuerpo" (39). It is against this tension, this backdrop of emotions and descriptions, that Valdivieso constructs her own account of this woman.

The confession structure that is represented in the comic and the soap opera also appears in Valdivieso's novel. In its closing pages, Catalina de los Ríos y

Lisperguer ends her story declaring that, absolved by her confession, she will now enter into matrimony, fulfilling her Christian duties.<sup>23</sup> The lines that follow, “Esa soy, padre, hija de Llanka Curiqueo que es hija de Elvira de Talagante que es hija de Agueda Flores [...] Me confieso, padre,” close the novel, but also serve as the beginning of her “confession,” circling back to doña Catalina’s initial narration of her life. The text’s positioning of doña Catalina’s account as a confession is further reinforced through her own words: “Bastardaje y mestizaje nos hicieron, y de esta mezcla para adelante seguimos. La historia de lo que somos enmadeja sangre y guerra y la subo a su principio para que esta *confesión* se entienda” (37, my emphasis). Doña Catalina’s narration is an acknowledgment of her identity and actions.

Although the narrative is structured as a pseudo-confession, doña Catalina’s discomfort with the rite recurs through the novel. Doña Catalina explains her tension with confession:

Fray Cristóbal estaba siempre al aguaito de escucharme en confesión, no en conversa como yo lo buscaba, para hacer de tierra mis senderos de ceniza. Pero el fraile me dividía el alma entre brujería y cielo y me quedaba en las mismas. Un jueves santo me negó la absolución por decirle que aborrecía a don Gonzalo y mantenerme en ese odio del que fray Cristóbal no quería entender los motivos, con miedo a que fuera cierto. (51)

The rite fails to satisfy her need for resolution and understanding. Doña Catalina struggles with her desire to be her own self (“Quiero ser mía”) and the dominant paradigm that constrains her: “mujer fue quien puso la oreja al demonio y en mujer principió el pecado” (45-46). Fray Cristóbal’s treatment of her augments this confusion and anguish. Rather than offering compassion and guidance, he condemns

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<sup>23</sup> The last passage could be interpreted as doña Catalina being conscious of her social reality and what she needs to do to retain power, marrying Alonso and even “confessing.” However, it can also be read as a form of containment; this woman who murdered and challenged patriarchy in the end needs to be re-inserted back into traditional societal expectations (marriage). Valdivieso is not able to fully resolve the tensions surrounding this female killer.

her for feeling hatred towards her father and ignores the suggestive cause of that emotion, paternal incest.<sup>24</sup> When doña Catalina is later confined to a convent for her affair with a man training to become a priest, she silently rejects fray Cristóbal's offer to "limpia[r] mi alma de pestes contagiosas" through confession (65). Instead she exclaims, "Ustedes son los que me tienen [...] yo carezco de hablar y de hacer. Las mujeres deberíamos quedarnos mudas hasta poder lo nuestro" (65). Doña Catalina understands that from her subordinate position, to recall her deeds would not be for her own benefit, but for the benefit of the men in power.

The demand that both Catalinas express repentance encapsulates the patriarchy's obsession with forcing these women to acknowledge their actions as sins. Upon the death of don Gonzalo, both mother and daughter are brought to trial accused of poisoning him:

Fray Marciano: "¡llora tu condición de pecadora! Eva fue causa del pecado original y ejemplo funesto que le sigue."  
 Catalina de los Ríos: "¡hijos de mujeres!"  
 Presidente: "¡guarda tu lengua y teme!"  
 Fiscal Cuevas: "para aconsejarlas de vuestras faltas nos hemos reunido. Consejos y no castigos aún, que estamos por la caridad. De muerte, encantamiento y lujuria dice contra vosotros el pueblo, y en escándalo se agita esta sociedad que empieza. ¡Catalina y Catalina no buscamos pecado en vosotras sino arrepentimiento! ¡Catalina y Catalina que no se repitan! Entonen un mea culpa y retírense al convento. El olvido las espera, que si el pueblo tiene larga la lengua, tiene corto el recuerdo."  
 (114-115)

According to Fiscal Cuevas, they charitably seek not "pecado" but "arrepentimiento" in these women. However, to ask them to repent is to ask them to admit their own sin. Furthermore, both the Church and the State don't need to look for sin since they're already presupposing it. The State accepts the townspeople rumors as true while the Church finds sin in their very existence as women. The last line explicitly echoes the structure of recalling only to forget that I have previously described in relation to the

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of paternal incest in the novel, see Mora 65.

figure of *La Quintrala* and the construction of Chilean national identity. Fiscal Cuevas attempts to persuade the women to recount their sins promising that the people will shortly forget them. Both women reject the process. With this passage and those previously discussed, Valdivieso establishes the irrelevance of confession and repentance to doña Catalina. The patriarchal orders of Church and State demand that she find fault and shame not only in her own actions, which may or may not be justified, but even in rumor and in her own identity.

The final confession of Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer in Valdivieso's novel is mocking and unrepentant. Rather than a confession of sins, this declaration is an affirmation of her gender and mixed heritage:

Esa soy padre,  
hija de Llanka Curiqueo  
que es hija de Elvira de Talagante  
que es hija de Agueda Flores  
que es hija de Catalina  
que es mi madre  
que soy yo.  
Todas hijas de Dios, Catalina, creadoras de linaje.  
La confesión.  
Me confieso, padre. (141-142)

Although she explicitly frames it as a confession, her statement lacks the repentance that is essential to a Catholic's confession. Doña Catalina expresses no remorse in the retelling of her past nor does she admit fault. She locates herself within a genealogy of women that begins with an indigenous female, seeking to negotiate and overcome the confines of patriarchy through a valorization of this past.<sup>25</sup> Doña Catalina now adopts this rite, not to admit to and repent for the sins that the friars have attributed to

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<sup>25</sup> For discussions of the conflation of mestizaje and femininity within the novel see Olea 110-111; Cuadra "Revisión" 12-18; and Guerra 58-64.

her, but to profess her own identity and viewpoint. Without repentance her confession does not seek to erase, but to solidify her proud view of herself.<sup>26</sup>

“Bastardaje y mestizaje” emerge as sources of feminine power. According to Llanos, “Valdivieso convierte la condición femenina de la rebeldía en una forma de bastardaje, es decir, en una condición social que no proviene del padre, puesto que la identidad mestiza sólo se constituye como tal en relación a la presencia de la madre” (1034). The “bastardaje” that defines doña Catalina and the women of her lineage begins with her great-grandmother doña Elvira’s refusal to marry Bartolomé Blumenthal, choosing instead to retain her lands and her freedom. From her, doña Catalina learns that only through rebellion can she construct her own identity as a woman. In Valdivieso’s novel, as Lee suggests, “Women are the purveyors of cultural and racial knowledge and are charged with imparting the power of *mestizaje* to future generations: ‘De mujer madre a mujer hija pasa la herencia que traemos’ (115). Through this matriarchal genealogy Valdivieso constructs a Catalina who is aware of her marginalized position and seeks to affirm her indigenous and feminine self (“Ningún hombre me pondría llantos y lejanías, yo primero” (61); “jamás me perderé de mí” (62)).

Valdivieso’s reinvisioning of Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer strikes a stark contrast with the classic monstrous construction of *La Quintrala*. As Sarabia writes, “En sus raptos de ira y violencia, en sus crímenes sin precedentes en la historia del Reino de Chile, y por extensión a toda la colonia, en su libido excesiva, este monstruo amenaza con alterar el orden de las cosas y su solo nombre se liga a aquello prohibido: el parricidio, el incesto, el adulterio, la tortura y el homicidio” (38). In an interview

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<sup>26</sup> The title of the novel also hints at this subversion and empowerment. Raquel Olea explains that “Al autonombrarse maldita en el negativo de la oración (‘bendita eres entre las mujeres’), dedice y no acepta la bendición que al ungirle, le marca un designio de obediencia, para asumirse autosignificada en una identidad social otra, ‘maldita yo’ ” (108).



with A. Maack for the newspaper *El Sur*, Mercedes Valdivieso explains the manner in which she approached this fiery red haired woman known as *La Quintrala*:

Lo más primario es, que yo tomé un personaje mítico, la Quintrala, y traté de ver detrás de esta Quintrala mitológica a doña Catalina de los Ríos, la mujer que tuvo que existir en el siglo XVII, más allá de la Quintrala mítica en la cual agrupó la tradición lo perverso, lo sacrílego, lo incestuoso, el asesinato. Había que ver en esta mujer el porqué ningún personaje puede ser la síntesis de la maldad.

Valdivieso attempts to reappropriate the historical woman behind the sensational legend, seeking to humanize her character. As Llanos explains, “Su discurso literario en los años noventa articula el resurgimiento de la lucha feminista y del movimiento de mujeres en Chile durante la dictadura, contra toda forma de autoritarismo político y sexual” (1027). Valdivieso is focused on refashioning doña Catalina as a willful woman struggling against the patriarchies of family, Church and State.

Essential to Valdivieso’s construction of doña Catalina is a repositioning of her violence. Vicuña Mackenna conflates doña Catalina’s violence with indigenous heritage and sadism in his creation of *La Quintrala*. In her treatment of doña Catalina, Valdivieso uncouples the violence and sadism from doña Catalina’s *mestizo* identity by contextualizing her violent actions and discrediting the most outlandish stories through the use of an alternative voice (“Dicen que”).

In her confession, doña Catalina openly describes her killing of Enrique Enríquez de Guzmán, an undesired suitor, and invites speculation into two other murders.<sup>27</sup> As doña Catalina explains it, Enríquez’s murder was her way of protecting her cousin Juan Pacheco from the duel he had accepted in defense of her honor; Enriquez had made false accusations about having had a physical relationship with her. She further recalls “cómo [a su medio hermano Segundo] lo mataron a traición en

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<sup>27</sup> The novel suggests doña Catalina’s involvement in other murders as well. Enríquez’s servant, Diego Sacristán, could have been the victim of *La Quintrala* and *La Tatamai* (Valdivieso 19). Alvaro’s disappearance further remains a mystery.

la cita que le fingió Enríquez” (139). Her crime had multiple justifications. Doña Catalina admits to the reader having invited Enríquez to her room, where she greeted him naked, twice plunging a knife into his back, and disposing of his body with the help of La Tatamai: “Sin demorarnos, echamos a Enrique Enríquez sobre la plazoleta de piedras y entre los arbustos recientes. Boca arriba lo soltamos y con los ojos abiertos” (26). Doña Catalina’s calm and unembellished account of Enríquez’s death contrasts with the collective voice/rumors of the townspeople, signaled by the narrative cue “Dicen que”:

Páginas y páginas se llenaron de denuncias en el libro de cabildo y las denuncias coincidieron en nombrar a una mujer como forjadora del delito [...] Y *dicen que* para dominar en él las virtudes de San Juan y de Malta, la doña sacrificó palomas y corderillos nuevos, en sus días mensuales de sangre impura. Con tales evidencias, la gente disparó insultos y piedras en la casa de los Ríos. La descripción del cuerpo de Enríquez lo mostraba puntado por mil cuchilladas sin misericordia, arrancados los ojos y cercenadas sus evidencias de hombre, ejecuciones que hicieron muy difícil vestirlo. (27, my emphasis)

This account casts doña Catalina as a malicious and misandrous sadist who would not just kill a man, but desecrate his body. According to Lee, these rumors represent for Valdivieso “the oppressive force of *La ley patriarcal*—a force that denies plurality by limiting women to the essentializing categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ” (114). The reasons behind doña Catalina’s decision to murder Enríquez complicate our understanding of her as a killer and blur the line of distinction between right and wrong. Doña Catalina’s actions, particularly due to their violent nature, cause her to be perceived as an evil woman, but she can also be understood as a woman whose actions to defend herself were justified.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Like Vicuña Mackenna’s account, the novel documents the fact that doña Catalina was absolved from the crime by the law and a black slave who confessed to the crime was hanged. Both accounts also recognize the power the Lisperguer’s influence had in that absolution.

Among the list of crimes for which the figure of *La Quintrala* is remembered, is the poisoning of her father don Gonzalo. Vicuña Mackenna relies on Bishop Francisco de Salcedo's letter to sustain that doña Catalina "mató a su padre con veneno que le dio en un pollo, estando enfermo" (80). In contrast, Valdivieso's novel conveys the details of don Gonzalo's ailment through doña Catalina's voice and mysteriously closes the section with the words, "me pidió comida" (107). Doña Catalina neither denies nor affirms her participation in his death, limiting her confession to a food request. The novel offers a justification for the murder. As Gabriela Mora attests, doña Catalina's murder of her father could be explained through "sutiles indicios que siembra la novela para apuntar como causa un fenómeno que sólo en nuestros días ha emergido en el discurso público: la persecución incestuosa paternal" (65). The inclusion of doña Catalina's account displaces the expression of the dominant Quintrala narrative that follows. The next chapter, initiated with the words "Dicen que," accuses doña Catalina and her mother of poisoning her father: " '¡Asesinas! Asesinas', le gritó doña Angustias: '¡que lo sepa el reino entero para que se haga justicia! ¡Las malditas lo asesinaron para hacer de las suyas! [...] ¡He visto el pollo envenenado! ¡Asesinas!' " (111). By further juxtaposing doña Angustias' accusation with rumors of the devil, of witchcraft, and of exorcism, Valdivieso reduces the crime to gossip. Valdivieso's oscillation between these two narrative techniques helps render doña Catalina a more sympathetic figure.

The second murder to invite speculation is the death of Rosarios Ay, a servant of the Lisperguer family, whose body is discovered by the neighbor's dog. Although doña Catalina does not confess to murdering Rosarios, her account admits her inability to forgive the servant for her betrayals:

[...] Rosarios Ay fue la que me delató al padre de Alvaro, la que se arrimó a Enríquez para palabrearle mi pecado con Segundo, y la que asustó a su amo con el terror del veneno. Lo supe gracias a la Tatamai,

maestra en descorrer secretos. Cuando de rodillas tuve a la mulata, y de imploro inundado en lágrimas, recordé que nadie tuvo misericordia del encomendado que, en su miseria, se colgó de un árbol. Perdonarla no cabía en mi breve tiempo de la tierra, que Dios lo hiciera en la eternidad del suyo. (100-101)

Doña Catalina's confession does not deal with her actions or culpability, but focuses instead on the way Rosarios has wronged her. In repeated minor instances in the novel, from doña Catalina's perspective, Rosarios acts against her, prompting her to respond by slapping or kicking Rosarios.<sup>29</sup> Doña Catalina chooses to emphasize Rosarios's betrayal rather than her own actions. In contrast, the rumors conveyed in the "Dicen que" section stress doña Catalina's violence:

Y los clamores subieron de punto cuando el perro de un vecino desenterró con mechones de su pelo, el escapulario de la Virgen que a Rosarios Ay le impuso fray Cristóbal de Vera. La mulata enseñaba su cabeza rota por un trancazo, su espalda ceroteada, marcas de fuego por todas partes y con las piernas tan encogidas que, en vez de cajón de madera, la metieron en un cántaro. (112)

The above passage follows the description of don Gonzalo's murder that I previously described. As such, it remains embedded in a discourse of superstition and embellishment. Here again doña Catalina is cast as a malicious woman capable of torture and extreme abuse. The impersonal voice and the exaggerations of the rumors make the "Dicen que" section appear less powerful and truthful than doña Catalina's direct and emotional voice. Yet her account is limited by what she chooses to recall. In the closing chapter, doña Catalina acknowledges others will play a role in shaping her story: "Serán muchas más las palabras que se quedarán imaginando" (Valdivieso 141).

At the eve of Chile's bicentennial, to be celebrated in 2010, Chile once more attempts to construct their national identity. During colonial times, Alonso de Ercilla's sixteenth century epic poem *La Araucana*, with its praise of the the valor and

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<sup>29</sup> Doña Catalina's behavior was not an exception. Salinas describes the physical abuse that Indians were subjected to at the hands of their mistress during Spanish colonial times (27).

bravery of the local indigenous warriors who resisted the Spanish conquistadores, allowed Chileans to forge a connection with their Araucanian heritage during their own quest for independence from Spain. Francisco Antonio Pinto, president of Chile between 1827 and 1829, recalled the impact of this work for the creole generation that was completing its higher education in the first years of the nineteenth century:

Around [1805] I read for the first time the *Araucana* by Ercilla, and we used to gather in a little group to enjoy reading it. It wasn't because we enjoyed the beauty of its poetry [...] but because of the heroic deeds of the Araucanians and the Spaniards, which we considered to be our own, as we were compatriots of the former and descendents of the latter. [...] It was impossible to consider the great deeds of Caupolicán, Colo Colo, Lautaro and other giants of our history without feeling the heart burn with the desire to imitate them [...] (portions qtd. in Collier 28 and in Earle 29-30)

The epic poem played its part in the stimulation of Chilean self-consciousness at the close of the colonial period; Chileans could look back at their indigenous heritage with pride and admiration. However, as Gilda Waldman Mitnick explains, this positive image of the indigenous was overturned:

La continuada violenta resistencia indígena en el sur del país, ligada al afincamiento de la conciencia liberal en una élite de historiadores e intelectuales liberales marcados por el positivismo y el evolucionismo europeo de mediados del siglo XIX, reforzó la oposición entre lo 'blanco' y lo 'no blanco' mediante la oposición entre 'civilización y barbarie'. El discurso criollo, sustento de la identidad nacional, se construyó ya no a partir de una visión positiva del guerrero araucano, sino a partir de una visión del indígena como alguien flojo, borracho, sensual, apegado a la naturaleza y carente de un sistema religioso estructurado. (100)

For the four great historians of the period-Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, Miguel Luis Amunátegui, Diego Barros Arana, and Crescente Errázuriz-, the inferior indigenous had no relation with "lo chileno." These historiographers negated the significance of indigenous peoples and heritage in the Chilean nation, instead defining the country as

White.<sup>30</sup>

Even after the absorption of the Araucanian lands and people by the Chilean government in 1888, under the guise of civilizing and pacifying the “savages,” Chile still defined itself as homogenously White. In 1915, an official presentation by the Chilean State discussed the nation’s racial makeup:

Los indígenas de Chile eran pues escasos, salvo en lo que después se llamó Araucanía. [...] Las condiciones del clima, muy favorables al desarrollo y prosperidad de la raza blanca, hizo innecesaria la importación de negros durante el periodo colonial [...] A estas circunstancias debe Chile su admirable homogeneidad bajo al aspecto de la raza. La blanca o causásica predomina casi en absoluto, y sólo el antropólogo de profesión puede discernir los vertigios de la sangre aborígen, en las más bajas capas del pueblo. (qtd. in Waldman Mitnick 101)

The “pacification” of Araucania paved the way for the populating of their lands with European immigrants whose presence was expected to improve the country. The permanent mark left by these White foreigners further allowed this myth to be perpetuated.

In September of 2007 the *Observatorio de los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas*, with the support of the *Red Ciudadana Chile País Multicultural* and the *Fundación AVINA*, launched a nationwide three-month campaign to promote indigenous rights and culture. The campaign featured banners, posters, cultural events, and television commercials. According to an article published in *The Patagonia Times*, titled “Nationwide Indigenous Rights Campaign Launched in Chile” (September 5, 2007) and written by Matt Malinowski, at the event that launched the campaign, many speakers criticized the treatment of the country’s indigenous population and expressed disbelief that after 17 years of center-left governments, Chile’s indigenous groups are still not recognized under the Constitution. Well-

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<sup>30</sup> See Jorge Pinto Rodríguez, *La formación del estado y la nación, y el pueblo mapuche: de la inclusión a la exclusión* (2003). 171-177.

known Mapuche poet Elicura Chihuailaf is quoted as expressing the following sentiment:

As we are approaching the bicentennial, Chile's ideology has not changed. I believe that it will not change for many more decades. Chile, and also the Chilean governments, considers themselves a country of white people, which thankfully did not have to resort to importing African slaves. Meanwhile, the presence of indigenous people represents one of the country's low points. We are all gathered here today because we believe intimately, and not just in our dreams, in the need to end the pain which affects us during these days [...] the Chilean government should assume more responsibility.

Chihuailaf's words again point to the country's desire to see itself as a White nation and forget its indigenous heritage. However, the Mapuche's activism makes it difficult to overcome the reality of Chile's racial composition; it is a nation of Indians, Whites, and *Mestizos*.

The figure of *La Quintrala* mars the idealized White image of the Chilean nation with her racial background and violent acts. Yet, she continues to fascinate and seduce the Chilean population as a recurring figure of their history.<sup>31</sup> With Chile's bicentennial approaching, this female killer's status as an icon of Chilean identity requires she once again be negotiated within the country's national imagination. Earlier this year, Chilevisión, the third oldest television channel in Chile, announced its plans to release in 2010 a primetime television series retelling the story of Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer. If the 2008 comic book episode on *La Quintrala* is any indication, she will once again form part of a shameful past that must be overcome/forgotten, for to accept her would be to accept a Chile that is non-Christian and indigenous.

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<sup>31</sup> In celebration of this year's International Women's Day the *Dirección de Archivos y Museos (Dibam)* and the Universidad de Chile presented an exposition entitled "Doble de letras: mujeres y trazos escritos" at the National Archive that included Catalina de Ríos y Lisperguer.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LANGUAGE OF FEMALE VIOLENCE: THE CASE OF “LAS POQUIANCHIS”<sup>32</sup>

Just as *La Quintrala* scandalized her nation’s citizens, three notorious sisters shocked the population of Mexico in the early 1960s. Delfina, María de Jesús and Luisa González Valenzuela, known as “*Las Poquianchis*,”<sup>33</sup> were accused of crimes including mass murder, torture, the kidnapping of women for prostitution, and the clandestine operation of a brothel. Due to the extensive coverage of the case by the Mexican media, *Las Poquianchis* became an infamous sensation, captivating the Mexican people and even drawing in international press.<sup>34</sup> Mexican director Felipe Cazals’s film *Las Poquianchis* (1976) and Jorge Ibargüengoitia’s novel *Las muertas* (1977) respond to the overzealous media damnation of the women by providing an alternative narrative of the crimes of *Las Poquianchis*.<sup>35</sup>

This chapter contains three parts. It examines language used in the 1960s media coverage of the case, addresses Felipe Cazals’s film depiction of these women, and analyzes parallel instances of violence perpetrated by the women of Jorge Ibargüengoitia’s novel. My analysis begins by demonstrating how contemporary Mexican media, particularly the tabloid *Alarma!*, sensationalized *Las Poquianchis*’

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<sup>32</sup> A shorter version of this work was previously published. See Alicia Muñoz, “The Language of Female Violence in Jorge Ibargüengoitia’s *Las muertas*,” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* vol. 12 (Dec. 2008): 79-92.

<sup>33</sup> “*El Poquianchis*” was the name of a brothel María de Jesús purchased.

<sup>34</sup> According to Mexican newspaper *Excelsior*, journalists from Germany, France, Italy, and the United States (including *Life* and *Time* magazines) sought photographs and information about the case (January 22, 1964). Fascination with the incidents continues through present day with a local Guanajuato magazine *Semanario Chopper* re-examining the case in 2005 through a four part series, and Susan Landau Finch’s company Wildwell Films developing “The Dead Girls,” based on Ibargüengoitia’s novel.

<sup>35</sup> Beyond these two works, the Poquianchis case has inspired a painting by Francisco Corzas (1966), several *corridos*, and a testimonial novel *Yo, la Poquianchis: por Dios que así fue* (1980) by journalist Elisa Robledo.



crimes and demonized the sisters, transforming them into a pervasive, inhuman threat and flattening reality into black and white extremes. Additionally, the tabloid adopts a defensive nationalistic tone that rejects the sisters' crimes as part of Mexico's national identity; *Las Poquianchis* will not come to represent Mexico. Unlike the tabloid, Felipe Cazals's film depicts the women's crimes as a perverse allegory to the nation, stressing the hierarchical exploitation occurring across class lines. Cazals reclaims *Las Poquianchis* as part of Mexico's identity, using them to critique the violent social conditions occurring in an era of urbanization and corruption. Ibargüengoitia's novel moves beyond a binary portrait or a social critique in his attempt to recontextualize these working class women themselves and their acts. By examining the rhetoric surrounding the fictional women's relationship with violence, I aim to show that in particular Ibargüengoitia relies on connotations of domesticity to add depth to his characters and make them and their actions more familiar to the reader. He couches the violence in metaphors, images, or objects having an intimate, domestic quality, altering our perception of ostensibly horrendous situations.

I further argue that Ibargüengoitia's use of these domestic details and mundane elements transforms our perception of these details and elements themselves. The basic nature of these is highlighted when they are placed in a violent context; scissors cut and an iron burns. The revelation that these instruments can be perceived to have a darker use, such as an iron's capacity to burn flesh, decreases the familiarity of these every day objects and provokes anxiety. Just as the association of violence with domestic elements functions to alter the readers' perception of the women of *Las muertas*, it reflexively changes their perception of those domestic elements, creating a new threat, much more intimate than that of *Las Poquianchis* of *Alarma!* or the grand social allegory of Cazals.

Born in 1910, 1921, and 1922 respectively, Delfina, Luisa, and María de Jesús González Valenzuela were the daughters of a shopkeeper in Juanacatlán de Juárez in the state of Jalisco.<sup>36</sup> Their father became chief of police, but in 1921 he murdered a man and fled with his family to El Salto, another city within the state. It is here that Delfina first opened a bar in 1938. The establishment also served as a brothel, for which Delfina purchased young women, almost girls, who had been kidnapped or lured with the promise of a job. When circumstances forced her to shut down her business she relocated to a different town and opened a new brothel named *Guadalajara de Noche* with the help of her sister Eva. She later set up another business of the same name in San Francisco del Rincón.

In 1950 María de Jesús established her own brothel *La Casa Blanca* in León, Gto. after being impressed by the elegant establishment owned by her ex-sister-in-law and operated by a homosexual man known as *Poquianchis*. Months later when her landlord refused to continue renting to her, she purchased the brothel *el Poquianchis* and changed the name to *La Barca de Oro*. Despite this change, people continued to call the brothel by its original name and called her *La Poquianchis*. When the governor of the state of Guanajuato prohibited prostitution in 1962, María de Jesús moved all of her women to Delfina's brothel in Lagos de Morena, in the state of Jalisco. One year later the authorities closed Delfina's brothel as a result of a shooting. The sisters sequestered the women inside the brothel house for a month; although the women were left with few provisions, none of them dared leave for fear of being arrested.

In May of 1963 Delfina ordered María de Jesús to take their women to the brothel in San Francisco del Rincón. There they were left to fend for themselves with

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<sup>36</sup> The background information pertaining to the case comes from Elisa Robledo, *Yo, la Poquianchis: por Dios que así fue* (1980) and from the local Guanajuato magazine, *Semanario Chopper*.

María de Jesús only visiting and providing food sporadically. The women lived under these precarious conditions of malnutrition and decay for seven months. The sisters hoped to re-open a brothel but their fear of being discovered by the authorities led them to transport the women to their farm in San Angel. On January 12, 1964 Mexican police burst onto the farm, rescued fifteen women, and arrested the sisters. Days later, the police apprehended their accomplices bringing the total to eighteen and charged them with kidnapping, murder, rape, the corruption of minors, and the clandestine operation of a brothel, among other crimes.

The details of *Las Poquianchis*' crimes were revealed with their capture. The women rescued said that they were kidnapped, some from an early age, and sexually exploited primarily by the two sisters Delfina and María de Jesús; that they were savagely beaten and *Las Poquianchis* were responsible for several murders; that when they became pregnant they were forced to abort and the fetuses were placed inside bottles. Their denunciation of *Las Poquianchis* sisters generated interest in both the police and the international press.

On January 15, 1964, the prominent Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior* featured its first account of *Las Poquianchis* featuring the arrest of Delfina and María de Jesús González Valenzuela. The opening lines of the article detail the crime:

Cuatro mujeres que estaban en poder de tratantes de blancas y encarceladas en un moderno campo de concentración, murieron de hambre y fueron sepultadas clandestinamente en el predio conocido como "Los Ángeles," a 30 minutos de aquí, por la carretera que va a Manuel Doblado. Otras 19 chicas fueron rescatadas hoy y se salvaron de muerte tan cruel. Pero algunas han tenido que ser hospitalizadas porque se encuentran muy graves. (A37)

The tone and content of the article mix objective facts with subjective descriptors. Phrases such as "encarceladas en un moderno campo de concentración" and "se salvaron de muerte tan cruel" do not just inform the reader but add dramatic notes to

the story. Subsequent articles in *Excelsior* further rely on hyperbole, describing the women as “despiadadas,” “las hienas,” and “feroces ‘Hermanas del Diablo.’ ” The public’s outcry was such that mobs frequently gathered around *Las Poquianchis*, seeking to stone or lynch them. An editorial piece written by Bernardo Ponce for the same newspaper reflects the public furor, sounding a still more condemnatory tone in demanding full punishment for these women: “Que todo el peso de las leyes caiga sobre los seres demoníacos que han violado las leyes divinas y humanas en forma inusitada y escandalosa” (A6). In the writer’s opinion the women’s actions transgress all moral boundaries, re-classifying them as diabolic rather than human beings. The use of language that dehumanizes the women reflects discourse used by the public to describe *Las Poquianchis* and their crimes.

*Excelsior* does not always employ this type of language to describe violent criminals. In an article published at the height of *Las Poquianchis* news coverage, titled “Formal prisión para una criada filicida,” *Excelsior* maintains a much more impartial tone when reporting the facts of the case, despite the shocking nature of the crime.

Ángela de la Cruz Remedios, la sirvienta acusada de dar muerte a su hijo recién nacido, cuyo cuerpo fue cortado en pedazos para ocultarlo en una caja de zapatos, fue declarada formalmente presa por el juez decimonoveno penal, por los delitos de homicidio, profanación y ocultación de cadáver.

Según la denuncia, la acusada estranguló al recién nacido en el cuarto de criados de la residencia ubicada en el número 19 de las calles de Rincón del Bosque, donde trabajaba como sirvienta. El crimen ocurrió el día 10 del presente mes.

Ante el juez, la infanticida aseguró que el niño nació muerto y que se concretó a hacer desaparecer el cuerpo porque no tenía dinero para inhumarlo. (A27)

This case, like that of *Las Poquianchis*, centers on a female killer. However, the newspaper does not resort to judgmental or exaggerated language to describe the crime. Instead it presents the details in a neutral, straightforward manner. What

differentiates this case from that of *Las Poquianchis* is the extent of the threat. Remedios' alleged crime is personal and intimate; she killed her own newborn. Consequently, her alleged actions are contained, affecting only her family and those immediately around her. In contrast, *Las Poquianchis*' crimes are interpreted as a pervasive threat. *Las Poquianchis* kidnapped and killed *other people's* daughters. They ran a sordid business for over ten years and were seen as a corrupting sickness, a threat to the nation's morality. As *Excelsior* relates, the case induced a morbid fascination in the public, drawing people from neighboring towns and states to the courtroom: "la gente se trepaba en las ventanas, para ver lo que ocurría dentro" (" 'Las Diabólicas' " A30). The newspaper further highlights the shocking nature of the case: "Los espeluznantes crímenes—creíbles sólo en una novela policiaca—han enfurecido a los habitantes de esta población" ("Tratantes" A37). Ironically, Jorge Ibargüengoitia would take *Excelsior's* suggestion that the events echo a police procedural in writing his novel *Las muertas*.

The public's fascination with the heinous details of their crimes was such that *Alarma!*, a minor tabloid magazine, increased its circulation from 140,000 to 500,000 copies a week by featuring extensive sensational coverage of the case. The *Alarma!* articles further exaggerate the incidents, describing the women in a degrading and animalistic manner.<sup>37</sup> The striking images grab the reader's attention; the caption, in turn, supplies a palatable interpretation whose "uncontested realit[y]" is reinforced by the image itself (Medina 27). A photograph titled "Encerradas como lo que son: ¡Ratas!" pictures Delfina and María de Jesús smoking cigarettes in their cells.

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<sup>37</sup> This type of sensational depiction of a female killer was also seen in the first chapter, particularly through Vicuña Mackenna's portrayal of *La Quintrala* and historian Luis Martín's referral to doña Catalina as an "untamed animal" in his 1983 study on daughters of the conquistadores.



Figure 2.1: Page 5 of *Alarma!* (February 1, 1964).

The caption reads “Las dos asquerosas bestias fuman silenciosas en la obscura celda.” Similarly, another photo of María de Jesús in her cell is captioned “La diabolica María de Jesús, trás la reja de la celda fuma nerviosamente y se defiende como una fiera enjaulada” (*sic*). In both captions *Alarma!* transforms the women’s simple action of smoking into the diabolical conniving of beasts. The images and interpretative captions guide our understanding of the reality of the scene, presuming and reinforcing the women’s guilt. Additionally, as Belinda Morrissey explains in her discussion of the media’s representation of female killers, “Vilification operates to displace the offender from her society, to insist on her otherness, thereby avoiding the knowledge that she is produced *by* that society” (24).<sup>38</sup> *Alarma!*’s extreme language allows its

<sup>38</sup> Similarly, as I showed in chapter one, Vicuña Mackenna insists on the Quintrala’s *mestizaje* (her otherness) to displace her from Chile’s national cultural imaginary.

readers to displace culpability from their society onto the immutable nature of *Las Poquianchis*.

The bestial references continue in the description of another photograph: “La temible rata menor que responde al nombre de María de Jesús, no ha dejado en ningún momento de insultar [...] a sus víctimas, jueces y abogados de oficio” (3). This passage casts María de Jesús as a despicable vermin who *responds* to a name like a trained animal, rather than having an identity. Another photo caption portrays her sister Delfina as a rabid creature: “Los cargos que le imputaron a la hiena que echaba espuma por la boca fueron terribles.”



Figure 2.2: Page 9 of *Alarma!* (February 15, 1964).

The photograph itself shows Delfina arguing behind bars with one of her accusers. The tabloid’s description of the image, however, presents her not as a rational human being but as a crazed animal whose savagery should be feared. By inscribing these female murderers with unnatural, animalistic or devilish descriptors the tabloid creates an even more sensationalist story that preys on reader’s fears and craving for

excitement. As well, with these violent women placed firmly on the side of evil, any serious issues or questions arising from these crimes, which may have repercussions for society in general, tend to be buried under a tide of sensationalism and hysteria.

The tabloid's depiction of these women as animals serves as a blatant example of the vilification of violent women that often takes place in contemporary media discourses.<sup>39</sup> A female who kills violates not only societal norms against murder, but also traditional notions of femininity. Bronwyn Naylor argues that in the media the "contradictions in the notion of a female killer, particularly one whose crime seems 'inexplicable' and horrific, who tortures, or kills without motive, or kills children, are resolved by characterization as a witch or monster" (6). Historical, sociological, and psychological studies have observed that violent women are overwhelmingly cast as "unnatural," "abhorrent," and "threatening," in contrast to violent men, who can be seen as expressing their masculinity.<sup>40</sup> Violent actions are not foreign to traditional conceptions of male behavior. Instead of resolving the societal contradictions implicit in the existence of a female killer, the bestial characterization avoids these tensions by excluding these killers from the category of woman.

One page of *Alarma!* offers a particularly striking representative of the publication's form of journalism. Two images sit at the top of the page followed by a subheading and caption. Beneath is a giant headline in capital letters that reads "RESTOS HUMANOS EN 'LA GARGANTA DEL DIABLO,' " followed by a dramatic preface to the article, boxed in and at the center of the layout. Running down a column on the left side is a *corrido* to the Poquainchis. Finally, underneath another giant heading "COMO FUE LA INVESTIGACIÓN," in the bottom third of the page, comes the formal investigative article.

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<sup>39</sup> The following studies have focused on the representation of female killers in society, specifically in legal and media discourses: Morrissey 11-23; Naylor 4-8; Myers and Wight 101-112; and Hendin 1-36.

<sup>40</sup> See Scott 6, 21-23; Schurman-Kauflin 5-24; Kelleher and Kelleher 1-17; and Gilbert 1271-1300.





Figure 2.3: Page 16 of *Alarma!* (February 1, 1964).

The reader's eye is drawn to the preface, centered, boxed, and flanked by headlines, where the body of the article explains what the public needs to know:

En el apartado lugar de la “Garganta del Diablo” en Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, las “poquianchis” llevaban a sus víctimas moribundas y ahí las quemaban para hacer desaparecer cualquier rastro. Esta peligrosísima cañada, uno de los panteones particulares de las hermanas González Valenzuela, en donde gozaban observando como las aves de rapiña despedazaban a los cadáveres de jóvenes mujeres que mataban a palos por serles inservibles en su “negocio.” Toda la maldad que pueda existir en el mundo es poca, comparada a lo que hicieron “Las Poquianchis” con infelices criaturas que apenas empezaban a florecer en la vida. Muchas de ellas prefirieron la muerte que verse esclavizadas en su persona y en su honor por las satánicas hermanas.

(16)

The preface portrays *Las Poquianchis* as cynical women who take pleasure in their killings. The supplementary material functions as “evidence” to lend credibility to the claims made. However, the claims go to hyperbolic extremes in demonizing the

sisters and praising the victims. While presenting facts, *Alarma!*'s chief aim is to shock and entertain. Moreover, the tabloid's narration reinforces societal norms, using the trope of the saintly female victim.

Another way *Alarma!* titillates its readers is by describing objects found in the brothels and houses of *Las Poquianchis*. However, these references to domestic spaces have a different effect from those that I will later discuss in Jorge Ibargüengoitia's novel *Las muertas*. Whereas domestic allusions in *Las muertas* provide a humanizing context to the actions of *Las Poquianchis*, the tabloid presents such details in the context of their demonizing coverage, inscribing even ordinary items with elements of morbidity. A two-page spread with the headline "El 'Guadalajara de Noche' es otra tumba" catalogs the various objects found in this particular brothel. Here *Alarma!* uses small photographs with brief explanations as a visual border for the enclosed story. The captions include: "Un tétrico cuadro con fotografías de personas muertas, entre ellas la madre de las hermanas González Valenzuela," "Santos, veladoras, rosarios, libros religiosos y muchos crucifijos," "El guardarropa de las mujeres secuestradas," "A un lado de la piscina [...] se encontró una fosa en donde hay cenizas que pudieron pertenecer a cadáveres incinerados" and "En botellas de refrescos [...] fueron descubiertos en la azotea [...] pedazos de cuerpos de niños de varios meses de edad."<sup>41</sup> Not all of the objects are inherently sensational. Photographs of dead ancestors can represent a cultural practice and many homes contain a dead loved one's clothing, religious artifacts, or ashes. In this case, the mentioned objects assume murderous connotations when they are juxtaposed together. The combination of religious books, dead women's clothing and dead babies in bottles

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<sup>41</sup> The corruption of an everyday object, in this case a soda bottle used to store fetal remains, foreshadows Ibargüengoitia's use of the domestic.

makes these items take on the most sinister implications, contributing to *Alarma!*'s nightmare world of *Las Poquianchis*.

*Alarma!* provides an ironic commentary on the incidents and their own coverage of them. The passage below both gives the publication's perspective on the impact of the case and what must be done, and reveals the hypocrisy and biases of those responsible for it:

Siendo el tema escabroso como ninguno, hemos cuidado minuciosamente su exposición a fin de que no falte en ningún momento al pudor y respeto que merecen nuestros lectores. La presentación de estos sucesos bochornosos constituye la más candente requisitoria en contra de las malas autoridades que a lo largo de los años han propiciado la existencia de antros del tipo "Las Poquianchis". Hay muchas Poquianchis en odiosa proliferación, que envilecen a nuestras niñas, a nuestras adolescentes, a nuestras florecitas silvestres de la barriada y de la campiña, y que las torturan y las matan. Hay que exterminarlas, aplastarlas, y hacer escarmiento a la medida de su culpabilidad. (qtd. in Robledo 39)

*Alarma!* ironically ignores the sensationalist angle they have taken in the coverage of the case, blithely disregarding their skewed presentation of the incidents. Moreover, the opening line flatters the readers by claiming to have protected their delicate sensibilities, while the exaggerated and dramatic coverage is the very reason for the reader's fascination with the case. Interestingly, *Alarma!* directs some of the blame at the authorities but the solution focuses on the destruction of *Las Poquianchis*. The words "exterminarlas" and "aplastarlas" carry strong, physical imagery. They are words used in reference to insects and vermin. These words contrast with those applied to the victims, who *Alarma!* describes as "florecitas silvestres." Both characterizations dehumanize their subjects, but in opposite directions. While *Las Poquianchis*' image is one of a despicable, dangerous plague, that of the girls is one of vulnerable, fragile, and innocent flowers. The tabloid actively participates in constructing a pious portrait of the girls considered victims of these women, fixating

on mundane details such as the women's pilgrimage to a church and the nuns' daily visit, and featuring an intimate exposé on their visit to the *mercado* to buy groceries. Much in the same way that *Alarma!* exaggerates the unnatural character of *Las Poquianchis*, they play up the women's role as victims, emphasizing their innocence and pious "feminine" nature.

The implicit concern for the case's impact on society is explicitly addressed in an article titled "Nuestra sociedad no está corrompida." Here *Alarma!* looks to reassure their readers that Mexico's moral image remains intact:

Hemos dado la exacta dimensión a las asquerosas villanas. Ha sido tan rico el volumen informativo y hemos creado tanto asco y horror en contra de ellas, que temen que el pueblo las queme vivas. Pero el nombre de México que no se ha manchado ni opacado por lo ocurrido en la granja San Ángel, no sufrirá mengua ni nadie pensará que nuestra patria está corrompida y dominada por la lujuria y el crimen. Ninguno nos identificará con las Poquianchis como nadie dijo que Landrú era Francia, el destripador era Inglaterra, y Capone, Estados Unidos. México es y seguirá siendo ante el mundo, grande y bello, noble y valiente, limpio y justo, orgulloso y pacifista, fraternal y gallardo. (2)

The preceding passage reads like a patriotic speech reaffirming the faith of Mexicans in their homeland in the context of international attention generated by the case.

*Alarma!* recognizes the hatred their publication has so diligently generated towards these women, but disavows any repercussions. Due to the scandalous nature of the crimes, the case of Delfina, María de Jesús and Luisa Valenzuela quickly became international news. As María de Jesús explains in her testimony, "Semanas antes éramos unas cualesquiera y luego, asunto internacional" (qtd. in Robledo 10).

According to Stephanie Clark, the case "invites conclusions about the most negative traits of a cultural environment, in this case a small Mexican village, that breeds such corruptions. Those within it react with shame and violence as they see themselves reflected in the participants" (207). In other words, *Las Poquianchis'* case has the potential to impact how other Mexicans see themselves and how non-Mexicans view

their country. The above passage explicitly addresses society's fear that *Las Poquianchis* will come to represent Mexico by assuring its readers that these women have not, nor will they, destroy or tarnish Mexico's national identity.

*Alarma!*'s fear that the case of *Las Poquianchis* will alter Mexico's national identity assumes its citizens share a particular image of the country. Rather than being an ambivalent figure, the tabloid idyllically defines Mexico as "grande y bello, noble y valiente, limpio y justo, orgulloso y pacifista, fraternal y gallardo." The tabloid attempts to shape their readers' perception of their country to this jingoistic ideal, a vision of a Mexico with no space for these killer women. In contrast, Mexican director Felipe Cazals's film *Las Poquianchis* (1976), recognizes these women as part of Mexico's tainted identity and portrays them as a representation of the country's exploitative economic system.

The film, which reconstructs the crimes of the titular characters, opens with the discovery of several bodies in 1964. Three brothel madams, known in the film as Chuy, Delfa, and Eva, have ordered the killing of many of their female prostitutes. The subsequent trial of these women is interwoven with flashbacks to two storylines that begin in 1951 and move forward in time. One story, filmed in color, narrates the hardships of two sisters sold into prostitution: Adelina (Diana Bracho) and María Rosa (Tina Romero). Taking advantage of their family's dire economic situation, one of the brothel owners, passing as an "honorable" woman, convinces their rural peasant father Rosario (Jorge Martínez de Hoyos) to allow his daughters to come work at her restaurant, providing the father with an advancement of his daughters' wages. In reality, these women were forced to work as prostitutes under horrible conditions. Rosario's third daughter, Amparo, is kidnapped one year later for prostitution. The second story, shot in black and white, relates the misfortunes of a group of peasants, Rosario among them, whose lands were taken away. When these peasants attempt to

reclaim their land from the cattleman who wanted the land for his bulls, they are shot down.

Critics have viewed the film *Las Poquianhis* as a subversion of the *cabaretera* genre, flourishing in Mexico during Miguel Alemán's administration (1946-1952).<sup>42</sup> These films, set in the marginal spaces of bars, bordellos, dance halls, and cabarets, explore the difficulty of sustaining traditional moral values in an era of urban growth and modernization. *Cabaretera* films offer a straight-forward plot: a young, decent, lower class woman is forced into prostitution in the big city, by circumstances beyond her control, and harassed and mistreated by the brothel keeper. She is a sympathetic character who also often becomes a professional and successful dancer of Afro-Latin American tropical music. The story is told by incorporating aspects of "Mexican melodramas, hard edged elements of the *cine de arrabal* (Mexican cinema's urban melodrama), and popular music from the tropics: the Cuban *danzón*, the rumba, and the Brazilian samba" (Hershfield 77).<sup>43</sup> The genre gained popularity with its titillating depiction of sordid situations and female sexuality. The melodramatic intensity of this type of film further added to its success and mass appeal. As Susan Dever declares, "Cities may be claustrophobic spaces of danger and desire, ringed by a darkness not dispelled by neon and jazz, women may entice and entrap, sin and perdition may threaten, but in the end melodrama redeems waywardness, offers hope" (103). Although these films dramatized the breakdown of traditional values the melodramatic formula of the prostitute with "a heart of gold" was usually employed to reinforce

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<sup>42</sup> According to Rafael Aviña, "El cabaret se convirtió en el escenario por excelencia del cine de prostitutas y pecadoras, formando parte integral de la trama, una suerte de atmosférico y ruidoso personaje abstracto, testigo de toda clase de épicas cotidianas del arrabal" (172).

<sup>43</sup> According to Eduardo de la Vega Alfaro, "the background and elements for the brothel-*cabaretera* genre can be traced to films of the 1930s (particularly in *Santa*, *La Mujer del Puerto*, and *La Mancha de Sangre*), to the erotic dramas of cheap popular literature, and to the compositions of Agustín Lara, a composer of extremely popular songs, that in most cases idealized the female type dominant in the brothels and cabarets that were frequented by men of all social classes" (167).

underlying moral values. The cinema of the *cabaretera* created an alluring and entertaining atmosphere for its viewers, while reflecting societal changes, maintaining optimism, and satisfying desires.

The film *Las Poquianchis* follows the traditional *cabaretera* storyline with its focus on two young innocent sisters who are deceived, forced into prostitution and harshly mistreated by the brothel owner. It also uses popular music such as Dámaso Pérez Prado's "Mambo número 5," Agustín Lara's "Santa," and Consuelo Velázquez's "Que seas feliz," in its telling of the story. However, there is no prostitute with "a heart of gold," the brothel owners are women, and there is no enticing atmosphere or satisfaction of viewers' desires. Instead the film shocks its viewers with its graphic, unpleasant portrayal of city life and a dire economic situation. These rural poor girls are confined during the day and released at night to sell sexual favors; they are subjected to threats of starvation and beaten; those who die from physical abuse are silently buried in the backyard. Additionally, the film emphasizes the oppression of peasant life in Mexico through the trials and tribulations of the father of these two young girls and his fellow *campesinos*: their land has been taken away, they can't feed their families, their rights are ignored and no one cares. Faced with this situation their options are to leave their towns, migrate to the U.S., or continue to fight even if it means being arrested or killed. One shot in the film pans the faces of a group of rural peasants (non-actors), adding a documentary view into their anonymous misery. Their dark, wrinkled faces communicate a feeling of despair and frustration. They have been forgotten. As Charles Ramírez Berg asserts, "As *Las Poquianchis* sees it, forcing peasants off their land and coercing their daughters into prostitution in the city are two sides of the same deplorable underclass experience, the one feeding the other" (195-

196). The film further makes clear the hopelessness and degradation experienced by the working class when Rosario drinks to forget and upon returning home beats his wife for requesting what he cannot give her: money for medicine for his sick son. With these two interwoven story lines Cazals exposes the dark and disturbing economic realities of Mexico's national identity.

While Cazals's indictment against an exploitative economic system takes two forms (peasants and prostitutes), this study focuses on the representation of these violent women. As I previously stated, Cazals's film is considered a subversion of the *cabaretera* genre. *Las Poquianchis* encompasses the years between 1951 and 1964, but the film itself was produced in 1976 during a period of revival for the *cabaretera* genre. The 1970s experienced a new generation of *cabaretera* films that featured female nudity, soft-core sex and puerile music-hall jokes, making them immensely popular and profitable.<sup>44</sup> *Las Poquianchis* stands out among these 1970s *cabaretera*/prostitute films for addressing provocative social subjects and subverting traditional elements of the classic *cabaretera* genre. As Leonardo García Tsao explains, "the representation of the prostitutes as one more link in an interminable chain of submission and exploitation is crudely realistic and the very antithesis of what the *cabaretera* melodramatic tradition offered" ("One" 210). Cazals's film offers a grim portrait of brothel life that reflects social and class realities. In contrast to *Alarma!*'s limited animalistic portrait, Cazals depicts *Las Poquianchis* and their women as exploited and miserable

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<sup>44</sup> As Charles Ramírez Berg explains, building only superficially on the classic *cabaretera* formula, the new *cabaretera* films developed from the sex comedies popular in the 1960s; the plotline essentially repeating itself in film after film: a man fears he has lost his manhood and uses a woman to regain it (127).



human beings, victims of a larger social and economic structure. He uses these violent women to create a nightmare vision of a world that is the extreme result of this systemic hierarchy of exploitation.

Like other members of his generation (such as Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Jorge Fons and Arturo Ripstein), Felipe Cazals breaks with the ideological conventions of Mexican cinematic melodramas. His film style reflects “un cine de la crueldad que muestra sin discursos maniqueos ni dogmáticos las mezquindades de la condición humana” (Millán 228). Cazals replaces the mysterious and enticing women of the *cabaretera* genre with a more realistic portrait of women exploited by a corrupt system, abused and capable of horrific violence. Adelina and María Rosa’s introduction into brothel life reveals the brutality of the profession; they initially refuse to work as prostitutes and consequently are kept in a room and beaten. A prostitute by the name of Santa<sup>45</sup> visits the two sisters trying to convince them to cooperate by invoking the fantasy of the *cabaretera*. Santa is striking in a bright orange dress and full makeup; she strides in and tempts the girls, promising many beautiful dresses like hers if they would only come down and dance a little. However, no one believes the fantasy, not Santa, not the girls, nor the viewer. In the same breadth that Santa offers temptation, she threatens further beatings and worse. Her colorful, well-groomed appearance accentuates the gray, grimy condition of the beaten girls and their prison. We hear the music and noises of the dance hall drifting in to the room, highlighting the stark realities lived in the back rooms of the cabaret. When the two girls refuse to cooperate, two men are let in to rape them. When we next see the girls, the camera focuses on their expressionless faces and empty, staring eyes.

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<sup>45</sup> The name “Santa” invokes Federico Gamboa’s perennially popular novel by the same name and Agustín Lara’s sensual bolero. In her study of Gamboa’s novel Debra Castillo writes, “Trapped between bad luck and her own vile nature, [Santa] more closely resembles the potential for perversion in any attractive natural order” (41).

They've become a copy of Santa, donning colorful dresses and bright makeup, but the brutality behind the transformation of these women into life-size "dolls," shatters the image of the noble *cabaretera* prostitute.

Delfa and Chuy teach their prostitutes to obey by threatening them with starvation, confinement, beatings, and rapes. They utterly control the women's lives and bodies; Santa's refusal to abort her pregnancy, as ordered by the madams, leads to her murder. One scene of murder in particular demonstrates the hierarchical exploitation of these women. Delfa asserts her authority by dictating when one prostitute can eat; she may join the others once she is done ironing. When the prostitute fails to thank her for her "generosity," Delfa scolds her and states, "Chuy tenía razón. Parecen animales." The comparison of the women to animals recalls the language of *Alarma!*, however it is less rigid. The intention is not to classify them strictly as animals, but to denote their actions as less than human. Later in the scene Delfa once more displays the control she has by punishing a prostitute who complains about the watery beans and burned tortillas they are fed. Delfa angrily shouts to the other prostitutes, "¿Quién le rompe los dientes a ésta?" From across the room the prostitute she had earlier chastised responds to Delfa's request by bludgeoning the woman to death with the iron.<sup>46</sup> Her attack is immediate and zealous; she laughs as she is pulled away from the dead body. The image is of a woman who has lost her own volition and self-control. The scene concludes by revealing Zenaida, a prostitute who has been slowly eating her beans with her fingers throughout the violent incident, detached and wild-eyed. "Mi idea de Las Poquianchis" states Cazals, "es que no trataban a las mujeres como prostitutas sino como perros" (qtd. in García Tsao, *Felipe*

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<sup>46</sup> Her use of an iron as a weapon echoes Ibarguengoitia's incorporation of the domestic with violent acts, which I will later discuss. Here the iron is a weapon of opportunity and may reflect the prostitute's frustration, but the film does not accentuate the object's domestic nature nor the incongruity of its violent use.

182). Not only do *Las Poquianchis* treat the women as less than human, but also the prostitutes as a result act with less humanity themselves.

What is particularly striking in his film is the way these female victims become active participants in each other's victimization. As Cazals explains "la camaradería entre las prostitutas, como se ve en el cine mexicano tradicional, no existe. Eso de que las prostitutas se abracen y se consuelen no existe. En *Las Poquianchis* nunca se tocan, entre ellas se establece más bien la lucha" (qtd in García Tsao 172). He replaces the image of the fallen woman with a "heart of gold" with a darker picture of a group of prostitutes degraded to the point of self-destruction. These women are capable of inflicting the same type of violence to which they have been subjected. Cazals's stark depiction of *Las Poquianchis*' women, portraying them as victims and victimizers, contrasts with *Alarma!*'s insistence on their innocence and piousness.

Cazals highlights the total decomposition of these female victims through one unpleasant scene in particular. At this point in the film, the banning of brothels leads Delfa and Chuy to hide themselves and their women. The prostitutes are forced to share one room, dressed only in intimate attire, receive little food, no baths, and are only allowed to relieve themselves once a day. It is under these conditions that Delfa orders one prostitute to beat another who has soiled herself and who laughs hysterically, having lost her mind. Delfa screams at the top of her lungs "¡Ponle! ¡Ponle, maldita!" The prostitute slowly removes her shoe and begins to hit the other. Delfa then orders the rest to join in the beating. They remove their shoes and beat the woman continuously as she screams in pain. In the last shot of the scene the camera is directed toward the beaten woman, but the legs of the attackers block our view. As the legs clear away, revealing the beaten woman who lies on her side, her bottom half covered in excrement and her face and head bleeding, the camera lingers on the unobstructed view for eight seconds. Delfa has tremendous power over the women

and uses it to abuse, exploit, and command them. The prostitutes are a victimized class, enduring beatings, rapes, and inhuman conditions, yet when they are in a position of power over someone deemed lower than them by Delfa, they abuse that person to an even greater degree. Cazals asserts that this hierarchical chain of exploitation and abuse is a part of Mexico's societal reality. As Francisco Javier Millán argues, "Cazals convierte sus películas más autorales en un instrumento de agitación que incomoda y sacude las conciencias burguesas del público, mostrándole una realidad violenta y en nada placentera (228). The long eight seconds holding the image of the beaten and soiled woman forces the viewer to acknowledge her feelings of discomfort. Felipe Cazals recognizes the disgust the whole scene causes. In an interview he states:

Es una escena bastante desagradable, lo admito, pero la intención es marcar la descomposición espantosa que se manifiesta en una forma física...cuando una prostituta se vuelve un desecho humano, pues ya no es vendible, ni rentable, ni exhibible (qtd. in García Tsao, *Felipe* 182).

The beaten woman is the antithesis of the image of the glamorous *cabaretera*/prostitute, not titillating but repulsive. Additionally, she is a product of a society in which everyone is both exploiter and victim.

A subsequent and parallel scene represents the ultimate betrayal of values resulting from this society of exploitation with the degradation of the two innocent, pastoral sisters. María Rosa's malnutrition and abuse causes her to soil herself. Consequently, Delfa orders Adelina to beat her sister and calls upon the mob of prostitutes to do the same. Adelina looks on as her sister endures one hit after another, screaming in pain. She then silently and with a blank face picks up a plank of wood and joins the mob; she slowly and deliberately begins striking her sister. As the women scream in the background, we watch Adelina's face twist into rage and her blows intensify as she cries out "¡Putas! ¡Putas!" In contrast to the previous scene

where the camera centers on the victim and the mob is viewed as a unitary force, here our perspective is focused on a single perpetrator. The horror we derive from the scene is accentuated not by lingering on the victim, but by the degradation of the perpetrator. Adelina's violent abuse of her sister communicates the breakdown of basic moral values that is the end result of a systemic hierarchy of abuse and exploitation.

In this nightmare vision even the victimizers are victims; the brothel madams are exploited by higher officials during their reign, and after their arrest face the same conditions they forced upon their prostitutes. Chuy and Delfa sit in a dark, grimy cell complaining about the food they are fed, a lack of money for medications, restricted access to the outdoors, and the bucket they must use to relieve themselves (emptied only every 24 hours). These conditions, as Chuy explains, have caused Eva to lose her mind. Cazals's depiction of *Las Poquianchis*' situation provides a counterpoint to *Alarma!*'s photographs of an imprisoned Delfina and María de Jesús. In the context of the *Alarma!* coverage ("Encerradas como lo que son: ¡Ratas!") the image is animalistic and of justice served, but in the context of Cazals's film that same image points to the parallels between victim and victimizer.

Cazals uses the case of *Las Poquianchis* as a perverse allegory<sup>47</sup> for the nation reflecting, "un mundo de chingones y chingadas, sin salida ni escape" (Ayala Blanco 314). The inhuman treatment and self-destruction of the lower class, dramatized to an extreme, heeds a warning for society. This "foco de infección social," as a reporter in the film describes the brothel, functions as a representation of what is occurring across class lines: a hierarchical chain of exploitation. In contrast to Cazals's social portrait, Jorge Ibarguengoitia's novel *Las muertas* (1977) looks to provide its reader with a

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<sup>47</sup> In chapter one I demonstrated how the Quintrala has also been used as perverse allegory for her respective nation.

deeper understanding of these women as individuals. Specifically, the author interweaves violence and domestic elements, and by making this connection alters our perception both of these women and of the elements themselves.

Ibargüengoitia's initial fascination with *Las Poquianchis* case resulted from the repulsion it caused him: "la historia era horrible, la reacción de la gente era estúpida, lo que dijeron los periódicos era sublime de tan idiota" (qtd. in Asiain and García Oteyza 50). He wishes to supplant the despicable and unrealistic portrayal of these women with a narrative highlighting those elements of their life that make them real and even personable: "[S]egún la información de los periódicos todos los personajes eran espantosos. Lo que me interesaba, entonces, era meter a esa gente en la realidad, hacerla comprensible, no verla como los periódicos" (qtd. in Asiain and García Oteyza 50). In order to do so he attempted to uncover the facts of the case. Ibargüengoitia did not personally interview the people involved, but sought to understand the incidents through newspaper reports and case files. As Ibargüengoitia describes it, his investigation of the case was hampered by the lies circulated by the press: "Descubrir los datos no fue cosa fácil, porque sobre las mentiras que la prensa dijo y las verdades que olvidó decir se podría escribir otro libro más escandaloso que el que [se] escribió" ("Memorias" 34). Furthermore, the size of the case file was enormous, exceeding 1,000 pages, and complications such as the numerous aliases used by those involved made the story difficult to piece together. In the end, Ibargüengoitia felt he understood the incidents well enough to construct his own alternate narrative.

Ibargüengoitia derives two novels from *Las Poquianchis*' case: *Estas ruinas que ves* (1975) and *Las muertas* (1977). As he explains in an article titled "Memorias de novelas," towards the end of 1964 he conducted a disorganized investigation of *Las Poquianchis*' case and wrote 100 pages that was neither a report, nor an essay, nor a novel and ultimately served no purpose. One year later he decided he should write a

novel based on the case. In 1970 he worked towards this end and produced one hundred fifty pages that he later threw out. However, this standstill solidified a description of Cuévano that would later become the first chapter of a novel (*Estas ruinas que ves*) in which Las Poquianchis —or las Baladro—have only a marginal and brief mention (“Memorias” 33). *Estas ruinas que ves* is the story of a professor of literature, a profession Ibargüengoitia had for many years, who writes a novel about *Las Poquianchis*. However, this novel has little to do with the case itself. Instead it is “una crónica novelada de costumbres, cuya constante es el erotismo” (Castañeda Iturbide 75). In 1977 Ibargüengoitia completed *Las muertas*, which takes its name from the murders themselves and tells the story of the Baladro sisters.

The characters in his novel, Serafina and Arcángela Baladro, function as Ibargüengoitia’s fictional representations of the real-life Poquianchis. As the author explains, “no es la historia de las Poquianchis, sino la historia de unas señoras que yo inventé, a las que les pasaron las mismas cosas que a las Poquianchis” (qtd. in Asiain and García 50). The novel’s opening page explicitly states that some of the events are real but all the characters are fictional. At the end of the novel, Ibargüengoitia includes a photograph of *Las Poquianchis* and their victims but flips the image around the vertical axis and erases their faces. As Clark notes, this choice fits with his intentions for the novel; Ibargüengoitia removes the specific details and characters of the case, allowing their themes to be extended beyond *Las Poquianchis* themselves (212). Further, while the novel does not attempt to relate the literal facts of the case, the author adopts a pseudo-documentary format incorporating a variety of narrative styles. Raymond D. Souza observes, “There is a considerable variety in language of the novel between the literary discourse of an omniscient narrator, the popular language of the characters and the legalistic and journalistic jargon of many of the reports” (20). This is a stark contrast with the single-note sensational discourse of

*Alarma!*, which results in a flat representation of the women and their crimes. I will argue that included in Ibargüengoitia's rhetoric is a language of the domestic, which especially serves to deepen our understanding of his female characters.

In contrast to *Alarma!* where the crimes appear premeditated, many of the violent acts contained within *Las muertas* appear to be accidental. As Alfonso González argues, "las muertes de las muchachas, nos dice la novela, fueron principalmente accidentales y los secuestros y esclavitud de los que se les acusa a las mujeres no sucedieron sino como consecuencia de haberseles impedido seguir ganándose la vida legalmente al serles clausurados los negocios" (148). Much of the violence in the novel can be explained by the circumstances and legal binds that the women encounter as a result of their working social class.<sup>48</sup> Ana Rosa Domenella comments on the dual reading of the Baladro sisters' context: "Serafina y Arcángela son 'demonios' para sus pupilas y para quienes las juzgan, pero a su vez son 'víctimas' de un sistema arbitrario que primero las protege y luego las sataniza" (153-154). In an interview, Ibargüengoitia explains how he imagines the women's position:

Se trataba, desde luego, de personas muy tontas: la clase de gente a la que le da una pulmonía y quiere curarla con té de orégano. Pero por otro lado la sociedad que las rodea es una sociedad podrida, que funciona para impedir que las cosas se arreglen. Estas personas se encuentran de pronto fuera de la ley y tienen que huir de Jalisco...Y de pronto se muere una de ellas. Normalmente, uno llama al médico, el médico extiende un certificado de defunción y uno entierra al muerto. Pero si uno está viviendo en una casa clausurada no puede llamar al médico, no puede tener el certificado, no puede enterrar al muerto en el panteón. Entonces, ¿qué hace? Lo entierra en el corral, porque tiene corral y no puede hacer otra cosa. (qtd. in Asiain and García 50)

Ibargüengoitia's recognition of a corrupt society echoes Cazals's preoccupation with a society built on exploitation, but is more concerned with discovering precisely how such conditions can give rise to such shocking results. By contextualizing the

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<sup>48</sup> We will also see this in the next chapter with the figure of Rosario Tijeras.



violence, Ibargüengoitia succeeds in developing an alternate narrative in which the women's actions are potentially more comprehensible, counteracting the popular media's diabolic and bestial depiction. He accomplishes this in part by grounding their violence in intimate, domestic elements.<sup>49</sup>

I next examine four instances in which women commit or attempt murder within the novel to reveal how a new anxiety arises from the combination of violence with the private and mundane. Ibargüengoitia replaces the inhuman threat created by the media with an alternative threat of the perversion of the domestic.

The opening scene of *Las muertas* depicts the extreme revenge of a scorned and passionate woman. Four individuals arrive in a small Mexican town by car and search for a bakery shop. When the car reaches the bakery, Serafina Baladro shouts “¿Ya no te acuerdas de mí, Simón Corona? Toma, para que te acuerdes” (11). She proceeds to let loose a hail of bullets upon the establishment. Finally one of her companions sets the shop on fire and they quickly leave in their car. Serafina's ex-lover, Simón Corona, and his assistant are left cowering under the bakery counter. The language used by Ibargüengoitia in this scene is a flat relation of the events, but the actions are inherently dramatic. It is a woman who commands the group and unleashes this violence. However, the brutality of her violence is offset by the mundane elements that precede the scene. On their way to kill Simón, members of the group stop to eat “chicharrones,” drop a peso into a church's donation box, buy cheese, and urinate. Serafina also enters a church: “(después se supo que encendió una vela, pidió de rodillas a la Virgen buena suerte en la empresa y en agradecimiento anticipado clavó en el terciopelo rojo un milagro de plata en forma de corazón, como

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<sup>49</sup> This grounding of the women's violence in intimate, domestic elements ultimately also reins in the potential threat these women represent. Similarly, *La Quintrala* soap opera and comic rely on a confessional structure to contain her crimes. The containment of a female's violence will also come forth in the next chapter with Franco's use of a formula romance.

si ya se lo hubiera concedido)” (10).<sup>50</sup> By the time they finally arrive at the correct bakery they have bought three bags of “campechanas.” As José de la Colina explains, “con las anotaciones ‘gastronómicas’ insertadas de paso, aun los momentos-cresta se aplanan y su tensión o su horror es disuelto en lo trivial” (41). I classify these gastronomic annotations as domestic references and their inclusion is consistent with the author’s attempts to create a level of familiarity towards Serafina and an understanding of her violence through repeated domestic tropes.

The back-story of her relationship with Simón contextualizes the extreme violence of the bakery scene. Serafina cannot forget Simón’s abandonment and determines to kill him rather than allow him to be with anyone else. During her first unsuccessful attempt to seek out and harm Simón, Serafina carries in her purse “una pistola calibre .25, a la que no le tenía confianza, y unas tijeras, por si fallaba” (30-31). She has more faith in her ability to wield the scissors, an instrument from the domestic sphere, than the gun, an instrument used solely for killing. Ibargüengoitia’s inclusion of the scissors roots the violent Serafina of the above scene in the domestic and makes her more understandable as a woman who finds comfort in a familiar tool. However, her intention to use those scissors to attack her ex-lover displaces this object from its normal location in the home. Instead of cutting paper or cloth, the scissors are intended to cut flesh, reminding the reader of the object’s basic function; it is an instrument that cuts. The shift in the reader’s perception of this function creates an unfamiliar and unsettling new association.

When she later settles on a gun as the weapon of her choice Serafina makes certain the weapon will do the job:

Serafina quería un arma grande, aunque al disparar ella tuviera que

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<sup>50</sup> The description of such mundane tasks and actions recalls the *Alarma!*’s coverage of the victims’ after the brothel’s discovery. In the tabloid such descriptions function to underline the victims’ humanity and traditional femininity, but here they are being applied to the “villains” of the story.

sostenerla con ambas manos, aunque el retroceso levantara la boca del cañón, aunque la detonación fuera ensordecedora, aunque la bala, al entrar en el pecho de la víctima, le abriera un boquete en la espalda. Todos estos defectos quedaban compensados, en opinión de Serafina, con la seguridad que un arma de esta índole le daba / de que/ el ‘ajusticiado’, ya herido, no iba a ir caminando hacia ella, con la mirada de loco y los brazos abiertos, como si quisiera darle un abrazo. (34)

Ibargüengoitia does not simply state that she wants a large weapon but provides a detailed and visual list of the attributes she seeks. Serafina wants a gun that will push Simón back when he is shot, preventing his embrace. However, Serafina also recognizes her discomfort with this gun. In order to secure the weapon she will have to hold it with both hands, the sound will deafen her, and the bullet will create a gaping hole in his chest. In her eyes the size and power of the phallic gun are defects rather than positive traits. Her true reason for wanting such a gun belies her more violent perceived motivations. Serafina’s main concern is not with such masculine attributes, but with the gun’s ability to stop the “hug” that may come after the shot. Serafina is not a coldhearted killer, but a vulnerable woman who sees the gun as a source of protection from the possibility of unwanted intimacy. However, Ibargüengoitia’s inclusion of the image of a shot and bloodied Simón, walking towards her with open arms, “como si quisiera darle un abrazo,” perverts the intimacy expected from an embrace. The hug, rather than offering a source of comfort, brings feelings of disgust and fear. Ibargüengoitia humanizes Serafina and her motivations, but in doing so he disturbs our perception of an intimate act.

A second violent incident takes place in the novel when two female lovers clash over the gold from a fellow prostitute’s teeth. The women’s fighting takes place in the home with all the other women of the house watching but not interfering. It is a lover’s quarrel, “[un] asunto privado en el que no debe intervenir la comunidad.” Ibargüengoitia describes the “espectáculo” in a detached manner:

La imagen es más o menos así: hay dos mujeres con las caras muy

cerca una de la otra, frente a frente, cada uno está aferrada con ambas manos de las greñas de la otra. Tienen las facciones descompuestas, los ojos a veces cerrados por el dolor, a veces desorbitados, la boca torcida, les escurre una baba espumoso, los vestidos desarreglados y rotos—por un escote asoman los pedazos de un brassiere—. Se mueven al mismo tiempo, muy juntas, como si estuvieran bailando: tres pasos para allá, dos para acá, de ven en cuando un pisotón, un puntapie en la espinilla, un rodillazo en la barriga. Los ruidos que hacen las mujeres son casi animales: pujidos, quejidos, resoplidos, de vez en cuando, una palabra corta y malsonante—“puta”, etc. (100)

Ibargüengoitia utilizes inhuman imagery as a descriptor of the visceral struggle, but juxtaposes those metaphors and the violence with private and domestic elements. He notes their distorted faces, their foaming mouths, and their sounds, “casi animales,” but does not outright call them animals, instead qualifying his portrayal with the use of “casi.” The use of a qualifier further distinguishes the description from those of *Alarma!*. Additionally, this “casi animales” characterization enters into dialogue with Ibargüengoitia’s inclusion of a dance metaphor. As he states, the women move in synch “*como si estuvieran bailando*” (my emphasis). Ibargüengoitia’s addition of a dance metaphor offsets and competes with the animalistic imagery. It grounds the violence within an intimate act, counteracting the savagery of this dramatic image. At the same time, his association of a dance with fighting and bestial language distorts the intimacy and grace of a *real* dance. It is a dance of snarling dogs. The fight ends when the two women fall to their death as a balcony railing gives way: “Sus cráneos se estrellaron contra el cemento y se rompieron como huevos” (101). Ibargüengoitia’s characterization of the fall is abrupt and graphic. His metaphor familiarizes the reader with the horrific visual while simultaneously reminding her of the violence inherent in a familiar act. The cracking of an egg is a common occurrence often associated with the kitchen, however the comparison to cracking skulls is reflexive, resulting in a defamiliarization of this domestic action. This action shifts away from being perceived

as constructive (cooking) and towards being perceived as destructive (shattering a case to spill out its contents).

The scene concludes with the discovery of Blanca's gold teeth, which form an image that Colina describes as a horrid smile: "una monstruosa sonrisa, cuatro dientes de oro, anteriormente arrancados al cadáver de Blanquita, asoman por el escote de una de las putas muertas" (40). The twisted image suggested by the teeth distorts the intimate and connective act of smiling. Rather than being a warm gesture, the smile accentuates the disconcerting image of the woman's dead body. For Octavio Paz, "La risa es una defensa contra lo intolerable. También es una respuesta al absurdo" (589). I believe this smile functions in a similar manner. The inclusion of this suggestive image by Ibargüengoitia acts as a form of relief from the violence of the scene, but also as a perversion of intimacy.

In the attempted murder of Marta Henríquez Dorantes, a fellow prostitute and one of the few women permitted to leave the establishment, household objects become weapons. Four prostitutes of the brothel attack Marta out of spite while she wrings dry her laundry:

La tumbaron al piso, la amordazaron y la ataron con la ropa húmeda que acababa de lavar, la hicieron levantarse y estuvieron a punto de darle una muerte extraña. En un rincón del corral había un excusado común antiguo que estaba en desuso desde hacía muchos años. Las mujeres llevaron a Marta arrastrando hasta esta construcción, quitaron las tablas del común e intentaron meterla en el agujero. (Por las descripciones de este hecho se deduce que las atacantes tenían intención de enterrar viva a la víctima.) Su gordura la salvó. Marta es una mujer de osamenta muy ancha y por más esfuerzos que hicieron las otras no lograron hacerla pasar por el orificio. (113)

Ibargüengoitia lays out the steps of the attack in a deliberate fashion. The detached narration belies the crude and brutal violence depicted. Only one line in the passage, "Por las descripciones de este hecho se deduce que las atacantes tenían intención de enterrar viva a la víctima," mentions the intentions behind the acts and it appears as a

side note, enclosed within a parenthesis. In this scene the toilet becomes an instrument of death while the wet laundry becomes an instrument of restraint. Two domestic elements cease to be common household objects and instead function as absurd weapons. While the detached narration softens the violence described, the combination of the domestic objects and murderous intent heighten the perversity of the act.

The most shocking incident of violence in *Las muertas* is the tortuous healing of a prostitute named Blanca. Blanca becomes pregnant and decides to have an abortion on the recommendation of Serafina. A doctor performs the operation in her bedroom with the assistance of the Calavera, a woman who works for the Baladro sisters, but the doctor only partially succeeds. He successfully causes a miscarriage, but with it a hemorrhage that paralyzes Blanca. In search of a cure for her paralysis, the Calavera goes to a famous healer and receives permission from the Baladro sisters to attempt the cure on Blanca. Ibargüengoitia relates the prescription in a detached manner: “La receta dice: aplicar las planchas bien calientes, en la manta humedecida, sobre el lado paralizado de la enferma, hasta que la manta adquiriera un color café oscuro” (90). The instructions quite literally describe how to iron a human being. The healers are applying a blanket to Blanca’s skin, spritzing it with water, and then pressing hot metal sheets on top until the blanket turns brown. Blanca’s screaming only encourages the healers, who take heart from her struggling movements and continue their ironing/healing. The consequence of their actions shocks even them: “Al retirar la manta del cuerpo de la enferma vieron, con sorpresa, que la piel se había quedado adherida a la tela” (90). Blanca ends up dying despite their attempts to revive her with the medicinal properties of Coca-Cola. The reference to this drink accentuates the absurdity of the situation and the ignorance of the “healers.” Furthermore, the incongruity of framing the torture in a domestic metaphor both

disguises the violence and highlights the potential perversity of ironing. The ironing metaphor provides a recognizable point of reference for what is otherwise a scene of unusual torture. Simultaneously, it transforms a domestic chore into a gruesome horror.

The case of *Las Poquianchis* raises questions of national identity, gender, and violence. Each of the three interpretations, the contemporary tabloid coverage, Felipe Cazals's film, and Jorge Ibargüengoitia's novel, struggle to encapsulate the tensions radiating out from these violent women, though each is preoccupied with a different shard. The women's crimes generated great attention, but their gender added another level of fascination by disrupting traditional notions of femininity. *Alarma!* attempts to resolve the tension between the horrendous nature of the crimes and the women's gender by characterizing *Las Poquianchis* as demons and beasts, to the extent that they are so distorted by hyperbole as to be excluded from the human race. In other words, they cease to be recognized as women so that gender is no longer problematic. Similarly, the threat these women pose to *Alarma!*'s idealized image of the nation is dispelled by rejecting their membership in Mexican society.

Felipe Cazals's film *Las Poquianchis* shares a concern for Mexico's national identity, but is less preoccupied with the gender of the perpetrators or explaining them as individuals. Instead, the film uses the women's violence to make a societal critique about an era of urbanization and corruption. The conditions of *Las Poquianchis* and their prostitutes function as a perverse allegory for the nation, warning of the inevitable degradation of all involved in systemic hierarchical exploitation. In Cazals's film, those who exploit become victims and those who are exploited in turn victimize. The women are degraded to the point of wallowing in their filth while basic mores are violated as sister murders sister. Cazals uses the women's gender to further accentuate the disturbing nature of the crimes. The effect is not to expand the

understanding of women, but to shock through displaying behavior and conditions beyond the traditional bounds of femininity.

In contrast to the tabloid's or the film's focus on the country's public image, Jorge Ibargüengoitia's novel centers on delivering an intimate portrait of the women's crimes. In his fictional account, Ibargüengoitia attempts to make *Las Poquianchis* "comprehensibles" while retaining their identity as women. The causal chain of circumstance humanizes and contextualizes the women's actions. In contrast to the coverage in *Alarma!*, the author attempts to reconcile the women's gender and their violence by inscribing them with domestic details or elements that add a level of familiarity. The use of *domestic* metaphors is effective in allowing the characters to maintain their gendered identity throughout their violent conduct because of the close association of the domestic with the feminine. The image of a woman ironing, laundering, dancing, using scissors or cracking eggs is recognizable and culturally acceptable. However, the injection of violence into these elements challenges our comfort with the domestic. This association partially displaces the original tension between violence and the female gender onto the domestic, but fails to fully resolve it.

All three accounts and/or interpretations of this notorious case attempt to resolve the tensions created, whether it be by presenting an animalistic portrait of these women, using them as a perverse allegory, or inscribing their violence with domestic details. However, all three prove insufficient in relieving the anxiety produced by these women's crimes. Their inability to do so suggests that there is something so particular about this sensational case that allows it to continue to fluctuate between fascination and disgust, rejection and acceptance. In the end, this continual fluctuation denies the possibility of closure further allowing these violent women to haunt the Mexican imagination.



## CHAPTER 3

### ROSA Y NEGRA: THE CONSTRUCTION OF ROSARIO TIJERAS

The previous two chapters discussed two historical women who committed acts of murder. This current chapter and the next engage with multiple fictional representations of a particular female killer that are based on a social reality, in this case a *sicaria* within Colombia's drug cartel.

The film *Rosario Tijeras*, directed by Mexican director Emilio Maillé (a Mexican, Colombian, Brazilian, French, and Spanish co-production), became the second highest-grossing film in Colombian history after it premiered in 2005.<sup>1</sup> The film takes its Latin American audience inside an all too familiar Colombia. According to the film's director, "La misma ciudad nos fue dando más elementos cada día. Por ejemplo, el señor que aparece rezando unas letanías, en el velorio de uno de los sicarios, apareció cuando estábamos rodando y ese solo elemento hizo esa secuencia inolvidable."<sup>2</sup> The presence of this man more directly connects the images projected on the screen with those of real life. In contrast to the actors, he participates in the prayer believing it to be part of reality. When the film made its debut in the slums of Medellín on a projection screen in the soccer field of the barrio Granizal, forty-eight year old Luz Dary Madrid Morales, who was filmed washing her clothes, wore her best outfit to see herself on the big screen. The blurring of genuine and fictional characters in the film is typical of the artistic and popular discourse surrounding the figure of Rosario Tijeras. Unax Ugalde, who plays Rosario's friend Antonio in the

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<sup>1</sup> Reportedly, the highest grossing film was Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. See Peter Martin, "AFI FEST Report: Rosario Tijeras Review" 12 Nov. 2005 <<http://twitchfilm.net/archives/004147.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Alberto López Duque, "Se estrenó 'Rosario Tijeras', con Flora Martínez," *Eskpe* 12 Aug. 2005 <[http://www.eskpe.com/secc\\_eskpe/cine\\_eskpe/otrasnoticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA\\_INTERIOR\\_ESKPE-2163085.html](http://www.eskpe.com/secc_eskpe/cine_eskpe/otrasnoticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR_ESKPE-2163085.html)>.

film, recalls this merging of reality and fiction: “En el cementerio donde rodamos parte de la película se decía que estaba enterrada la verdadera Rosario Tijeras, y lo contaban con orgullo, como cuando se habla de un héroe de barrio, pero por supuesto nunca llegamos a ver su tumba.”<sup>3</sup> The figure “Rosario Tijeras” has come alive in the Latin American imagination. At the same time, she is, as Maillé observes, “una de las muchas Rosario Tijeras que pueden existir.”<sup>4</sup>

From among many, the character “Rosario” stands as the representative face of the female *sicaria*. Who exactly is *this* Rosario Tijeras? She is a fictional character and the main protagonist in Jorge Franco’s best selling novel by the same name. The 2005 film is an adaptation of this literary work. Set in Medellín during the 1980s, the novel *Rosario Tijeras* (1999) narrates the life of Rosario, a contract assassin from the slums. The novel opens in a hospital where Rosario is brought after having been shot. While Antonio, an upper class friend who drove her to the hospital, awaits news of her condition, he reflects on his experiences with Rosario. Through a first-person narrative, Antonio recounts a limited version of Rosario’s life. It is through his memories that the reader learns of her adventures as a *sicaria*, their friendship, Rosario’s intimate relationship with his best friend Emilio, and Antonio’s undeclared love for her. Thus the wait of Antonio and the reader for news of Rosario’s fate is broken up by memories of her life, forming a non-linear narrative.

Franco attributes his novel’s immediate success to its portrayal of a Colombia readers could recognize:

It was about the disintegration of Colombia’s value system in the face

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<sup>3</sup> Amelia Castilla. “No quiero dedicar mi vida sólo al cine,” *El País* 24 March 2006  
<[http://www.elpais.com/articulo/elpcinpor/20060324elpepicin\\_1/Tes/cine/quiero/dedicar/vida/solo/cine](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/elpcinpor/20060324elpepicin_1/Tes/cine/quiero/dedicar/vida/solo/cine)>.

<sup>4</sup> Catalina B. Oquendo, “El director de ‘Rosario Tijeras’ habla sobre Medellín,” *Eskpe* 26 Sept. 2007  
<[http://www.eskpe.com/secc\\_eskpe/cine\\_eskpe/otrasnoticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA\\_INTERIOR\\_ESKPE-2182365.html](http://www.eskpe.com/secc_eskpe/cine_eskpe/otrasnoticias/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR_ESKPE-2182365.html)>

of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism. It was about a Colombia where stereo music played over the grave of a drug lord 24 hours a day; a Colombia where teenagers are paid in pocket money for every cop killed; a Colombia that everyone knew and struggled to understand (n.p.)<sup>5</sup>

Franco's novel reflects the societal problems that affected Medellín during the late 1980s and this familiarity with the novel's social context is part of what makes the character Rosario come alive for the people of Medellín. It is through Rosario's life story that the reader gets a glimpse of Colombia's gritty reality.<sup>6</sup> As Antonio explains, "Ella era la que me las contaba, como se cuenta una película de acción que a uno le gusta, con la diferencia de que ella era la protagonista, en carne viva, de sus historias sangrientas" (Franco 116). The reader of *Rosario Tijeras* joins Antonio as the recipient of stories that recreate a violent and underprivileged past shedding light on Rosario's killings.

The pages that follow explore Franco's aesthetic appropriation of the image of the *sicaria* and the cultural and social factors that surround her with respect to two familiar narrative subgenres. I argue that Franco's use of the *novela negra* places Rosario within a working class social context, and as such her actions can be read as a consequence, and her character as a *desechable* victim, of her social reality. Nevertheless, and at the same time Franco toys with Rosario's identity as a female killer by inscribing her within a formula romance, elevating her to the status of *deseable*. Whereas the film's reliance on a love story and on her beautiful, vulnerable body generates compassion for this female killer, the novel builds fascination through the tension between the socially compassionate *negra* and the twisted formulaic *rosa*.

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<sup>5</sup> Silvana Paternostro, "Colombia's New Urban Realists," *Críticas* 1 Dec. 2003 <<http://www.criticasmagazine.com/article/CA337352.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> The reader's familiarity with the novel's social context further brings the character Rosario come alive for the people of Medellín.

Ultimately, the use of a formula romance contains the potential threat Rosario represents, re-establishing the status quo with a rejection of this lower class female killer who exists outside the social order.

According to Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, the 1984 assassination of the Minister of Justice, Rodrigo Lara, by two youth assassins became emblematic of two major societal trends: first “the impact that drug trafficking networks were having in the economic, political, and social fabric of the country” and second, “the emergence of public and media representations of youth as social threat and criminal other” (1, original emphasis). Reported killings of political figures, judges, police officers, and citizens, each associated with the image of a young assassin, increased the portrayal of youth as delinquents and provided a specific face to fear. The face of the typical violent subject (or criminal *other*) became that of a young lower class person: “jóvenes entre dieciséis y veinte años, de origen popular, a veces desertores del sistema escolar, casi siempre de familias descuadradas” (Salazar, “Violencia” 111).<sup>7</sup> The amorphous fear produced by the violence and felt by the respectable members of society now had a concrete subject.

In addition to the equation of lower class youth with violence, this criminal *other* became qualified as “suicida y desechable” (Salazar, “Violencia” 113). The former adjective can be attributed to the youth’s attitude towards death; they show a lack of fear in dying young and place themselves in situations that will ultimately get them killed. Although these young men posed a societal threat, the fear they caused was tempered by the fact that the majority of those being killed were precisely these working class young men.<sup>8</sup> The latter adjective “desechable” indicates the

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<sup>7</sup> Between 1985-1990 reportedly one hundred and fifty youth gangs existed throughout Medellín, 30% of which had direct ties to the drug cartel (Salazar and Jaramillo 91).

<sup>8</sup> “Between 1987 and 1990, more than 78% of the victims of violent deaths in Medellín were youth between fifteen and twenty-four years old; eight out of ten were male” (Riaño 2).

insignificant status of the lower class youth. According to Jesús Martín-Barbero, the term “desechables” suggests on one level “la proyección sobre las personas de la rápida obsolescencia de que están hechas hoy la mayoría de los objetos que produce el mercado” (24).<sup>9</sup> Describing these working class youth as “desechables” classifies them as market products to be used and thrown away. Moreover using one over another does not matter; they are interchangeable. They are part of a series and carry little value as individuals. On another level the adjective “desechable” also has to do with the common noun *desecho* (Martín-Barbero 24). By being described as “desechable” dominant society already perceives these criminal *others* as *desecho*; they are the chaff to be discarded.<sup>10</sup> The unimportance of these working class bodies and the repulsion they produce is captured in Fernando Vallejo’s *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994), a classic *sicario* novel. Here the main protagonist describes the working class slum dwellers as infectious trash: “la peste humana en su más extrema ruindad [...] Aquí nadie es inocente, cerdos. Lo mataron por chichipato, por *bazofia*, por *basura*, por existir. Porque *contaminaba el aire* y el agua del río” (31, my emphasis). Furthermore the term “desechable” forms part of a late 20<sup>th</sup> century imaginary whose language references a city *sucia de humanidad*, surrounded and contaminated by “elementos indeseables” (Jáuregui and Suárez 368). These *cuerpos desechables* or disposable bodies belong to the outskirts of the city, and reflecting their location, are outside social recognition.

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<sup>9</sup> The question of obsolescence is not my central focus. Instead I am interested in the market commodification and seriality of people as suggested by Martín-Barbero’s quote.

<sup>10</sup> This discourse of *desecho* recalls Felipe Cazals’s words about a particular degrading scene in his film: “Es una escena bastante desagradable, lo admito, pero la intención es marcar la descomposición espantosa que se manifiesta en una forma física...cuando una prostituta se vuelve un desecho humano, pues ya no es vendible, ni rentable, ni exhibible (qtd. in García Tsao, *Felipe* 182). The prostitute, like these lower class youth, is a “desecho humano.”

Their classification as “desechable” provokes repulsion but also stirs desire. As Vallejo’s narrator further adds, the slums excite because they hold appetizing and desirable bodies: “De las comunas de Medellín la nororiental es *las más excitante*. No sé por qué, pero se me metió en la cabeza. Tal vez porque *de allí, creo yo, son los sicarios más bellos*” (64, my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> Vallejo’s narrator exposes a disturbing connection between poverty and erotic fantasy: part of the attraction to the lower class body lies in its poverty. José Joaquín Blanco comments on the eroticization and appropriation of such *apetecibles cuerpos de la miseria*: “Para dominarla mejor, la clase pudiente ha sobrerotizado los cuerpos de la miseria [...] El uso de ese fetichismo es sencillo y delirante: considerar los cuerpos de los jodidos como *algo comprable* y sobrerotizarlos para volverlos *apetecibles*” (72-73, my emphasis). As I previously suggested, being described as “desechable” turns these working class bodies into interchangeable market products to be used and thrown away. Blanco’s comment highlights the way the commoditization of these bodies further allows for appropriation but also desire. Their ability to be “purchased” and consumed makes them appealingly appetizing.

Franco’s novel about a female *sicaria* is an interesting switch to the common gender paradigm in which, as Mary Louis Pratt has explained, men are the perpetrators and women the victims.<sup>12</sup> This female focus is precisely what makes Franco’s text so unusual and appealing. In preparation for his novel, Franco interviewed young

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<sup>11</sup> Note how the attraction for these lower class bodies continues: “Desde esas planchas o terrazas de las comunas se divisa Medellín. Y de veras que es *hermoso*. Desde arriba o desde abajo, desde un lado o desde el otro, *como mi niño Alexis*. Por donde lo mire usted. Rodaderos, *basureros*, barrancas, cañadas, quebradas, eso son las *comunas*” (Vallejo 68, my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> In her study “Tres incendios y dos mujeres extraviadas: el imaginario novelístico frente al nuevo contrato social,” Mary Louis Pratt writes: “¿La violencia tiene sexo? Definitivamente sí. Tanto en la estadística como en el imaginario social, los agresores normativos son masculinos, los agredidos masculinos y femeninos. Y entre los agredidos, la categoría de víctima se reserva, como indica su género gramatical, prioritariamente para las mujeres, es decir los cuerpos hembras. (...) Los protectores contra la violencia también, dentro de la normatividad, son hombres. La violencia es un panorama radicalmente definido por el género, y en el cual los cuerpos hembras tienen estrecha definición” (91).

women in a correctional facility. As he notes in an interview, “Si la historia de Rosario parece violenta, comparada con lo que cuentan esas niñas parece un cuento infantil.”<sup>13</sup> Ironically, despite a male narrator Franco’s novel has become the emblem of the female *sicaria* experience.<sup>14</sup>

The glossary of *Violence in Colombia 1990-2000* defines a *sicario* as originally a hired teenage male assassin recruited from the poor neighborhoods around Medellín and trained (in some cases by foreign, including U.S. and Israeli, mercenaries) in the use of weapons and explosives (Berquist 287). Known as “los asesinos de la moto,” their killings of high profile politicians, of judges, of police officers, of university professors and political activists made them infamous. These hired youth assassins were not only used by the drug cartels, but also by “proper” citizens who wanted to eliminate threats, thus creating a market economy.<sup>15</sup>

Females also played an active role in contract killings. As Margarita Rosa Jácome Liévano has highlighted, Colombian authorities noted a significant increase in *sicaria* cases between 2003 and 2004: “las mujeres están pasando de simples colaboradoras del hampa a ser protagonistas de delitos. La forma de matar de ellas es más calculada. Matan con una sevicia única y son más difíciles de capturar, porque se caracterizan por no dejar pistas (Página judicial de *El Tiempo*, 17 de mayo de 2004).” Officials arrested the first *sicarias* on September 2, 2003 in Bogotá.<sup>16</sup> Reportedly on this day Jenny Liceth Agudelo (21 yrs old) and Sandra Milena Santo (20 yrs old)

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<sup>13</sup> Franco not only read Víctor Gaviría’s novel but also *No nacimos pa’ semilla* by Alonso Salazar and Fernando Vallejo’s *La virgen de los sicarios*. Additionally, Franco read a psychology thesis titled “La religiosidad en el sicariato.” See Jorge Consuegra, “Termina la era de García Márquez y se inicia la de Franco Ramos,” *Gaceta Iberoamericana* 5 Nov. 2007 <<http://gacetaiberoamericana.com/Issues/VolXINr3/lit3.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> The use of a male narrator also functions as a kind of containment of Rosario’s violence.

<sup>15</sup> Contract assassin killing became an institutionalized business mediated by local offices. As Ortíz Sarmiento explains, “*las oficinas* funcionan bajo la fachada de elegantes establecimientos comerciales legales, ubicados en distintos sitios de la ciudad pero especialmente en barrios de tradición burguesa, y reciben permanentemente hojas de vida de numerosos jóvenes que aspiran, como la gran oportunidad de su vida, a ser seleccionados” (62).

<sup>16</sup> Colombian magazine *Revista Dineros* reports the story in their July 2005 issue.

killed two men at point blank range in a cafeteria in Bogotá. The two young women entered the establishment; Jenny asked for a yogurt and Sandra requested a bathroom. They then proceeded to take out their guns and approach two men, Adrián Morales and César Andrés Botero, who were having a conversation. Both women fired upon them, shooting each in the head, and then calmly put away their guns and exited the building. Officials arrested the two women one hour after the shooting.

The case of Jenny Liceth Agudelo and Sandra Milena Santo is described inside an issue of *Revista Diners* wrapped in the image of Rosario Tijeras. The magazine cover features a frame from the film that accentuates the attractiveness of Rosario's physical body, filtered into black and blood red.<sup>17</sup> Rosario wears a skintight, low cut blouse that exposes her flat stomach, toned arms, and perky breasts. Her femininity is further communicated through her long hair, curvy body and large purse slung over her right shoulder. The grimy bathroom setting hints at her lower class background.



Figure 3.1: Front cover of *Revista Diners* (July 2005).

<sup>17</sup> This particular film frame is also the poster for the film.



Concurrently, her dominant pose captures the violence of her character. The angle of the frame forces readers to physically look up at a Rosario that stands proudly with her eyes lowered, her chin up, and her lips slightly parted. Lastly, the gun occupies the foreground, connected to her gaze by an outstretched arm; it is an extension of her body. With this image, “Cualquiera puede enloquecerse con Rosario” (Franco 23). Rosario stands as a desired and feared fantasy.

The iconic status of Rosario Tijeras and the allure of the femme fatale character contribute to the popularity and marketability of this poor body.<sup>18</sup> As previously stated, Blanco asserts that the working class body is overly eroticized by the dominant sector of society in order to make it *comprable* and *apetecible* (72-73). One glance at the film’s billboard makes apparent the association of eroticism with marketability: sex sells.<sup>19</sup> The billboard shows Rosario’s naked body stretched out on a bed. Emilio’s equally naked body embraces her from behind while he fondles her. The picture explicitly puts forward Rosario’s eroticized body as “purchasable” and attainable. The price of one movie ticket allows the viewer access to this body and the story it represents. Similarly, the image used by *Revista Diners* for their cover promotes the novel’s film adaptation but here the eroticization of Rosario’s body is subtler. Beyond being sexy and tempting, Rosario holds a menacing handgun. She is the seductive *and dangerous* beauty that is “veneno y antídoto a la vez. Al que quiere curar cura, y al que quiere matar mata” (Franco 25). The juxtaposition of violence with sexuality engages the reader/viewer. As Elizabeth Cowie asserts, the fantasy of a

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<sup>18</sup> The 2004 music hit “Rosario Tijeras” by Colombian pop singer Juanes further attests to this figure’s popularity and her commercialization as a femme fatale: “Era Rosario Tijeras, la de pistola, espejito y labial en su cartera siempre llena de vicio, sexo, balas, placer y dolor las de las mil y una vidas pam pam pam!”

<sup>19</sup> This billboard was used to promote the film in Mexico. The explicit nudity contained in the image prompted many Mexican citizens in Guadalajara to ask that the billboard be censored. See Juan José Olivares, “Ayuntamiento de Guadalajara intenta censurar el cartel de *Rosario Tijeras*,” *La Jornada*, 17 March 2006 <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/03/17/a11n1esp.php>>.

woman's dangerous sexuality can be as much a feminine fantasy as a masculine one; the femme fatale character affords "women roles which are active, adventurous and driven by sexual desire" (136). Part of Rosario's popularity comes from the adventure and/or fantasy her physique and attitude represent. For many readers/viewers, Rosario is the closest approximation they have to the real life *sicaria*. Her troubled life, whether on screen or on the page, makes her more accessible and realistic. The existence of an "antídoto" further makes possible this engagement.

The figure of Rosario Tijeras is "popular" as a commercialized product<sup>20</sup> but also as an element of *lo popular*. Here I am using the term *lo popular* to refer to that pertaining to or arising from *el pueblo*. Inside the pages of Franco's novel, the fictional slum dwellers of Medellín consider Rosario an idol. Graffiti on the walls announces, " 'Rosario Tijeras, mamacita' 'Capame a besos, Rosario T.' 'Rosario Tijeras, presidente, Pablo Escobar, vicepresidente' " (90). The working class idealizes her aggressiveness and action heroine qualities, which have earned her their respect and admiration. She is one of them: a working class woman who continually looks to survive. This reputation and fame in turn also creates new fictions about her identity: "Se comenzaron a crear historias sobre ella y era imposible saber cuáles eran las verdaderas. Las que se inventaban no eran muy distintas de las reales" (90). Ironically, even within fictional pages there are whisperings and doubts about the veracity of Rosario's actions.

Outside the novel's pages the figure of Rosario Tijeras continues to capture attention as a stand-in for reality. *Revista Diner*'s cover centers on Rosario, a fictional

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<sup>20</sup> In his article " 'Se vende Colombia: un país de delirio': el mercado literario global y la narrativa colombiana reciente" Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola suggests that literary works such as *Rosario Tijeras* (1999) "ya han establecido un nicho comercial para un tipo de best-seller basado en novelar las penurias sociales latinoamericanas y ofrecer personajes marginales aptos para el consumo masivo" (43). If we recall Blanco's notion of the "apetecible cuerpo de la miseria," perhaps this is another way the lower class figure has been made appealing and available for consumption to the upper class.

female killer, but the subtitle “En la realidad y en el cine: ¿por qué matan las mujeres” explicitly combines the real world with fiction. “Rosario Tijeras” is the featured story of this issue, but she is concurrently being used to discuss real life *sicarias*. In an interview Franco discusses Rosario’s representative force: “as a result of [the novel’s] publication, the Colombian media uses the label Rosario Tijeras when referring to girls who, like the protagonist, live from day to day, killing for hire and surviving in a world which buries them in drugs” (cited in Pobutsky 31). I must point out that the label “Rosario Tijeras” is not used with the understanding that she is a fictional character. The search for her tomb is an indication of that. Rather, the working class of Medellín sees her as a real life symbol of who they are. For María Luisa, a woman imprisoned for murder at the Buen Pastor penitentiary in Bogotá, Rosario Tijeras was not a film or literary character but her; she self-identified with Rosario.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, Mexican film critic Luis Tovar asserts that the working class youth proclaim Rosario as a reflection of them: “Rosario Tijeras somos todos nosotros.”<sup>22</sup> As Aldona Bialowska Pobutsky suggests, Rosario Tijeras “incarnates many things for many people, somehow capable of tapping into our subconscious baggage of myriad cultural references, popular myths, and individual recollections” (24). Our memory and imagination has allowed Rosario to step outside the fictional realm and come alive.

The opinions reflected by investigative authorities in *Revista Diner*’s news coverage of Jenny Liceth Agudelo and Sandra Milena Santo’s actions display stereotypical assumptions about these real life *sicarias*. Within the magazine’s pages, intelligence services admit their fear of these women: “Tienen una puntería infalible,

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<sup>21</sup> Fernando Gómez, “Flora Martínez,” *Rolling Stone Latinoamérica* 8 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.RollingStoneLA.com/726742>>.

<sup>22</sup> “Dicen que Rosario es un drama universal,” *El Siglo de Torreón* 8 Aug. 2005 <<http://www.elsiglodetorreon.com.mx/noticia/163550.dicen-que-rosario-tijeras-es-un-drama-univers.html>>.

son laberínticas, perspicaces, estrategas. Son las reinas del disimulo y tienen otras armas como la belleza y la seducción. Y cuando matan, no se arrepienten jamás.”<sup>23</sup>

Their characterization of these women as skilled, rather perfect assassins with no conscience is a projection of their ideas and beliefs; they have no way of knowing if these women ever repent. These women are portrayed using terms that rely on a particular and stereotypical idea of a woman who kills: the Hollywood image of a seductive and beautiful killer woman with no conscience. This *femme fatale* image further contrasts with an opposing stereotype expressed by a police analyst in the same article: “Las mujeres no levantan sospechas, y cada vez hay más huérfanas, viudas y mujeres solas que son tentadas para el delito. Ellas tienen especial talento para el crimen porque ponen en juego más astucia y disimulo que los hombres.”<sup>24</sup>

Instead of being beautiful seductresses, they are cast as susceptible, vulnerable women. The first part of the statement assumes that the women committing these acts are tempted because of their solitude. The second part again attributes women’s success to their ability to deceive. As “reinas del disimulo” or by exhibiting more “disimulo” than their male counterparts these women further partake in the creation of fiction, disguising or molding present reality into another story. The new stories that they reportedly weave allow investigators to declare: “¡Es tan difícil pensar que una mujer sea capaz de matar!”

The focus of Franco’s narrative on these marginal, disposable bodies of Medellín and their place within the *sicariato* phenomenon that violently impacted Medellín in the late 1980s and early 1990s, positions the novel *Rosario Tijeras* as an

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<sup>23</sup> Juan Diego Mejía, “Flora Martínez llega Rosario Tijeras,” *Revista Diners* July 2005 <<http://www.revistadiners.com.co/noticia.php3?nt=24847>>.

<sup>24</sup> These opinions echo the preconceptions I described in the introduction with respect to sociological and criminological studies.

exemplar of Latin America's modern *novela negra*.<sup>25</sup> The genre has its origins in 1920s North America, when Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and others, began to write "hard boiled" detective fiction that interrogated the social order, separating itself from classic detective fiction that focused on solving a particular crime. In the same way that the emergence of hard-boiled fiction in the U.S. coincided with a moment of multiple crises, absorbing the effects of the World War I, organized crime, and the Depression, Latin America's *novela negra* grew at a period of turmoil and took into account its own social realities. This popular and largely masculine genre stands as an ideal literary format through which to articulate the sordid details of a culture.

In his discussion of the evolution of the Latin American hard-boiled detective novel of the last two decades, Glen Close asserts the hardest boiled fiction of urban violence is being written with "virtually no mediation between the subjective position of the narrator/reader and that of the agents of violence in the text" (155).<sup>26</sup> He further explains a new abject subject has replaced the melancholic modern detective as the narrative subject, leaving behind a new type of reflection on urban violence:

What is left is the sharp, hard language, the sordid and sinister atmosphere, the plumbing of criminal underworlds, and the sensational narration of a violence no longer understood as a social transgression requiring investigation and punishment, but rather as a prevailing norm of behavior, a tool for survival, a fundamental instrument of power, and as an entertainment in itself. (156)

It is the evolution of this "sordid and sinister atmosphere," as it pertains to Colombia, that I am interested in contextualizing.

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<sup>25</sup> According to Glen Close, the "Spanish term derives from the French *roman noir*, and although one English translation would be 'hard-boiled detective novel,' the term is often equivalent to 'crime novel' " (144).

<sup>26</sup> In his list of texts Close includes the novel *Rosario Tijeras*. However, I would argue that Franco's additional use of a formula romance, which I will later discuss, offers that mediation within this violent sphere.

In the first half of the twentieth century Colombia's region of Antioquia, of which Medellín is the capital, was a center of economic opportunity, industrialism, and social stability. By the 1950s an influx of migrants and refugees displaced by the effects of *la Violencia* (1946-58), a period of violence and turmoil in Colombia's countryside, disrupted the social balance and transformed the spatial organization of the city. These migrants came to Medellín with little or no economic resources, in search of jobs and housing. However, neither the city's stagnating industry nor its constrained physical geography could accommodate this influx. Between the early 1950s and the late 1960s the city more than doubled its population while industrial jobs grew by only 4.1% a year.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the geographic constraint and housing shortage led to creation of new, illegal settlements on the peripheral slopes surrounding the central valley. In the 1960s and 1970s, 50% of all inhabitants in Medellín lived in these new precarious developments (Riaño 39). As unemployment further worsened between 1965 and the mid-1970s, the poor and their neighborhoods became associated with criminality and violence. Drug and theft rings organized, grew, and were exported to cities such as New York, Miami and Chicago. As Mary Roldán explains, "immigrants to the U.S. continued to maintain close ties to the working class neighborhoods they left behind in Medellín, creating a complex system of exchange and mutual support that would later also serve the narcotics industry as a distribution and laundering vehicle" ("Wounded" 132).

By the 1980s the drug cartel was well established and its success created new jobs, especially for youth.<sup>28</sup> The drug lords hired people as bodyguards, drivers,

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<sup>27</sup> See Mary Roldán, "Wounded Medellín" 137. In 1951, Medellín had 358,189 inhabitants, in 1964, 777,887 and in 1973, 1,071,252 (Jaramillo, Ceballos and Villa 1998).

<sup>28</sup> According to Riaño, "this generation of youth was facing the effects of a regional industrial and economic crisis, a more competitive labor market and a lack of economic opportunities, all of which combined to make the unemployment rate grow at a faster pace than anywhere else in the country. Between 1986 and 1992 in Medellín, 70 percent of the unemployed were under twenty-nine years old (Consejería Presidencial and EAFIT 1995)" (62).

*sicarios*, and as “mules” who could transport cocaine to the U.S. and Europe. The narcotics trade effectively produced an organized economy, based on hierarchy and traditional cultural values, that extended the possibility of social recognition and a better economic status to its participants, despite the illegal nature of their activities (Salazar 1998; Róldan 1999).<sup>29</sup>

Franco’s inclusion of this social and economic reality allows the reader to understand Rosario’s background; her victimization by society dates back to her origins:

La pelea de Rosario no es tan simple, tiene raíces muy profundas, de mucho tiempo atrás [...] sus genes arrastran con una raza de hidalgos e hijueputas que a punta de machete le abrieron camino a la vida, todavía lo siguen haciendo [...] Cambió el arma pero no su uso. El cuento también cambió, se puso pavoroso [...] Y Rosario lo ha soportado desde siempre, por eso el día en que nació no llegó cargando pan, sino que traía la desgracia bajo el brazo. (41)

Additionally, Rosario’s past draws not only interest but also sympathy for her. Orlando Mejía Rivera attributes the reader’s fascination with Rosario to the following: “el personaje logra una fuerza y una credibilidad tal, que se convierte, de manera paradójica, en una figura que genera cariño y simpatía, a pesar de su condición de asesina sin escrúpulos y de que jamás trata de justificar sus acciones ni sus decisiones” (261). Her social circumstances and personal nature allow her identity as a killer to be overlooked; she is a victim of her surroundings.

Rosario’s first act of violence is a direct response to her experiences. Rosario was raped repeatedly by one of her mother’s boyfriends at the age of eight. When confronted with Rosario’s account Doña Rubi, Rosario’s mother, denies the rape

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<sup>29</sup> In the novel Rosario explains Ferney and Johnefe’s involvement with the drug cartel, as well as her own: “Después de que probaron finura los ascendieron, les empezó a ir muy bien, cambiaron de moto, de fierros y le echamos un segundo piso a la casa. Así sí daban ganas de trabajar, todos queríamos que nos contrataran. A mí después también me reclutaron” (74).

claiming Rosario has a big imagination for a little girl (28). Only her *sicario* brother Johnefe is willing to protect her and avenge her attack by killing her first rapist. When Rosario is raped again at the age of thirteen by a member of a neighborhood gang she no longer needs her older brother to stand up for her; she has learned to defend herself. Six months later she spots her attacker and takes her revenge. Rosario lures her attacker into her mother's house, strips him naked, and in order to gain his trust she allows herself to be caressed and fondles him as well. When his guard is down she castrates him with her mother's scissors earning her the nickname "Tijeras."

These scissors should not be overlooked for their symbolic significance, especially within the context of violence and class conflict. Rosario has access to this instrument because of her mother's attempt to pursue economic security through sewing. The scissors, a symbol of a feminine working class trade, become not just an instrument of labor, but a ubiquitous tool of domestic survival: "Las tijeras eran el instrumento con el que [Rosario] convivía en diario: su mamá era modista. Por eso se acostumbró a ver dos o tres pares permanentemente en su casa; además, veía cómo su madre no sólo las utilizaba para la tela, sino también para cortar el pollo, la carne, el pelo, las uñas y con mucha frecuencia, para amenazar a su marido" (21). Rosario sees scissors as integral to one's income, presentation, sustenance, and defense. Unsurprisingly then, Rosario relies on this domestic working class tool to avenge her sexual assault and prevent any future attacks.<sup>30</sup> As Antonio points out, with this second rape Rosario learns that "la vida tenía su lado oscuro, y que ése le había tocado

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<sup>30</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, Serafina also relies on scissors, a domestic tool, when plotting her first unsuccessful attack on her ex-lover. In the case of Serafina the scissors are displaced from their normal location in the home and intended to cut flesh, rather than paper or cloth, creating an unfamiliar and unsettling new association. In contrast, Rosario's mother's use of scissors establishes them from the outset as a tool for cutting meat, making Rosario's reliance on this tool to avenge her attack less surprising. She has learned from a young age to associate scissors with the cutting of flesh.



a ella” (37). She responds by fighting back with the instruments she possesses: her sexuality and her mother’s scissors.

Rosario executes her killings as if against her own will, motivated by a force outside of her control: “pero lo que yo quiero que entiendan es que no es culpa mía, cómo les dijera, es como algo muy fuerte, más fuerte que yo y que me obliga a hacer cosas que yo no quiero” (Franco 178). Similarly, Miguel Cabañas underlines Rosario’s relative innocence when he signals the novel’s extenuating perspective: “la obra no excusa la actuación violenta de Rosario, sino la conceptúa como defensa propia” (19). Antonio’s point of view serves as an example. As he waits at the hospital for news of Rosario’s condition, Antonio contemplates her life. He feels compassion for this working class woman who was not afforded the same opportunities as him: “En la oscuridad de los pasillos siento la angustiosa soledad de Rosario en este mundo, sin una identidad que la respalde, tan distinta a nosotros...A Rosario la vida no le dejó pasar ni una, por eso se defendió tanto, creando a su alrededor un cerco de bala y tijera, de sexo y castigo, de placer y dolor” (15). Antonio believes Rosario’s actions can be attributed to the way life has treated her. As such, she deserves understanding and forgiveness rather than condemnation. He himself is “trying to understand the complexities of her existence and, in understanding, redeem her” (Reyes 89). Through its contextualization of Rosario’s actions, the novel presents Rosario as a victim of her circumstances, mitigating her criminal actions.<sup>31</sup>

Rosario’s story has always been a search for survival, but as our narrator explains, if one was to place a bet on Rosario’s fight with life, “con los ojos cerrados vería el final: Rosario va a perder” (27). Rosario is part of a working class sector of society “que ya no es incorporable”; they are “los sobrantes sociales, los *desechables*”

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<sup>31</sup> Valdivieso and Ibargüengoitia also attempt to mitigate the actions of the female killers they examine through a contextualization of the situation and their character.

(Walde 225). As the residue of society, their bodies hold little value. Additionally, Alonso Salazar explains that contract assassins like Rosario “turn life (their own and that of their victims) into a commodity to deal in, into a disposable object. In return, death has become part of everyday life. It has become normal to kill and be killed” (*Born to die*, 120). In this market economy the interchangeableness of life and death amidst a repetitive cycle of violence makes the body of the “laborer” disposable and replaceable. A dead *sicario* can be easily substituted with another.

Rosario’s physical body, lower class, miserable, changeable, and yet desirable, reflects the disposability of her existence. Largely, Franco’s narrative physically paints Rosario as exceptionally attractive. However, her body fluctuates with the effects of violence and drugs. When the reader first encounters Rosario, her body is bloody and punctured by a bullet. Her physical condition explicitly signals the violence and misery of her life. Rosario’s murders and resulting emotional distress are physically manifested in her fluctuating weight: “Cada vez que Rosario mataba a alguno se engordaba. Se encerraba a comer llena de miedo, no salía en semanas, pedía dulces, postres, se comía todo lo que se le atravesara” (20). Three or four months later she returns to her slender figure only to re-initiate the cycle with her next kill. The malleability of her body, its lack of constancy, positions her as part of an economic system of disposability. Rosario’s guilt over the murders she commits results in weight gain that expands the parameters of her shape. However, this newly created Rosario body is constantly being replaced with a slender one that will allow her to earn her living by seductively killing her next victim. Rosario’s beauty is also at times overwhelmed by the effects of drugs: “una vez la vi vieja, decrepita, por los días del trago y el bazuco, pegada de los huesos, seca, cansada como si cargara con todos los años del mundo, encogida” (19). At other times her agitated body accentuates her attractiveness. Antonio describes his encounter with a drugged Rosario:

Me la habían devuelto media después de la temporada de drogras en la finquita [...] Había dejado la puerta abierta y cuando entré la encontré mirando la lluvia, desnuda de la cintura hacia arriba, sólo con sus bluyines y descalza. Al sentirme se volteó hacia a mí y me miraron sus senos, sus pezones morenos electrizados por el frío. No la conocía así, tal vez parecida en la imaginación de mi sexo solo, pero así, tan cerca y tan desnuda. (130-131)

Rosario's exposed body reflects her misery and lower class vulnerability, which amplifies her physical sexuality to Antonio. It is not Rosario's arousal, but her lack of protection from external conditions that makes her nipples erect. Antonio sees Rosario simultaneously as fulfilling his sexual fantasies and as a wasted body. His description of Rosario continues: "derrumbada, abatida, demacrada [...] tan pálida, tan consumida, tan escasa de vida que no pude evitar imaginármela muerta" (131). Her own body, miserable yet desirable, alive yet deathlike, betrays her character's disposability and its liminality.

The novel's conclusion constitutes a shift in focus, from Rosario's survival to Antonio's coming of age story. Consider the following passage:

Fue ella la que nos desaferró de esa adolescencia que ya jóvenes nos resistíamos a abandonar. Fue ella la que nos metió en el mundo, la que nos partió el camino en dos, la que nos mostró que la vida era diferente al paisaje que nos habían pintado. Fue Rosario Tijeras la que me hizo sentir lo máximo que puede latir un corazón y me hizo ver mis despechos anteriores como simples chistes de señoras, para mostrarme el lado suicida del amor [...] (108-109)

The shift in the narrative suggests that the story in reality centers on Antonio rather than Rosario. Any transcendent meaning to Antonio's experiences with Rosario and more specifically to the stories addressing Colombia's social reality are to be found in the lessons learned by him and in his passage to adulthood (Shuru n.p.). From the outset of the novel, disguised as it may be, Antonio is narrating one piece of *his life*—his experience with Rosario. He functions as our mediator to Rosario and as his words declare, "Más que una palabra, Rosario era una idea que hice mía, sin títulos, ni

derechos de propiedad” (115). These assertions beg the question, if the story is really about Antonio and his lessons<sup>32</sup>, then why is Rosario so important? It is, after all, her name, not his, that the novel and the film bear.

Franco’s adoption and twisting of the formula romance makes Rosario desirable and the focus of our attention. Franco relies on the masculine *novela negra* to communicate a dark and grimy reality, but his narrative also steps outside the conventions of the genre; his feminine love story does not fit. As Salvador Faura and et al. explain, in contrast to the *novela negra* the *novela rosa* is assumed to be totally conformist and lacking merit, a perception born of the traditional gendering of the respective genres: while men write and read the *novela negra*, women write and read *rosa* (47). In *Rosario Tijeras* the reader finds the feminine world of the *novela rosa* juxtaposed with the masculine and violent world of the *novela negra*. The friction between these two narrative genres creates this focus on Rosario and feeds our fascination for her.

The romance market, traditionally classified as women’s literature, both epitomizes “low” culture for women and has vast paperback sales sector worldwide (Castillo 139). In Argentina this genre makes up 11% of the country’s book sales. “Es un número más interesante si tenemos en cuenta que la novela histórica representa 17.5% de las ventas de ficción,” declares Jorge González, commercial manager of Librerías Yenny- El Ateneo, a bookstore chain that sells 17,000 books of this genre a year. In Spain, the newspaper *La Vanguardia* affirms that in 2005 the *novela rosa* or romance novel, represented 7% of the Spanish literary market.<sup>33</sup> Despite its market sales, the *novela rosa* has received the same sort of critical condemnation as its

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<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, Franco’s decision to name the novel after Rosario, but narrate the love story from Antonio’s perspective, focusing on *his* emotions, echoes Colombian Jorge Isaac’s canonical and romantic novel *María* (1867). In both novels, the female character also dies at the end.

<sup>33</sup> Alejandra Rodríguez Ballester, “Apasionadas, románticas y vendedoras,” *Clarín* 2 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/2006/09/02/u-01263553.htm>>.

English counterparts (Mills and Boon or Harlequin novels). For example, Edward Stanton finds that within the *novela rosa*

The social, political, and economic infrastructure of society is virtually absent: the characters frequently exist in a historical vacuum. They are “flat” and poorly developed, types rather than individuals. Sudden psychological shifts can occur without rhyme or reason. The language is sentimental and riddled with clichés. (208)

Gonzalo Navajas equally comments on the *novela rosa*’s disconnection from reality:

“A la *novela rosa* la realidad referencial no le interesa más que como una materia semántica inicial sobre la que operar las modificaciones necesarias para la realización de sus premisas textuales” (365). In other words, any social reality functions as only a backdrop and reference point for the sentimental plot, but it is not an important narrative element.

Additionally, critics have condemned the romance novel for its formulaic structure. As Jean Franco explains, “The use of formulas—that is, ready-made plots and ready-to-hand symbols—is both a major feature of mass culture and the target of most of the critical attacks from academics and high culture critics” (184).<sup>34</sup> In her discussion of the romance novel, Tania Modleski defines the formula romance that occupies these works:

Each book averages approximately 187 pages, and the formula rarely varies: a young, inexperienced, poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced, wealthy man, older than herself by ten to fifteen years. The heroine is confused by the hero’s behavior since, though he is obviously interested in her, he is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal. By the end, however, all misunderstandings are cleared away, and the hero reveals his love for the heroine who reciprocates. (28)

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<sup>34</sup> Tania Modleski comments that both “high-art” critics and Marxist-oriented critics “have usually found it necessary when studying mass art to oppose it to high art, thereby demonstrating the political and/or aesthetic superiority of the latter” (110).

The game in a typical romance novel is limited to the single goal of trapping a man higher in social rank and wealth. The formula fiction of the *novela rosa* is also based on a series of features that Andrés Amorós identifies as follows: “El argumento se reduce, varias veces, al contraste entre la inexperiencia de ella y la gran experiencia de él”; “es la historia de una pobre huérfana a la que todos tratan mal”; “aparece el hombre que sabe comprender cómo es ella en realidad”; “el final es, inevitablemente, feliz” (58-59). In the end, the plots usually offer comfortable predictability although they may astonish us with sudden changes and contradictions.<sup>35</sup> The point of view is also almost invariably the woman’s because most readers of the genre have traditionally been female.

As for Franco’s novel *Rosario Tijeras*, Camila Segura Bonnett asserts, “los tonos rosas y sus tiradas melodramáticas” explain “el fenómeno editorial y literario en el que se convirtió la novela pocos meses después de haber salido a la venta” (118).<sup>36</sup> Franco adheres fairly closely to the traditional formula romance but in fact manipulates familiar elements of the genre: a young lower class woman (Rosario) becomes involved with two upper class men (Antonio and Emilio). Antonio and Emilio are confused by Rosario’s behavior since, though *she* is obviously interested in them, she is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal. In an interview about the novel *Rosario Tijeras*, Franco explains his novelistic approach: “yo quería hacer algo no sólo testimonial, entonces recurrí a mis dos temas favoritos: el amor y el mundo femenino. Puse como telón de fondo esa realidad y, en

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<sup>35</sup> Modleski cites the guidelines offered to prospective authors of Harlequin romances: “Harlequins are well-plotted, strong romances with a happy ending. They are told from the heroine’s point of view and in the third person. There may be elements of mystery or adventure but these are subordinate to the romance. The books are contemporary and the settings can be anywhere in the world as long as they are authentic” (35-36).

<sup>36</sup> The novel *Rosario Tijeras* sold out in two days and since then has sold more than 100,000 copies in Colombia alone -- unprecedented for any Colombian writer other than García Márquez. See Paternostro (2003).

primer plano, la historia de esta niña contada por su enamorado, que la lleva en sus brazos, moribunda.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Franco’s adoption of the formula romance reflects his desire to appeal to his favorite themes (love and the feminine world) but his manipulation of the genre’s elements further highlights the way Rosario’s character does not fit within a conventional format. As Antonio states, “Sus historias no eran fáciles. Las mías parecían cuentos infantiles al lado de las tuyas, y si en las mías Caperucita regresaba feliz con su abuelita, en las de ella, la niña se comía al lobo, al cazador y a su abuela, y Blancanieves masacraba a los siete enanos” (35). Rosario’s violent character stands out in this fantasy world.

Emilio’s relationship with Rosario suggests a variation on the rich boy/poor girl theme often evoked by the *novela rosa*. Both genres are traditionally “characterized by a central story of heterosexual love in which obstacles and intrigues plague the main couple who have to overcome these impediments and schemes to achieve happiness together. The two main characters usually have different socioeconomic origins; therefore, their love story is also about socioeconomic advancement” (Acosta-Alzuru 194). Emilio belongs to the “la monarquía criolla, llena de taras y abolengos (60), while Rosario represents the working class slums of the other Medellín. In preparation for her visit with Emilio’s family, Rosario attempts to cover her past. She buys an expensive outfit and has her hair done at the best salon. When Emilio introduces her to his family, his mother wrinkles up her nose as if Rosario had an unpleasant smell to her and refuses to engage with Rosario beyond her initial hello. The socioeconomic divisions are further highlighted by Doña Rubi’s comment: “Doña Rubi la previno de todo lo que le podía pasar con ‘esa gente’, le vaticinó que después que hicieran con ella lo que estaban pensando hacer, la

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<sup>37</sup> “El sicariato tiene cara de mujer,” *Clarín* 17 Oct. 1999  
<<http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/1999/10/17/e-01210d.htm>>

devolverían a la calle como a un perro y más pobre y más desprestigiada que una cualquiera” (64-65). Rosario and Emilio’s relationship would have to overcome these social biases to reach their happy ending. However, aspects of Rosario’s character complicate the traditional model. For one, the poor girl is not poor. Rosario holds as much money as Emilio (and Antonio) thanks to her involvement with the drug cartel. Additionally, Rosario is not a sweet and naive heroine. As she tells Antonio, if Emilio’s mother had spoken to her, “le hubiera arrancado la lengua con el cuchillo de la carne” (62).

According to Faura and et. al., “the pleasure of romantic fiction is chiefly derived from the narrative’s ability to negotiate and resolve the inequalities of power within gender relationships through the ideal of matrimony as a triumph over adversity” (46). Early on Emilio proposes to Rosario: “—Cásate conmigo, Rosario — le propuso Emilio. —¿Vos sos güevón o qué? —le respondió ella. —¿Por qué? ¿Qué tiene de raro? Si nos queremos. —¿Y qué tiene que ver el amor con el matrimonio?” (58). Rosario rejects Emilio’s marriage proposal understanding the union of both socioeconomic classes is not possible. So, what pleasure does the reader derive? I would suggest that the pleasure derived by the reader stems both from familiarity with the formula romance and from recognition of Franco’s manipulation of it.

Unlike traditional popular formula romances, the novel presents a *male* narrator, infected with the “maldita droga que los ingenuos llaman amor” (123), who struggles to declare his love.<sup>38</sup> Using rumors of Rosario’s infamous aggressiveness as a cover, Antonio suggests the possibility that he might be in love with her: “—Qué más dicen, parcero, contame más. —Puras güevonadas. Imaginate. Dizque yo ando enamorado de vos. —¡Eh! Ya no saben qué inventar—dijo ella y me mató (91-92). While whisperings of Rosario’s character and actions provide Antonio with the chance

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<sup>38</sup> This characteristic is more reflective of Latin America’s nineteenth century sentimental novels.



to hint at his love, Rosario's confessions of personal memories increase his desire to declare it. He feels jealousy when Rosario announces "they" have killed her only love (her brother), the only person that ever loved her. Rosario's comment about what Emilio's body has to offer in contrast to the *duros* pushes him to think, what about me? The following passage accentuates Antonio's turmoil and feminization:

¡El amor aniquila, el amor acobarda, disminuye, arrastra, embrutece!  
Una vez...me encerré en el baño de una discoteca y me di cachetadas hasta que se me puso roja la cara. ¡Zas! por güevon ¡Zas! por marica y ¡tenga! por gallina. Entre más me golpeaba más rabia sentía conmigo mismo, y más imbécil me sentí cuando tuve que esperar a que se me bajara el rojo de los cachetes para poder salir. (92)

His words indicate he realizes love's effects. Love has transformed him into a hysterical and irrational "woman." Antonio reveals his emotional and narrative crisis to the reader:

Yo también perdí el hilo. En cuestión de segundos no supe qué hacer con todas las palabras que imaginaba para ella. Palabras de amor que encadenaba mientras me dormía, y que preparaba para decírselas algún día bajo una luna, frente a una playa, en el tono marica y romántico que a ella tanto le molestaba. ¿De qué otra forma se puede hablar del amor? (78)

Central to these frequent displays is Rosario's dismissal of romantic love. She considers suffering for love a "güevonada" (99). She further states: "A mí no me gusta que me hablen contemplado. Si los hombres supieran lo maricas que se ven cuando se ponen de románticos" (77). The fascination with love of the typical romance heroine is absent from Rosario; her personality resists incorporation into a standard romance.

Rosario is "mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal" towards the men she loves. She calls them "maricas, maricones y güevones." When Emilio interrogates Rosario about her actions wishing to know what part of the rumors is true, Rosario coldly replies: "Seguramente la que te duele" (105). Her reply

causes Emilio to lose control, throwing chairs and breaking furniture. He reacts in a similar manner when both Antonio and he are confronted with Rosario's assassinations. Rosario kills a male acquaintance that dares to call her promiscuous in a crowded club. Neither men witness the murder but both become alarmed after she describes the incident: "No lo podíamos creer, lloramos del susto y del asombro. Emilio se desesperó como si él fuera el asesino, agarró los muebles a patadas...Más que afectarlo el crimen, lo que lo tenía fuera de sí era darse cuenta que Rosario no era un sueño, sino una realidad" (46-47). Their reaction prompts Rosario to insult them, calling them "[un] semejante par de maricas" (47). Rosario adopts the role traditionally assigned to men in formula romances. She is the "strong, experienced male" but her experiences (and actions) supersede any found in love stories.

On one occasion Rosario delves deeper into Antonio and Emilio's friendship interrogating Antonio. She asks him if he and Emilio have ever fought. When he replies no, Rosario insists: "¿Ni siquiera por una mujer?" (110). Again Antonio replies no and Rosario continues: "—Te imaginás parcero—remató—si a Emilio yo le pusiera los cachos con vos..." (110). Her suggestion ends with a decisive and yet unclear smile; she toys with Antonio. Throughout the novel Antonio repeatedly asks "¿Alguna vez te has enamorado?" This time Rosario's reply hurts: "Su respuesta fue en cambio una pregunta asesina, como todo lo suyo, que si no me mató sí me dejó mal herido...--Y vos, parcero, ¿alguna vez te has enamorado?" (174). In a low voice Antonio finally answers her question and Antonio's love for Rosario gets expressed. Rosario and Antonio sleep together, fulfilling Antonio's long awaited fantasy but Rosario's next comment shatters the dream. Rosario declares: "—Emilio lo tiene más grande que vos" (193) and remains silent. Antonio states, "Se quedó en silencio esperando mi reacción, pero como yo no entendí ese paso intempestivo del amor al odio, tardé en responderle" (193). Rosario aims to hurt Antonio. When he refuses to

remain the way she wanted to see him, hurt and fragile, and offers a clever response, Rosario gives him a look that puts an end to it. Antonio once again seeks the warmth of her body but Rosario brushes him off: “Mejor durmámonos, Antonio” (194). Her last words bring Antonio to tears: “Me puse la almohoda sobre la cara y lloré, me la apreté con fuerza...para morirme como quería en ese instante, junto a ella y después de haber tocado el cielo, muerto de amor...no poder vivir ya más con el desprecio” (194). Rosario ignores Antonio’s pain. Although she cares for Antonio, she is cold towards him. Lastly, Antonio announces, “Las tijeras son tus chimba, Rosario Tijeras” (195). His statement reflects the violence of Rosario’s character; it is not possible to establish a traditional sentimental relationship with her.

Not only is Rosario hurtful, cynical, she also takes Antonio and Emilio outside their comfort zone, which is part of the attraction. Rosario’s combination of brutality and beauty simultaneously shocks and attracts them. As Xochitl Shuru explains, “The threat of violence, the glimpse into a heretofore unknown world of abuse, and the constant display of marginalia, all contribute to the erotic appeal that Rosario holds for both men” (n.p.). Antonio repeatedly emphasizes the danger in Emilio’s relationship with Rosario. As if her own violence was not enough, her previous relationship with another *sicario* places Emilio in a precarious situation: “Pero tengo que admitirlo: yo tuve más miedo que Emilio, porque con ella no se trataba de gusto, de amor o de suerte, con ella la cosa era de coraje. Había que tener muchas güevas para meterse con Rosario Tijeras” (24). Emilio has the courage to become involved with Rosario. Antonio joins them for the guaranteed adventure her marginal body provides.

The “unknowability” of Rosario, typical of a formula romance novel, allows her to exist between an intersection of fiction and reality. Antonio’s quest to know Rosario is a driving force in the narration; he asks, “¿De qué estás hecha, Rosario Tijeras?” (100). Descriptions of Rosario’s character display her incongruous and

mysterious nature: “Eso es algo que nunca entendí de Rosario, la contradicción entre las canciones románticas que le gustaban y su temperamento violento y su sequedad para amar” (88). Simultaneously callous and vulnerable, rational and reckless, Rosario makes it difficult to say who exactly she is. Antonio questions her exact age explaining, “le oímos decir que veintidós, que veinticinco, después otra vez que dieciocho, y así se la pasaba, cambiando de edad como de ropa” (19). Equally perplexing are the rumors that surround her. When Rosario asks Antonio what is said about her, he replies: “Que has matado a doscientos, que tenés muelas de oro...que también te gustan las mujeres, que orinás parada...que sos un hombre, que tuviste un hijo con el diablo...Qué tal que todo fuera verdad” (91). Rosario answers that only half of the rumors are true but does not specify which ones. She allows the mystery and doubt surrounding her identity to continue. Additionally, she has the power to persuade: “Tenía la habilidad del convencimiento sin tener que recurrir a muchas patrañas, pero si surgía alguna duda sobre su ‘verdad’, apelaba al llanto para sellar su mentira con la compasión de las lágrimas” (23). Rosario’s complex personality and manipulative quality frustrates any attempt to precisely define her; she is an unknowable creature.

Part of Rosario’s unknowability comes from her foreignness. Rosario’s physical description marks her as unfamiliar. Antonio recalls his first “sighting” of Rosario at the discotheque Acuario.

Del humo y las luces que prendían y apagaban...emergió Rosario como una Venus futurista, con botas negras hasta la rodilla y plataformas que la elevaban más allá de su pedestal de bailarina, con una minifalda plateada, y una ombliguera de manga sisa y verde neón; con su piel canela, su pelo negro, sus dientes blancos, sus labios gruesos, y unos ojos que me toco imaginar porque bailaba con ellos cerrados. (96)

The scene describes Rosario emerging from the smoke like a futuristic Venus, denoting her beauty, but also suggesting her other-worldliness. The fluorescent colors

of her silver miniskirt and skimpy neon green top differentiate her from the rest, creating an image reminiscent of science fiction films; a extraterrestrial woman in a sexy space suit descending from her space craft amid smoke and lights. Rosario's clothing reveals her sexually alluring body but also uncovers another marker of her foreignness: her *desechable* brown body.<sup>39</sup>

The otherworldly imagery of Rosario's origins is reinforced in passages regarding her home. As Antonio waits at the hospital for news of Rosario's condition he stares at the distant location from which Rosario once came down. He recalls her words:

--Mirá bien donde estoy apuntando. Allá arriba sobre la hilera de luces amarillas, un poquito más arriba quedaba mi casa. Allá debe estar doña Rubi rezando por mí.

--Yo no vi nada, sólo su dedo estirado hacia la parte más alta de la montaña, adornado con un anillo que nunca imaginó tener, y su brazo mestizo y su olor a Rosario. (12)

The scene combined with Rosario's futuristic Venus description positions Rosario a foreigner from another world. Rosario stands in front of Antonio pointing to a distant place and calling it home. The spatial distance makes it seem like she's signaling at a location in the sky; a place referred to by Antonio as the city "de las lucecitas" (49).

Antonio describes his first encounter with this new space: "Cuando llegamos a la parte baja de su barrio, comenzó a guiarme. Ya estábamos en el laberinto, en tierra extraña, sólo quedaba seguir instrucciones...Después, todo fue estupefacción ante el paisaje, desconcierto ante los ojos que seguían nuestro ascenso" (52). Rosario serves as Antonio's guide through this strange and bewildering land.

Besides being portrayed as a foreigner, Rosario is also presented as an infectious disease. She causes Antonio to feel "mariposas en el estómago, el frío en el

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<sup>39</sup> According to Aldona Pobutsky, "in an interview conducted by Canchón, [the actress] Flora Martínez says that her skin color will be darkened to approximate her more to Rosario. This fact foregrounds the importance the director and Franco himself (who participated in writing the script for the movie) pay to the heroine's darker complexion as an indicator of her background"(33).

pecho, la debilidad en las piernas, la desazón, el temblor en las manos, el vacío, las ganas de llorar, de vomitar” (184). Rosario’s otherworldliness further infects Antonio and Emilio’s dress and physical appearance. Both men adopt the style of members of Rosario’s *combo*:

Primero fue el pelo, nos lo dejamos bien cortico y con unas colas más discretas, después nos enrollamos maricaditas en las muñecas y nos forramos en bluyines viejos, en las rumbas intercambiábamos las camisetas, y así fue como a mi armario fue a parar la ropa de Fierrotibio, Charli, Pipicito, Mani y otros. (70)

Antonio and Emilio’s new appearance makes them look like they come from Rosario’s world.

As Shuru suggests, “unknown details of Rosario’s identity [...] point to how Rosario resists incorporation into standard conceptual and social frameworks that contribute to the formation of a recognizable social being” (n.p.). Rosario’s lack of a legitimate surname denies her upward social mobility within a traditional social strata. Despite her recently acquired economic means, Emilio’s upper-class family considers Rosario inferior. She has no identity “que la respalde, tan distinta a nosotros...con apellidos que producen muecas de aceptación y hasta perdón por nuestros crímenes” (15). Unlike Emilio or Antonio, Rosario does not possess a family lineage that can save her. Her identification with a nickname rather than a proper last name highlights her marginalization; rather than being an abstract label of status, her name recalls a mundane household object. Rosario did not choose the name *Tijeras* but it was chosen for her: “Le cambiaron su apellido, contra su voluntad y causándole un gran disgusto, pero lo que ella nunca entendió fue el gran favor que le hicieron los de su barrio, porque en un país de hijos de puta, a ella le cambiaron el peso de un único apellido, el de su madre, por un remoquete” (14). Ironically, the same nickname that marginalizes her affords her protection and fame within her violent surroundings because as she herself states, “Con solo el nombre asusto” (15). In her world,

Rosario's self-made reputation, in addition to the violent potential of scissors, lends weight to her surname

Her class condition further denies her recognition as a real citizen. In their introduction to *Cities and Citizenship*, James Holston and Arjun Appadurai explain that since the eighteenth century two linked concepts of association—citizenship and nationality—have been used to establish the meaning of full membership in society (1). But as Carlos A. Jáuregui and Juana Suárez assert “Propiamente hablando, el ‘desechable’ es el opuesto constitutivo de la nacionalidad” (368). As I previously explained the face of the typical violent subject (or criminal *other*) became that of a young working class person, qualified as “suicida y desechable.” The label “desechable” classifies working class youth like Rosario, as market serial products carrying little value as individuals. Instead, the “‘desechables’ son identificados por el ciudadano pleno con los residuos, y consecuentemente ubicados más allá de la mirada, en los confines o ‘tugurios’ de la representación y el reconocimiento social” (Jáuregui and Suárez 368). Society's identifiable citizens, members of the dominant class, deny these working class youth recognition as valued bodies of society. Like the scissors from which she takes her name, Rosario, as a “desechable” constitutes a mass-produced serial product that does not comply with the expectations of a citizen.

The love story that began as a novel appeared just six years later on the big screen in 2005. Director Emilio Maillé's film *Rosario Tijeras*, an adaptation of Jorge Franco's novel, maintains the novel's essence and non-linear plot but is, as a film critic states, “una mezcla de tiempos, lugares, situaciones y personajes que no ayudan al espectador, lo obligan a adivinar lo que está pasando, sin que los caracteres profundicen, ni el transcurso social y económico asome lo suficiente.”<sup>40</sup> What the

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<sup>40</sup> Alberto López Duque, “La pistola de Rosario,” *Prensa Latina* 25 Oct. 2007  
<<http://www.prensalatina.com.mx/Article.asp?ID=%7B65BF4AC9-3D29-4176-BCE6CAC82510DC1E%7D&language=ES>>.

film does make clear is its dedication to the love story. In an interview about the film Jorge Franco states, “Ante todo, coincidimos en que se trataba de una historia de amor, no de narcos ni de sicarios.”<sup>41</sup> Unsurprisingly, the film relegates the turbulent violence of Escobar’s era to a secondary role emphasizing instead the love triangle and Rosario’s seductiveness. As Pobutsky has suggested, Rosario’s body, her soul and her vicissitudes seem to be the center of the story (Rev. 206-207). I will discuss the way the film conveys this female killer’s vulnerability and struggles with love, in effect softening her image and invoking compassion.

Rosario’s real weapon is her (well-known and literal) killer body. The gun she uses is an extension of her own body, which in turn takes on characters of that gun. An iconic scene that portrays Rosario’s mature and seductive style of assassination exemplifies this theme. Rosario is escorted into the livingroom of a druglord who she knows but was not expecting her. He watches her intently as she deliberately removes her black purse and red leather jacket, revealing her slender frame in a low-cut black leather vest that exposes her midriff, and strides across the room to get herself a drink. The druglord comments on her beauty and looks up at her admiringly as she stands next to him, statuesque. They talk briefly and Rosario kisses him, then she retreats to the balcony, allowing him to follow. The two embrace, kissing and talking, until she fires a single round into his stomach. He falls out of her embrace and out of frame. We are left with the lingering image of Rosario standing with her gun in one hand nestled between her legs. Finally, she slowly and tenderly secures the gun in the front of her pants and the image fades out. That the gun is not visible when he is killed suggests Rosario’s body is the real weapon. When the gun appears it is part of her sexual body; she positions it over her vagina and embraces the weapon. The gun

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<sup>41</sup> Franco collaborated in the film’s production as an advisor for screenwriter Marcelo Figueras. See López Duque (2005).



should not be interpreted as phallic, it is not protruding, penetrating, or masculine, but as an intimate and distinctly feminine part of herself.

The gun resurfaces as an extension of her body in a scene between Emilio and Rosario. Upon returning to Rosario's home after a night out Emilio asks her, "¿A qué hueles?" Rosario responds: "¿A qué huelo? Huelo a esto." She pulls out her gun and points it to Emilio's face, nudging his chin and pushing him back. She continues, "¿Ahora que ves? ¿Ahora que ves cuándo me ves?" Emilio's words express understanding for Rosario: "Veo a alguien que hace cosas raras pero que en el fondo no quiere hacerlas." This infuriates Rosario and she softly snarls, "Vos nunca, nunca, vas a entender que hago. Así que contentate con lo que te hago a vos." Emilio tempers her anger by moving his lips past her gun, kissing down her arm and embracing her. Rosario's body and gun are interchangeable; she smells of gunpowder and treats the gun as an extension of her arm. Furthermore, her gun is again linked to her sexuality. Emilio must seduce her beginning with her gun. With his caresses Rosario reveals her rough behavior to be a facade and welcomes his affection.

Rosario's reluctance to permit greater emotional attachment is further explored in the following two scenes, which highlight Rosario's use of her sexuality as a defense mechanism. Rosario stands naked smoking by a window when Emilio asks, "¿Qué fue lo que pasó en la discoteca? ¿Fuiste vos la que disparó? Te pregunto porque todo el mundo te vio conmigo." Rosario coldly replies, "Mira Emilio no sabes nada de mí. Esa es tu protección." Emilio continues to look for answers: "Mi protección. ¿Por qué no me puedes decir la verdad? Decidme algo." As if suddenly feeling vulnerable, Rosario puts on a shirt, her expression saddens and she pauses, silently contemplating how to respond. Finally, she approaches Emilio who repeats his previous request: "Decidme algo mamacita, decidme algo." Rosario sits down on the bed next to him, places her hand on his crotch and begins to caress him: "Lo que vos y

yo tenemos no pasa por las palabras. Si quieres conservarlo, respeta mi silencio.”

Rosario sexually engages Emilio in order to stop his inquiries; she refuses to allow him into that part of her world. Rosario again attempts to distract Emilio from his inquiries in another scene. When Emilio first visits Rosario’s apartment he declares, “Así que está es tu casa.” Rosario replies, “Pues sí, yo vivo acá. Sí. Pero nada de lo que ves acá es mío. La mayoría de las cosas estaban aquí cuando me pasé. No es muy Rosario que digamos ¿o sí?” Rosario’s question prompts Emilio to comment and ask, “No sé. No sé muy bien, ¿quién sos vos? ¿Cómo sos cuando no estás conmigo?”

Rosario asks him to respect the rules they’ve given each other but Emilio does not think he can. She pauses, contemplating how to respond, and begins to unbutton her dress. Rosario stands up, sweeping aside her dress to reveal her alluring body, looks at him suggestively and purrs, “Así estamos bien. Yo te doy todo lo mío y vos me das todo lo tuyo.” She embraces Emilio and kisses him softly. The camera watches Rosario as she slowly strides towards the bedroom, pausing to look back at Emilio/the viewer invitingly. The film is explicit in its portrayal of Rosario’s sexuality and ability to seduce the characters and the viewer. Rosario’s sexual power is evident but in these cases she uses this power in a defensive manner to shield her relationship with Emilio from her other life as a *sicaria*.

The scene that best portrays Rosario’s vulnerability and love is her sexual encounter with Antonio. Antonio arrives at Rosario’s country home and discovers Rosario sitting outside in the rain wearing only a pair of jeans. He carries her inside and covers her with a blanket. Rosario is pale and strung out on drugs. As he holds her, Antonio notices the scars on Rosario’s forearm and asks “¿Quién te hizo esto?” Rosario replies, “Voy a dejar de ser mala.” The scars are from her self-inflicted penance; in a variant from Rosario’s binge eating in Franco’s novel, Rosario physically reflects her discomfort with her own violence by cutting herself after every

kill. After Antonio shelters and comforts her, Rosario lies on the floor in a t-shirt and blanket, resting her head on a pillow and looking lovingly at him sleeping in a chair. Antonio wakes up and Rosario tells him, “Me gustan estos huesos tuyos de acá” pointing to her own collarbone. She continues softly, “No sabía lo que era estar alegre hasta que un día me di cuenta que me dolía la cara de tanto sonreirme. Y que me latía el corazón duro cada vez que oía la persona que quería.” Rosario half sits up and innocently looks into Antonio’s eyes. He stares back at her and slowly leans in to kiss her. She tenderly kisses him and tells him with teary eyes, “Antonio, tú me diste lo que nadie me dio.” This sweet and innocent interaction contrasts with Rosario’s earlier relationships with other men. Instead of using her aggressive sexuality to kill, to derive carnal pleasure or to fend off emotional intimacy, Rosario opens herself to real love. Instead of drawing a man close with her physical body, she draws him to her through an emotional connection. This sweet and innocent Rosario continues through the next day until she is separated from her love. The scene is a conventional tragic and sweet love story, which contrasts with the harshness of the novel. The novel concludes with the impression of Rosario’s inability to show love and the castrating effect she has on men. The film is unable to conclude on such a note but fits Rosario into a character arc that brings her from an unknowable, sexually powerful killer to a fragile woman finding the capacity to love but unable to escape her past.

The film adapts the figure “Rosario Tijeras” into a vulnerable femme fatale but this image is one of many. The *desechable* Rosario of the *novela negra*, the *deseable* Rosario of the *novela rosa*, the real life “Rosarios” described by the popular press, and the mythical Rosario whose tomb is sought after by true believers all co-exist as different interpretations of a female killer born of the slums of Medellín.

## CHAPTER 4

### POLITICS AND VIOLENCE: FEMALE “KILLERS” IN ACTION

Unlike the previous chapters in which a woman’s perpetration of violence was largely due to more personal circumstances, this section explores society’s perception of a woman who has committed acts of violence for a political cause. According to David Apter, “Political violence disorders explicitly for a designated and reordering purpose: to overthrow a tyrannical regime; to redefine and realize justice and equality; to achieve independence or territorial autonomy; or to impose one’s religious or doctrinal beliefs” (5).<sup>1</sup> Within this context the combative woman stands in as a social and political subject, disrupting traditional notions of femininity by taking up arms and problematizing the perception of her actions by linking her violence to a political purpose.

This chapter explores women’s participation in political violence through an examination of the case of Nora Astorga, a Sandinista *guerrilla* fighter. The first part of this chapter analyzes Gioconda Belli’s novel *La mujer habitada* (1988). Although the novel is not a direct re-interpretation of Astorga’s character and her actions, the text’s protagonist Lavinia embodies elements of Astorga and Belli’s experience with the Movimiento, offering a portrait of bourgeois women’s involvement in political violence. I argue Belli’s construction of her main character does not allow her to be read as a killer despite her shooting of the general. Instead, Belli casts her as a sacrificial soldier, one who is willing to give her life for this new imagined nation. It is Lavinia’s willingness to sacrifice herself for her country that lends legitimacy to her violence, rewriting it in positive terms, and allowing her to be embraced as part of that

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike the term terrorism, political violence carries a value neutral connotation and does not deliberately target civilians to attain political aims (Whaley Eager 1-2).

national history. The second part of this chapter centers on the U.S. media's representation of Astorga as a femme fatale, a Mata Hari, and a Marlene Dietrich persona. Through these archetypal figures the U.S. media negotiates Astorga's involvement in armed combat, restricting her identity and capacities as a diplomat while exaggerating her threat as a treacherous woman. However, as I show, the missing piece to that image is Astorga's identity as a mother. Inside Nicaragua her violence and resistance coincide with a discourse of "combative motherhood" as promoted by the Sandinistas.

This last chapter most closely resembles Josefina Ludmer's model of women who kill, detailed in her chapter "Mujeres que matan" and discussed briefly in the introduction to this dissertation. In her analysis female characters, depicted as mothers and virgins, kill men of power and influence:

--matan en 1896 a los futuros *médicos* que inventan la histeria [...] en la *nouvelle* policial, eliminan de raíz al poder científico que acompaña al estado liberal;  
--matan en 1936 al que representa, en el teatro del espejo, al *dictador latinoamericano* que quiere dominar el mundo;  
--matan en el otro cuento "realista y social" de los años cuarenta *al patrón de la fábrica* en huelga en los años veinte;  
--matan *al policía* de los años treinta en "el folletín" de los años sesenta,  
--matan *al político* corrupto del PRI de los años veinte en la nueva novela histórica de los años ochenta [...] (372)

The victims of Lavinia and Astorga fit Ludmer's profile; they are representatives of the dictatorship. Moreover, both female figures rely on their "signos femeninos" to accomplish their task. Lavinia takes advantage of the general's preconceptions of women as simple and sexual beings to avoid suspicion while Nora utilizes her "feminine wiles" to lure Pérez Vega into a trap. As Ludmer has written, "Las que matan en los cuentos actúan 'signos femenino' [...] y a la vez les aplican una torsión, porque se valen de los

‘signos femeninos’ de la justicia, como el de ‘mujer honesta,’ para burlarse y para postularse como agentes de una justicia que está más allá de la del estado” (371-371). Lavinia/Astorga’s actions challenge a retrograde gender/political relationship that is based on a patriarchal family state. They *perform* feminine attributes in order to commit a violent act that violates gendered societal expectations, and significantly, their violence functions to undermine patriarchal political authority. As Ludmer notes, those men who represent “modernization” are eliminated by women who prove to be more modern than they (373).

In this first novel Gioconda Belli communicates the struggles experienced by a woman as she awakens to the oppressive forces, the injustice and violence that mark her country. The text is semi-autobiographical, reflecting Belli’s own involvement with the Sandinista movement. Belli joined the FSLN in 1970 and formed part of the underground resistance in Nicaragua until her participation in the Sandinista assault on the Castillo home in December 1974 forced her into exile, first to Mexico and later to Costa Rica. During her exile, she continued to be active in communications and logistic operations. After the Sandinista’s victory in 1979 Belli returned to Nicaragua and held various government positions, working primarily in communications, journalism and public relations.

The novel narrates the story of Lavinia Alarcón, a 23-year-old upper middle-class architect living in Faguas (a fictitious name for Nicaragua), and rebelling against her parents’ social expectations. She falls in love with Felipe, a fellow architect who is secretly involved with the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, and is gradually drawn into the activities of the organization. During this time her architectural firm asks her to design plans for General Vela’s mansion. By way of this project Lavinia becomes the Movimiento’s conduit of information about Vela’s habits and his family.

Gradually Lavinia learns through bits of information that the organization is planning a covert operation. However, it is not until Felipe is gravely wounded and asks her to take his place, a day before operation Eureka, that Lavinia discovers that the target will be Vela's new mansion. She joins the other *guerrilleros* in the taking of Vela's home and dies heroically as she shoots General Vela.

Operation Eureka, which in the novel occurs on December 20, 1973, is based on the assault on the home of José María Castillo. This is an operation in which Belli provided logistical support. On the night of December 27, 1974, FSLN guerrillas seized the home of this former government official during a holiday party and took as hostages a handful of leading Nicaraguan officials, many of whom were relatives of Somoza.<sup>2</sup> With this successful occupation, the FSLN negotiated the release of 14 political prisoners, \$1 million in ransom, a lengthy radio statement, and a flight to Cuba. The success of this operation gained national and international attention for the Sandinistas and an upsurge in popular support, making them a larger threat to the Somoza regime.

Running parallel to Lavinia's political awakening is the story of Itzá, a sixteenth century Indian *guerrillera*, whose spirit inhabits the orange tree in Lavinia's patio. Itzá fought the Spanish conquistadores alongside her warrior-lover Yarince five hundred years earlier and died at the hands of these invaders. Her spirit comes to penetrate Lavinia's body by means of a glass of orange juice from Lavinia's tree. While she cannot control Lavinia's life, Itzá can transmit certain images of her past: "Sé que habito su sangre como la del árbol" (112). Her discourse consists of observations of Lavinia and a series of anecdotes about her own experiences as a woman. Laura Barbas-Rhoden suggests, "She is the actant that lends mythological

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<sup>2</sup> Leticia Herrera, Olga López Avilez, and Eleonora Rocha, were among the FSLN members who participated in the occupation. See Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (1996): 492.

legitimacy to the guerrilla struggle, just as the figure of Sandino did in the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua [...] a mythical antecedent for the struggle of the modern guerrillera” (63). It is her spirit that helps Lavinia find the courage to take action against the violence and oppression that permeates her country.

Lavinia’s social transformation begins when she is confronted with a wounded member of the Movimiento. Felipe arrives at her home before dawn with Sebastián, a fellow comrade, who was shot while escaping from the National Guard. Upon the sight of this bloody man, Lavinia feels terror and confusion:

Vio la piel en carne viva, la sangre manando roja, intensa, indetenible. Imágenes dispersas acudieron a su mente; películas de guerra, heridas de bala. El lado oscuro de Faguas apareciendo en su casa, inesperado, intempestivo [...] Entendió, finalmente, las llamadas misteriosas de Felipe, sus salidas. No podía ser otra cosa, pensó, sintiendo el terror subirle por el cuerpo, tratando de tranquilizarse pensando que no debía saltar a conclusiones tan rápidamente. ¿Pero por qué, si no, habría tenido Felipe que traer ese hombre a su casa? Los reproches, el miedo, la invadía en oleadas, mientras miraba hipnotizada la herida, la sangre; esforzándose para contener el mareo, las ganas de vomitar. (62-63)

Lavinia’s visceral reaction betrays her level of shock and difficulty in absorbing her surrounding reality. Sebastián’s bleeding arm marks the oppression occurring around her and challenges the comfort and security of her upper middle-class background. The context of Sebastián’s wound, three men relinquished their lives so that he could survive and continue the political fight, also defines Lavinia’s first impression of the Movimiento: an organization full of heroic sacrifice and idealism, but ultimately irrational. As Lavinia explains, “Una cosa era su rebelión personal contra el *status quo*, demandar independencia, irse de su casa, sostener una profesión, y otra exponerse a esta aventura descabellada, este suicido colectivo, este idealismo a ultranza” (70-71). The incident with Sebastián sets the stage for Lavinia’s eventual reconciliation between her admiration for the participants’ willingness to make



sacrifices and her understanding of their motivations through her own political awakening.

Flor functions as a mentor for Lavinia throughout this awakening. It is through this revolutionary nurse that Lavinia delves further into the organization and it is she who ultimately administers to Lavinia the oath of commitment. In her search for understanding Lavinia visits Flor and asks, “¿Y vos cómo llegaste a decidir ser lo que sos?” (116) Flor’s reply suggests the Movimiento was her salvation. Her uncle raped her and for many years she lived a self-destructive, promiscuous life full of self-hatred. Sebastián, a soldier of the revolution, was the one that rejected her sexual advances and instead opened her eyes to the damage she was causing herself. In a moment of danger, when the army attacks a university rally, he further trusts her with his safety by asking her to hide his pistol, knowing she could turn him in to the authorities. After this, Sebastián convinces her to collaborate fully with the Movimiento and leave her past life. Flor assumes a collective identity and comes to believe each individual is ultimately responsible for his or her path: “Cada uno de nosotros carga con lo propio hasta el fin de los días. Pero también construye [...] El terreno es lo que te dan de nacimiento, pero la construcción es tu responsabilidad” (235). The Movimiento offers her an ethical and moral framework similar to that found through organized religion.

Lavinia’s initial recognition of the importance of sacrifice in the Movimiento is reinforced throughout her experience with the organization. Upon reading the Movimiento’s program she describes the revolutionaries as “Cristos modernos [...] dispuestos a ser crucificados por difundir la buena nueva...pero no dispuestos a fallarse entre sí” (124). The comparison to Christ implies Lavinia sees the revolutionaries as self-sacrificing and loyal beings. Given her description, it is no surprise “[que] le costara imaginar a Sebastián, Flor o Felipe disparando” (198). The virtue of the

revolution and its soldiers does not lie in their ability to inflict violence on others, but in being disposed to surrender themselves for the advancement of their cause.

Moreover, as Kathleen March has suggested, “any actions of the revolutionaries which cause death are not to be interpreted as violent aggression, but as resistance or as unnatural acts imposed upon those carrying them out (153). In this manner Belli paints a sympathetic portrait of the revolution and its armed struggle against injustice.

The separation of the revolutionaries (more specifically Lavinia) from the acts of violence is furthered by Itzá’s inhabitation of Lavinia. In her construction of the revolution as an act of liberation, Belli makes an explicit association between the modern struggle against the dictatorship and the indigenous resistance during the Conquest through these two women. By inscribing Lavinia within the mythology of this indigenous female warrior, Lavinia’s relationship with violence is tempered. Itzá is an impulsive and forceful influence on Lavinia. She further introduces images of violence into Lavinia’s subconscious. As the novel progresses, Lavinia dreams of “guerras y hombres y mujeres morenos” (112), involuntarily draws bows and arrows on her architectural sketch-pad, and even speaks unconsciously of Yarince. She is impelled to act by an external agent. Consider the dream Lavinia has while undergoing *guerrilla* training in the mountains: “Soño que estaba con un vestido de grandes flores blancas y amarillas en un lugar como una fortaleza. Tenía en la mano una pistola extraña que parecía cañón en miniatura. Desde atrás, una mujer con trenzas le ordenaba disparar” (276). The figure in the dream propelling Lavinia’s resistance by calling on her to fire can be interpreted as Itzá (Barbas-Rhoden 63). The mythical warrior woman Itzá takes primacy of the violent side of the revolutionary soldier, allowing Lavinia to take ownership of the self-sacrificing aspects of the revolutionary soldier.

As part of Lavinia's revolutionary development she must abandon what she has been taught, to think of herself as "el centro del mundo, el principio del universo"(231), and adopt a collective identity. Flor explains to Lavinia at the beginning of her training: "Hoy empieza tu tiempo de sustituir el 'yo,' por el 'nosotros' " (143). However, Lavinia's social class deters others from accepting her. In one scene, Lavinia sits in the waiting room of a public hospital while doctors attempt to save the life of her maid Lucrecia, the victim of a bungled abortion. As she waits, made uncomfortable by the stares of others, she lowers her gaze and scrutinizes the feet of the people around her: varicose veins on feet, toes protruding from holes cut out of the shoes; chipped violet polish on rough brown toes; the worn-out soles of a man's shoes. The contrast of their feet to hers reflects the distance between them. Guilt ridden over her own beautiful white feet, Lavinia fears she will never be accepted:

Ella se había comprometido a luchar por los dueños de los pies toscos, pensó. Unirse a ellos. Ser una de ellos. Sentir en carne propia las injusticias cometidas contra ellos. Esa gente era el 'pueblo' del que hablaba el programa del Movimiento. Y, sin embargo, allí, junto a ellos en la sala de emergencia sucia y oscura del hospital, un abismo los separaba. La imagen de los pies no podía ser más elocuente. Sus miradas de desconfianza. Nunca la aceptarían, pensó Lavinia. ¿Cómo podrían aceptarla alguna vez, creer que se podía identificar con ellos, no desconfiar de su piel delicada, el pelo brillante, las manos finas, las uñas rojas de sus pies? (176)

Lavinia's social class is visible in her porcelain body; "She is not Everywoman" (Craft 163). Nevertheless, in contrast to many of Faguas's elites who have turned inward in self-absorption, Lavinia has been awakened to the cries of injustice that surround her. In her mind, she cannot be apolitical and neutral. She has committed herself to a collective identity, despite the fact that her class problematizes that sense of shared community.

Lavinia's privileged position in society functions as an original sin for which she feels she must seek penance. The inner turmoil Lavinia had to overcome in order to join the Movimiento makes her desire a great change in herself, a new identity. However, the organization fails to allow her to "participar más activamente. Romper el miedo y aceptar el compromiso frontal, no teórico, de su decisión" (204). The Movimiento wants her to continue to be herself, but Lavinia's bourgeois background makes her feel alienated among the revolutionaries, who do not share the same experiences as she because of class differences. The unresolved tension between the political awakening she has experienced, which no longer allows her to feel comfortable in her upper middle-class world, and the lack of acceptance on the part of *el pueblo*, leads Lavinia to feel lost and alone. She reflects on her place within the revolution: "A pesar de la aceptación que el Movimiento le brindaba, no dejaba de sentir su clase como un fondo pesado del que hubiera querido liberarse de una vez por todas. Le parecía *una culpa sin perdón*; una frontera que quizás sólo la muerte heroica podría desvanecer totalmente" (308, my emphasis). Ultimately, the text insinuates that the only way for Lavinia to resolve her identity crisis is to sacrifice herself for the revolution.

Lavinia's progressive *concientización* brings her to the realization that she seeks to "subordinar la propia vida a un ideal más grande" (345); her dream is to place the revolution's shared constructed nation above herself. According to Timothy A.B. Richards, "In the resistance narration the individual and the national are intrinsically linked: Lavinia's individual transition, her conscientization, mirrors on a broader scale the appropriation or restoration of a fuller sense of nationhood from the partial and therefore distorted image of the neo-colony" (211). More specifically, the text manifests this linkage of the individual with the national through the land. Consider Itzá's topographic description of Lavinia's inner world upon entering her body: "Su

mente tiene amplias regiones dormidas. Me sumergí en su presente y pude sentir visiones de su pasado. Cafetos, volcanes humeantes, manantiales. Envueltos en la densa bruma de la nostalgia” (57). Itzá, the Indian *guerrillera* who prods Lavinia toward revolutionary participation, observes the landscape of Lavinia’s mind through metaphors of the landscape of her nation.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the novel Lavinia will express this parallelism as well. Shortly before her death, Lavinia contemplates the landscape for which she is willing to sacrifice herself:

Más cerca, la vegetación de las montañas deshaciéndose en faldas hacia el valle de la ciudad, mostraba sus verdes...Bien valía la pena morir por esa belleza, pensó. Morir tan sólo para tener este instante, este sueño del día en que aquel paisaje realmente les perteneciera a todos. Este paisaje era su noción de patria [...] Por este paisaje podía comprender los sueños casi descabellados del Movimiento. Esta tierra cantaba a su carne y su sangre, a su ser de mujer enamorada, en rebeldía contra la opulencia y la miseria: los dos mundos terribles de su existencia dividida [...] ¿Qué ocuparía el tiempo de Felipe en este momento en que ella se sentía por fin, parte de todo aquello? (346-347)

Her meditation on the landscape reflects her own inner state and wishes for herself as well as for her country. Lavinia’s dream for the land to be shared by all parallels her desire to subordinate herself for the greater cause. Similarly, it is not just the physical landscape that gives her an understanding of the Movimiento’s aspirations, but also her own inner quietude. Lavinia finally feels the revolution as a part of herself, something she has helped create.

Lavinia’s participation in Operation Eureka, the takeover of General Vela’s home, enables her to express a concrete political and personal commitment to the revolution. A scared taxi driver shoots Felipe when he attempts to seize his vehicle for the *guerrilla*’s use. On Felipe’s dying request, Lavinia replaces him in the assault on the general’s home, “entra[ndo] a la historia por necesidad” (308). Surrounded by

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<sup>3</sup> As Henry Cohen has noted, Itzá also expresses Lavinia’s revolutionary development in botanical terms: “Llegará el tiempo de los frutos, de la maduración” (43).

her comrades and awaiting the right hour to proceed with the operation, Lavinia contemplates her personal trajectory:

Después de tantos meses, tuvo la sensación de haber alcanzado una identidad con la cual arroparse y calentarse. Sin apellido, sin nombre—era tan sólo la ‘Doce’—sin posesiones, sin nostalgia de tiempos pasados, nunca había tenido una noción tan clara del propio valor e importancia; de haber venido al mundo, nacido a la vida para construir y no por un azar caprichoso de espermatozoides y óvulos. Pensó su existencia como una búsqueda de este momento. (386)

Feeling whole and accepted, Lavinia embraces her decision to risk her life for the advancement of their shared goals. By adopting the number twelve<sup>4</sup> as her identity she subsumes her individuality, rewriting herself as one piece of the collective, any single part of which can be given up for the good of the whole. The emphasis lies precisely in that conscious sacrifice rather than on the possible violence that they might be forced to inflict. After all, as Sebastián stated, “Es fundamental que los rehenes se den cuenta de que están tratando con revolucionarios, no con asesinos, ni desalmados” (378). In fact, Lavinia’s role as a soldier is articulated through faith, commitment, and serenity instead of violence and aggression. Her participation is not important in terms of the violence she can potentially commit, but much like a religious warrior, by the sacrifice she is whole-heartedly ready to give. In fact, the number she takes as her identity is, in its suggestion of the apostles, the culmination of a pattern of religious subtext running through her participation in the Movimiento. The comparison of the *guerrilleros* with “Cristos modernos,” her class as a “culpa sin perdón” (suggesting an original sin), the sacrifices she witnesses and ultimately is willing to make, and the spiritual peace she finds among her comrades, connect her and the organization to a language of religion and spirituality that allows her/them to claim a higher moral ground, contrasted with the corruption of the State. As with the

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<sup>4</sup> The number also makes reference to the twelve apostles.

killer women Ludmer analyzes, Lavinia can “postularse como agente de una justicia que está más allá de la del estado” (Ludmer 372).

In the midst of Operation Eureka Lavinia shoots General Vela and dies in the process, as he confronts her from his hiding place inside the arms collection display. Upon learning of Vela’s presence in the home through signals from his son, Lavinia consciously decides to put her life at risk for the safety of her comrades: “Debía enfrentar a Vela sola, pensó. Nadie tenía por qué arriesgarse más que ella” (405). As Lavinia confronts Vela the screams of the young boy paralyze both bodies for a fraction of a second. Silvia Lorente-Murphy views this moment as a sign of Lavinia’s lack of full commitment:

Si Lavinia pierde concentración por pensar en el niño, lo que estamos presenciando es la actuación de una persona que no ha llevado a cabo un proceso completo de concientización revolucionaria, de otra manera, la protagonista no se hubiera detenido a pensar en un individuo cuando es el bienestar del grupo, de la ‘especie’, lo que debe tener prioridad (n.p.).

In contrast, I would assert Lavinia’s hesitation upon taking a life does not diminish her revolutionary consciousness. Rather, it reminds the reader of her humanity and counteracts any image of her as a cold-blooded killer. As Lavinia hesitates, Itzá takes control: “Yo no dudé. Me abalancé en su sangre atropellando los corceles de un instante eterno. Grité desde todas sus esquinas, ulelé como viento arrastrando el segundo de vacilación, apretando sus dedos, mis dedos contra aquel metal que vomitaba fuego” (408). At the moment of violence, Itzá’s spirit propels Lavinia’s actions. Through Itzá’s eyes we see *her* squeezing Lavinia’s trigger finger, through Lavinia’s perspective she feels “la fuerza de todas las rebeliones” (408) flowing through her veins. The violence is written into a larger history of struggle and the primary agency of the killing is attributed to Itzá while Lavinia takes ownership of the heroic sacrifice. March views Belli’s novel as successful from “the perspective of the

natural and complete development of the figure of Lavinia Alarcón as the sensual, lifeloving woman warrior” (152). However, this portrayal of a warrior woman is tempered by Itzá’s inhabitation. Rather, Belli’s depiction of a female *guerrillera* is divided between two parallel characters, one of whom bears the sacrifice, the other the violence. This model points to the difficulty of reframing a woman’s violence in a positive way. Belli’s displacement of one facet of the main character’s identity (her warrior side) onto a mythic racialized historical figure suggests a woman’s violence must come from outside her if it is to be understood as acceptable; it cannot remain a part of her.

Lavinia dies in combat, denying the opportunity to delve further into the construction of a female killer and the (possible) anxieties surrounding her existence. Belli dedicates her novel to Sandinista guerrilla fighter Nora Astorga, a childhood friend and fellow comrade “quien seguirá naciendo,” as a way of commemorating Astorga’s spirit of resistance and emphasizing the continuity of the rebellion.<sup>5</sup> Like Lavinia, Astorga participated in the killing of a general, but unlike this fictional character, Astorga lives. Her subsequent life is marked by various attempts to reconcile her violence and gender. While Belli explains Lavinia’s act of violence through a religious structure of sacrifice, the U.S. media simplifies Nora’s motives and actions to that of a Mata Hari or femme fatale, and the image of a female combatant in Nicaragua is understood through a discourse of motherhood.

On March 8, 1978 (International Women’s Day) Nora Astorga, a Sandinista fighter and divorced mother of two, executed a plan that made her Nicaragua’s most infamous female revolutionary. During this time Astorga worked as a corporate lawyer and head of personnel for one of Nicaragua’s largest construction companies.

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Nora was able to read only a fragment of the novel before her battle with cancer came to an end in 1988 (Craft 164).



She became acquainted with Reynaldo Pérez Vega, a general in the National Guard and nicknamed “*El Perro*” for his torturous practices, when he approached the company she worked for about developing some land he owned. Astorga developed a working relationship with the General and resisted his sexual advances for over a year as she attempted to obtain information for the Organization; operation “*El Perro*” was finally put into effect on March 8th. According to Astorga, the original plan was to kidnap Pérez Vega for interrogation and exchange him for political prisoners (qtd. in Randall 122). As such, she invited the General over to her house, where three comrades hid, with the promise of giving in to his desires. She successfully disarmed him, got him undressed, and then gave the signal for the armed comrades to burst out of hiding. Astorga was then instructed by her fellow soldiers to get Pérez Vega’s driver to leave and bring the car around. In her absence, General Pérez Vega was executed. As Astorga explains, “He put up too heavy a fight and they had to do it” (qtd. in Randall 123).

Eight days after the death of Pérez Vega, Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* published on its front page a signed statement and picture sent to them by Nora Astorga. The photograph depicts a smiling Astorga in front of a wooded background, dressed in guerrilla fatigues: camouflage pants and shirt, beret, and rifle slung over her



Figure 4.1: Front page of the newspaper *La Prensa* (March 16, 1978)

left shoulder. She poses proudly, in what might be termed the conqueror's pose, with her right foot raised on top of something, her right hand resting on her knee, while her left hand steadies the butt of her rifle. In the letter that accompanied the photo, Astorga proclaims her participation in the killing of Reynaldo Pérez Vega:

Declaro con orgullo revolucionario mi militancia en la organización de vanguardia del pueblo de Nicaragua, el Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN). Quiero hacer constar que participé en el operativo de ajusticiamiento del esbirro general Reynaldo Pérez Vega, G.N.1, del ejército de Anastasio Somoza D., en mi carácter personal como militante disciplinada y consciente de mis obligaciones y compromisos revolucionarios, sujeto a la disciplina y lineamientos de nuestra organización, ningún miembro de mi familia [...] tuvo ni conocimiento ni participación activa de ninguna índole en el planeamiento, desarrollo y ejecución del plan de acción. [...] Hago por este medio un llamado a todo el pueblo de Nicaragua a participar activamente en el proceso de insurrección popular [...] (qtd. in Astorga 40)

This brazen document, with its declaration of her involvement with the FSLN and her role in operation “*El Perro*,” aims to transform her into a symbol of liberation and/or hope for the Nicaraguan public; her bravery and social consciousness is to serve as an example for others. The photo that accompanied the statement communicates the same feeling. Astorga’s smile and staged posture exudes a sense of triumph over Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> Her stance is reminiscent of Theodore Roosevelt’s safari poses, with her right foot pressed down as if on her vanquished prey. This image of Astorga successfully conveys her as an extraordinary combative woman.

Like Belli and her fictional character Lavinia, Astorga (1948-1988) belonged to an upper middle-class family of Managua.<sup>7</sup> As a youth she partook in charitable work through her religious educational institutions, developing in her an awareness of social disparity. In 1967 her family sent her to the United States to study at the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. in hopes that this distance would curb her political dissent. In 1969 she returned to Nicaragua, enrolled in the Catholic University in Managua (the UCA), and began collaborating with the FSLN. For four years she transported Sandinista leader Oscar Turcios, found safe houses, and carried messages for him. It was also during her university years that Astorga married Jorge Jenkins, a fellow student activist, and gave birth to her first child. She successfully graduated from law school in 1971 and spent a year in Italy with her new family, studying banking law and computer programming. After five years of marriage and two children, Astorga separated from her husband. During that time she worked as a

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<sup>6</sup> Anastasio Somoza Debayle served as President of Nicaragua from 1967-1972 and again from 1974-1979. Prior to that he served as the head of the National Guard under his family’s rule. He was the last member of the Somoza family to hold office, ending a political regime that began in 1936.

<sup>7</sup> The information pertaining to Nora’s life comes from Patricia Daniel, *No Other Reality: the life and times of Nora Astorga* (1998).

corporate lawyer for a construction company, aided the Movement, and continued to be a mother for her children.

The January 1978 assassination of newspaper editor Pedro Chamorro pushed Astorga to take up arms against Somoza's regime: "I finally understood that armed struggle was the only solution, that a rifle cannot be met with a flower, that we were in the streets, but if that force didn't get organized we wouldn't achieve much. For me, it was the moment of conviction: either I took up arms and made a total commitment or I wasn't going to change anything" (Daniel 64). In March of that year, Operation "*El Perro*" was successfully carried out and Astorga went underground. She took part in combat in northern Nicaragua and led a military squad. When she became pregnant with the child of her lover and fellow comrade José María Alvarado, she was sent to Costa Rica and assigned to a desk job. Astorga had one more child with him before they separated, and later adopted the son of a friend killed in the revolution. Upon the revolution's triumph in 1979, Astorga served as Special Attorney General and was responsible for overseeing the trials of more than 7,500 ex-guards and other functionaries of the Somoza regime. Two years later she joined the Foreign Ministry. In March 1984 Astorga's appointment as ambassador to the U.S. was rejected by the Reagan administration because of her activities during the Sandinista-led revolution. Astorga served as Deputy Foreign Minister to the United Nations and in 1986 became the Nicaraguan ambassador to this international organization, a position she held until her death in 1988.<sup>8</sup>

In the U.S. however, Operation "*El Perro*" came to define Astorga's identity despite her role as a mother and profession as a lawyer. For a *New York Times* column titled "Hers," Phyllis Rose, a professor of English at Wesleyan University, wrote an

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<sup>8</sup> Nora died of cancer on February 14, 1988 in Managua.

article about Nora Astorga's rejected appointment as U.S. ambassador (April 26, 1984) and society's fascination with aggressive women in general:

Last week the nomination was rejected by the State Department as inappropriate. Is she an accomplice to murder or a savior to her country? Was the action slaughter or revolutionary justice? [...] Still, however uncomfortable we are with political murder, we recognize that it exists in a different moral category from murder for personal gain or murder from passion. How you feel about it—whether you can imagine it as justified—tends to depend on two things: how long ago it happened and whether you agree with the killer's politics. [...] In Nora Astorga's case there is another important element: She is a woman. (C2)

Astorga may not have committed the execution herself, but society's perception of her is that of a revolutionary killer. With her participation she committed two crimes: murder and a betrayal of expectations about female behavior. Moreover, Astorga's pride in her daring role adds to her image as a defiant female. The American press quickly translated her outright confidence into that of a *femme fatale* and treated with levity her appointment as Ambassador.

A *New York Times* editorial titled "Femme Fatale" (March 23, 1984) compares her to Marlene Dietrich in several film roles and laments the fact "that Mr. von Sternberg is not around to direct Nora Astorga." The comparison emphasizes Astorga's words and actions as coy sexual gamesmanship rather than also highlighting the strategic nature of that behavior. Astorga's recollection of the last excuse she gave the General ["Look, you know I want to, but it has to be my way. I'm not like the women you're used to..."] is preceded with the *New York Times*' interpretation of those words: "Having no instructions from the Sandinistas, however, she stalled him with *some lines she must have learned at her grandmother's knee*. Take back your mink, she said. What makes you think that I'm one of those girls?" (my emphasis).<sup>9</sup> Undeniably, Astorga relies on her feminine charms to complete her mission of luring

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<sup>9</sup> The lines "Take back your mink. What makes you think that I'm one of those girls?" refers to lyrics of the song "Take back your mink," sang by Adelaide in the musical *Guys and Dolls*.

General Pérez Vega. However, the author is fixated on Astorga's identity as a femme fatale to the point of hinting at a matrilineal conspiracy; the skills necessary to kill a man are handed down from generation to generation. The last lines of the piece reveal the editorial's perception of Astorga as a larger threat: "Miss Astorga is sure she did the right thing. It was 'what the moment required'. Besides, as Lola-Lola put it, 'Men hover 'round me/ Like moths around a flame/ And if their wings burn/ Then who am I to blame?'" Her beauty and sensuality puts every man at risk and in comparing Astorga to the infamous screen character, the author expands the target of the soldier's actions from one General to *all* men.

The editorial's comparison of Astorga to Marlene Dietrich, and more specifically to her role as Lola-Lola in the film *The Blue Angel* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930), is significant given the political iconography surrounding that character. Von Sternberg transforms Heinrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat* (1904) into the story of a man whose attraction to an erotically powerful woman, a femme fatale, leads him to his downfall. More specifically, a professor pursues his students to the nightclub "The Blue Angel" where he becomes infatuated with the cabaret singer Lola, gives up his career to marry her, and becomes a stooge in the troupe. The combination of Lola's infidelity and his performance as a pathetic clown in front of his students drive him insane; he returns to his old school room and dies clenching the desk that was a symbol of his status. Lola's sexual allure proves deadly. Furthermore, it has political implications. According to Andrea Slane, "The conflict with fascism produced a number of images of female sexual danger, some of which are central to nationalist melodrama and national psychobiography" (214). Among these images was that of the femme fatale who, in the Nazi variant, was most often figured as a nightclub or cabaret singer, "a political siren potentially dragging American men into her moral and political morass" (Slane 215). Marlene Dietrich's Lola Lola exemplified this icon of

fascism/illicit sexuality. The political underlining to Lola's female sexual danger has certain connotations for the representation of Astorga. By comparing Astorga to Marlene Dietrich, the editorial colors the link between Astorga's sexuality and her politics with a fascist brush. To compare Astorga to Lola Lola is to cast her as an unknowable and dangerous sexual icon representative of a great national enemy. For American intelligence officials General Pérez Vega was a valuable CIA "asset" and colleague. Furthermore, in 1984 relations between the United States and Nicaragua were tense because of American support for anti-Sandinista contras. In the eyes of American officials, the Sandinistas were terrorists and communists that posed a threat to the U.S. In this context, the editorial's comparison of Astorga to Lola Lola associates the Sandinista government she hopes to represent to the U.S.A. with that of a hostile fascist power. Regardless of the fallacy of conflating leftist politics with fascism, the editorial uses Astorga's femme fatale image to heighten suspicion of the nation she represents.

The comparison between Astorga and Marlene Dietrich also speaks to a transgression of heterosexual boundaries and to the particular seduction of uniqueness and celebrity. Part of Marlene Dietrich's iconic persona was her androgynous beauty and ambiguous sexuality. She was known for her cross-dressing, bi-sexuality, and sensual appeal to both genders. Alice A. Kuzniar notes, "When Dietrich imitates virile display (as in her swagger and tuxedo), her allure resides in her gender in-betweenism (she is still 'femininely' flirtatious with a 'masculine' self-assurance" (248). Within the American press coverage, Astorga's appeal similarly resides in her foreign unknowability. Elaine Sciolino's *New York Times Magazine* article "Nicaragua's U.N. Voice" (September 28, 1986) dwells upon the attention Astorga receives:

Some of her critics charge that she is just a pretty face whose role is as

a propagandist [...] “It is hard to cut through her charm,” says one third-world ambassador. “I have spoken to her many times but feel I don’t know her.” (29)

She seldom goes unnoticed, though. It is not that she is classically beautiful. Her teeth are crooked and she has a graceless walk, but with her high cheekbones, heart shaped face and sleek, tall frame—5 feet 11 inches in the high heels she insists on wearing—she cannot help but stand out. Her movements, in fact, are so carefully watched that during a recent Security Council debate, a woman diplomat from Latin America says, “the moment Nora Astorga crossed her legs, all the eyes in the room were off the speaker and on her.” (95)

While Dr. Kirkpatrick steadfastly boycotted the delegates’ lounge, a kind of male club where horse-trading is conducted over cigars and Scotch, Ms. Astorga is a regular visitor, kissing and shaking hands with colleagues as she makes her entrance. (95)

Astorga’s diplomatic interactions are interpreted as a performance that blocks attempts to know her. Of course, she’s not there to make friends, but to serve her country’s interests. However, others seem to desire more from the “infamous female revolutionary.” She is described in contradictions: not “classically beautiful,” crooked teeth, “graceless walk,” and yet the object of everyone’s rapt attention. The strangeness of her physique echoes the way her behavior weaves around gender boundaries; she doesn’t abide by unspoken divisions but seeks out and is at ease in male spaces. In this discourse Astorga is unmistakably female, but like Dietrich, the unknowable strangeness of her gender and past fascinates. That mystique which makes her so alluring also causes suspicion; as a female who does not adhere to expectations of a female diplomat, Astorga is also viewed warily as a potential threat.

The framing of Astorga as a dangerous beauty continues in a *Times* magazine article (“Nora and the Dog,” April 2, 1984) covering Astorga’s nomination as ambassador to the United States. Although the article recognizes Astorga’s political credentials and commitment to the Sandinista front, there is also an underlying portrayal of her as a “onetime terrorist” and/or betraying female. The article opens



with the following declaration, re-writing Astorga into a species of film character: “Nora Astorga seemed perfectly *cast* as the Mata Hari of the Sandinista revolution, and she played the game of seduction and betrayal with deadly ease” (my emphasis). Mata Hari was the stage name of Margaretha Gertrude Zelle, a Dutch exotic dancer and secret agent during World War I. She serves as the prototype of the beautiful but unscrupulous female who uses sexual allure to gain access to secrets.<sup>10</sup> The article’s assertion (Astorga as the Sandinista Mata Hari) portrays her as a femme fatale naturally adept at deception and whose sexuality is dangerous. As a femme fatale she is sexy because she “harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable” (Doane 1). The article’s closing line, a wry quote from a United States diplomat, plays with Astorga’s past behavior and the potential threat she represents: “There’s a limit to how close I’d get to her.” Astorga’s identity as a femme fatale and the resulting connotations of sexuality and mistrust follows her and colors her current role as a diplomat.

Artist/photographer Esther Parada’s juxtaposition of two portraits of Nora Astorga, one accompanying two 1984 news articles and another found in Margaret Randall’s book *Sandino’s Daughters* (1981), questions the media’s representation of this woman.<sup>11</sup> As Susan Sontag explains, photography is not a direct representation of the world, but is both an artistic interpretative creation and reliant on cultural and ideological context for its meaning (6-7). The photograph published in the *New York Times* and in *Time* magazine helps construct Astorga as a dangerous and seductive Mata Hari. The image depicts her comfortably dragging on a cigarette from between her fingers, her eyes

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed description see Pat Shipman, *Femme Fatale: Love, Lies and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari* (2007).

<sup>11</sup> The work is titled, “Whose News? Whose Image? Whose Truth?” and was created in 1986 through a montage process. See Esther Parada, “Taking Liberties: Digital Revision as Cultural Dialogue” (1993).

heavily lidded and glazed, head cocked back. Her eyebrows are raised confidently. The pose is natural and fitting with the action; she is after all deriving pleasure and relaxation from smoking. However, the photo reflects a particular constructed image of Astorga: that of a treacherous woman, a



Figure 4.2: “Whose News? Whose Image? Whose Truth?” (1986) by Esther Parada.

“brazen terrorist.” We read the image within a narrative of a woman who, for political reasons, lured a General to his downfall. The confidence and elegance she exudes in the photograph reinforces her persona of a beautiful and seductive femme fatale, a Marlene Dietrich persona. In contrast, Randall’s photograph of Astorga captures a softer pose. In the original uncropped image Astorga sits behind a desk with some papers in front of her, resting both

forearms on the table. She holds a lit cigarette between the fingers of her right hand. Nora's wide eyes glance up and the corner of her lips curl slightly signaling the beginning of a smile. Parada titles this image "Dedicated Revolutionary." The image befits the intentions behind Randall's book: communicating personal stories of struggle and commitment. Astorga poses no threat. In fact, if she were holding a pencil instead of a cigarette we would read her as an attentive schoolgirl ready to learn. We can choose to see Nora Astorga as either a freedom fighter or a terrorist; either is just another side to the same coin, influenced by the context that surrounds it.

The missing piece to Astorga's identity, not emphasized in the media's coverage nor developed in Belli's novel, was her role as a mother/soldier. In her analysis of Belli's novel Amy Kaminsky writes, "En cada instancia la maternidad va en contra del desarrollo de la mujer, de la revolución, de la resistencia" (29). Itzá denies herself the opportunity to bear children, so the Spaniards have fewer slaves. Lavinia also gives up the idea of prolonging herself in another, renouncing motherhood:

Y sin aviso, en el momento más profundo del enfrentamiento, cuando sus cuerpos sudados entraban a saco en el agitado aire próximo al desenlace, su vientre creció en el deseo de tener un hijo. Lo deseó por primera vez en su vida [...] La mañana y la noche eran territorios inciertos [...] En esa situación, no quedaba más alternativa que renunciar al deseo de prolongarse. Un hilo no cabía en semejante inseguridad. (137)<sup>12</sup>

In the narrative Belli has created, the role of mother and soldier are incompatible. However, children were a motivating force in her (and Astorga's) decision to take

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<sup>12</sup> Other instances in the novel also show how motherhood problematizes life: Lucrecia, Lavinia's maid, becomes pregnant; the father of her unborn child denies her any support; a child would also put an end to her desire to improve her living conditions through education. The secretary in Lavinia's architectural firm sees her plans ruined when her lover's wife becomes pregnant, ending any chance of marriage. The engineer with whom Lavinia collaborates in the building of Vela's home tells her his daughter wanted to be an architect, but he didn't think women should have said occupation. Instead, she got married and died during childbirth.

arms against Somoza. As Astorga explains, “It may seem ironic, but part of my decision was precisely because of my children. I believed that by doing my part I would be helping to bring about a better world for them, and other children like them” (qtd. in Randall 122). In a 2002 interview Gioconda Belli expresses a similar sentiment when discussing her role as a mother and revolutionary soldier: “I have to care about the world my children are going to live in.” She further adds, “I had a conversation with Camilo and I said, ‘I have a daughter, I am afraid.’ He said, ‘Well you have to do it for your daughter because if you don’t do it, your daughter is going to have to do it. If your parents had done it, you wouldn’t have to be doing it.’ It’s true. That settled the question for me.”<sup>13</sup> As indicated by her autobiography *El país bajo mi piel*, a fellow pregnant comrade officially swore Belli into the movement when Belli was pregnant with her second child (76-77). In this way, she became a “combative mother.”

By the final 1979 Sandinista offensive, women comprised 30 percent of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) fighting force and commanded “everything from small units to full battalions” (Flynn 416). At the last battle of León, four of the seven *commandantes* were women (Schultz 38). A key factor facilitating women’s participation was the decision of the FSLN to actively encourage and recruit women in the struggle, appealing to women in their traditional roles and extending those responsibilities. In 1977, Sandinista women played a central role in forming the Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation’s Problems (AMPRONAC).<sup>14</sup> The organization denounced the atrocities committed by the National Guard, campaigned for the release of political prisoners, and organized

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<sup>13</sup> Suzy Hansen, “Sex, Lies and Revolution,” *Salon* 10 Dec. 2002  
<<http://dir.salon.com/story/books/int/2002/12/10/belli/index.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> This organization was later renamed the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) in honor of the first young woman to be killed by the National Guard.

support operations for the Sandinista guerrillas. More importantly, it mobilized women through a maternal collective identity. An AMPRONAC statement on International Women's Day (1978) proclaimed: "Today more than ever we need to recognize the need to organize ourselves to search for solutions that would make our country a place where our children can grow up safe and free from oppression and misery" (qtd. in Bayard de Volo 30).<sup>15</sup> This idea gained momentum in the neighborhoods of Managua. Women formed mothers' committees in early 1979, urging women to band together against Somoza's regime through the following argument:

From the moment of conception, the mother has the obligation to protect her child, and she who does not do this is breaking divine law. For this reason, NICARAGUAN MOTHER, reflect: your mission is too great to be stifled by fear. Do not be afraid to protect your child because with fear you are not going to free him or her from death." (qtd. in Bayard de Volo 41)

By centering on a woman's right to fight in defense of her children, this discourse allows a woman's violence and defiance to coexist with traditional representations of femininity. As Hermione Harris explains, "Nearly three-quarters of the people who took to the streets in the popular insurrection were under 25, and supporting them in their clandestine activity, coming to their defense when threatened and tortured by the National Guard, seemed a natural extension of motherhood" (193). As the ferocity of the dictatorship increased, the role of mother assumed a political dimension.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> That same month (March 1978) Albertina Serrano declared a hunger strike in protest of the torture and mistreatment of her son and other political prisoners. Her act was frequently covered by the press and on Mother's Day Serrano was recognized as an exemplary mother by *La Prensa*: "Few times has a mother come to such extreme sacrifice as this humble woman who has managed to move the country and gain the support of all Nicaraguans in order to win the following demand: better treatment of her son and the rest of the political prisoners. The act of love of Doña Albertina dignifies Nicaraguan mothers. She is a true representation of motherhood on this day" (qtd. in Bayard de Volo 28).

<sup>16</sup> Women bore the brunt of family responsibilities. Nearly half of household heads in Nicaragua were women, and in the capital, Managua, this rose to two-thirds. Women depended on themselves and their children to financially sustain the family. "The ties between mothers and their children were therefore often strong, both in a material and emotional sense, and further explain the participation of women in the war" (Harris 192-193).

This “transition to ‘combative motherhood,’ ” as Maxine Molyneux explains, “linked these traditional identities to more general strategic objectives and celebrated women’s role in the creation of a more just and humanitarian social order” (228).<sup>17</sup> In her collection of poems *Línea de fuego* (1978), Belli’s poem “La madre,” with its imagery of sacrifice and universal mothering, depicts a common portrayal of women in Sandinista discourse:

se ha cambiado de ropa,  
La falda se ha convertido en pantalón,  
los zapatos en botas [...]  
No canta ya canciones de cuna,  
canta canciones de protesta. [...]  
No quiere ya solo a sus hijos,  
ni se da solo a sus hijos.  
Lleva prendidos en los pechos  
miles de bocas hambrientas. [...]

Se ha parido ella misma  
sintiéndose—a ratos—  
incapaz de soportar tanto amor sobre los hombros,  
pensando en el fruto de su carne  
—lejano y solo—  
llamándola en la noche sin respuesta,  
mientras ella responde a otros gritos, [...]  
pero siempre pensando en el grito solo de su carne  
que es un grito más en ese griterío de pueblo que  
la llama  
y le arranca hasta sus propios hijos  
de los brazos. (34)

The poem paints a picture of a woman of action and sorrow, a mother pulled away from her children to fulfill a larger mothering role in clandestine activity. Though her physical image is militarized, wearing pants and combat boots, she maintains a nurturing quality as she supports the revolution. I must note that Sandinista discourse did not project one unified, static vision of motherhood. As Lorraine Bayard de Volo

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<sup>17</sup> The women’s organization, “Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs of Matagalpa,” serves as an example of the way women were mobilized by the FSLN around the symbol of motherhood.

explains, “It exalted some traditional aspects of motherhood while it rejected others, and applied old ideas in new ways, resulting in a variety of sometimes contradictory images: combatant mothers, combatant-bearing mothers, peace-loving mothers, suffering mothers” (39). That image of the “combatant-bearing mothers” also appeared in Belli’s early poetry. In her poem “Engendraremos niños,” giving birth is an act of defiance in a society of dictatorship and death.<sup>18</sup> She writes:

“Engendraremos niños, / por cada hombre o mujer que nos maten, / pariremos /cientos de niños /que seguirán sus pasos” (37). Motherhood operates as a political statement as women carry on the struggle through their reproductive role. It is with this image of the combative mother with which I wish to conclude.<sup>19</sup>

Among the frequently reproduced images of combative motherhood was a photograph of a mother at arms. A young woman, wearing a white button down short sleeve shirt and black slacks, smiles directly at the camera as she holds a nursing baby to her right breast, an AK-47 slung over her left shoulder. The photo appears both public and intimate. Within the frame we make out the blurred images of others in the background, as though the photo was taken in a street or gathering. Simultaneously, the subject’s gaze, her easy demeanor, and the depiction of breastfeeding impress a

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<sup>18</sup> As I noted earlier, Belli’s first novel, written ten years later, does not share this viewpoint. In that narrative becoming a mother *is* at odds with militancy.

<sup>19</sup> I must also point out that although the image brings together maternity and combat it too has limitations. Cynthia Enloe has asked where is the picture of the *male* guerrilla holding the baby and the rifle and has further suggested, “interweaving the images of woman as combatant and mother so tightly suggests that as soon as the immediate threat recedes, as soon as the ‘war is over,’ the woman in the picture will put down the rifle and keep the baby” (166). Nonetheless, the image is striking and very suggestive.



Figure 4.3: Image from a Nicaraguan postcard entitled “Miliciana de Waswalito Matagalpa, 1982.”

level of intimacy on the viewer. The photo is naturalistic and the viewer gets no sense of aggression from the subject; she could well be carrying a purse instead of a gun. In contrast, the photograph of Astorga dressed in camouflage and standing in a conqueror’s pose appears performative and sterile. Astorga’s photo is *intended* to be read as extraordinary; a woman fulfilling the idealized role of a revolutionary guerrilla. However, this other image is more transformative in its depiction of a female soldier. With it, the image of a soldier is redefined in feminine terms, not the masculine posturing of Astorga’s photograph or even the neutral language of spirituality and consciousness found in Belli’s novel. A soldier, a guerrilla, a revolutionary, is a mother taking up arms to protect the children of her nation.



## CONCLUSION

The range of narratives I have discussed to some degree attempt to negotiate various types of societal anxieties produced by women who kill through different containment strategies aimed at reconciling a woman's violence with her gender. The torture, witchcraft and murder committed by *La Quintrala* is contained by the soap opera and comic through a confessional structure that allows her crimes to be recalled, but also be forgotten/erased. It further permits the two narratives to indulge in her crimes while conveying a morality tale. Valdivieso also relies on a confessional structure, but in her account there is neither repentance nor erasure of these acts; instead, doña Catalina embraces her *mestizo* identity and her actions are contextualized and positioned as a response to the patriarchal order of the time. The Mexican media attributes the torture and murder committed by *Las Poquianchis* not to women, but to diabolical, conniving, inhuman beasts. Ibargüengoitia responds to the media's representation by contextualizing the women's crimes and containing their violence through his use of *domestic* metaphors, allowing the characters to at least maintain their gendered identity. Felipe Cazals's film depicts the women's crimes as a perverse allegory to the nation, stressing the hierarchical exploitation occurring across class lines and reclaiming them as part of Mexico's identity. These two cases represent the historical women of my study and in particular reflect a heightened societal vilification of violent women. They also express an overt struggle over how much these women are or are not representative of their nation.

Although the remaining cases create a fictional character from a specific social reality (*sicarias* and *guerrilleras*), they too grapple with the underlying tensions surrounding a female killer. The violence perpetrated by Rosario Tijeras is narrated by a male character from a formula love story that plays with her sexual body and

contains the threat she poses within a feminine realm. However, that sexual body beyond being *apetecible* is also depicted as *desechable*. In the popular Colombian imagination Rosario exists outside the fictional pages of Franco's novel, serving as an emblem of the *sicaria* experience. The figures of Lavinia/Astorga, like Rosario, are involved in organized violence, but in their case this violence has a political end. Belli's use of an indigenous spirit displaces the primary agency for her fictional *guerrillera*'s violence. The U.S. media defines Nora Astorga's act of violence through the simplistic and familiar archetype of the femme fatale, turning her into a species of film character. Neither Belli nor the U.S. media recognize Astorga's identity as a mother/soldier, yet the Sandinistas rely on a discourse of "combative motherhood" to increase women's participation in the Movimiento. Both these women *perform* feminine signs and "a la vez les aplican una torsión" (Ludmer 371) relying on society's preconceptions about women to achieve their respective tasks.

Through an examination of the multiple layers of discourse surrounding female killers I have raised questions about class, race, sexuality, preconceived notions about femininity, and national identity. This last theme is unexpected, yet persistent and emergent. The figure of *La Quintrala* haunts the Chilean national identity throughout representations of her history (literally in the case of *Historia de Chile en Cómic*), though Valdivieso's account vindicates her actions, rejecting her use as a national scapegoat and legitimatizing the nation's *mestizaje* heritage. The case of *Las Poquianchis* both prompts fear that they will be seen as representative of Mexico, as in *Alarma!*, and is explicitly used as a national allegory in Felipe Cazals's film. The relevance of Rosario Tijeras to Colombian national identity is less direct and comprehensive. Nevertheless, she is reflective of a particular and significant period and geography of the nation and has been claimed by working class youth as representative of themselves. Both Nora Astorga and Lavinia Alarcón are agents of a

national revolutionary movement, and Lavinia's *concientización* is representative of the change they hope to bring to Nicaragua/Faguas. Astorga's role as a diplomat literally places her as a representative of her nation, and as seen in the U.S. media coverage leads her colleagues to conflate their mistrust of a female killer with their mistrust for her nation. This theme of national identity emerges because of the multitude of anxieties arising from the violated social and sexual mores that lie in the wake of a female killer.

My reading of violence and women has centered on a female killer's relationship with the nation and on strategies of containment, but it has not dealt explicitly with the question of justice in relation to these women's violence. This element of justice is central to Josefina Ludmer's analysis of women who kill and present when Jorge Luis Borges features a female killer protagonist in his short story "Emma Zunz."<sup>1</sup> Borges's story presents a more familiar trope of a female killer than do the narratives discussed in previous chapters of this study, one who strikes back at her abuser, though it does complicate the reader's understanding of Emma as a victim.

On January 14, 1922 Emma Zunz, who lives in Buenos Aires, receives a letter from Brazil informing her that her father, referred to as Mr. Maier, died from taking an *accidental* overdose: "había ingerido por error una fuerte dosis de veronal" (59). Emma for her part concludes that her father committed suicide after serving a prison sentence for embezzlement of which he was innocent, the true culprit, as her father previously told her, being Emma's present employer, Aarón Loewenthal. In order to avenge her father's death, yet not go to jail, Emma develops a plan to frame him for raping her, providing her with a justification for killing him. She sacrifices her virginity to an unknown departing sailor, then visits Loewenthal at the textile factory,

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<sup>1</sup> The story originally appeared in September 1948 in the Argentinean magazine *Sur* and later became part of Borges's collection of short stories *El Aleph* (1949).

shoots him with the revolver she knows he keeps in a drawer, and calls the police to inform them that “*Ha ocurrido una cosa que es increíble...El señor Loewenthal me hizo venir con el pretexto de la huelga...Abusó de mí, lo maté...*” (65).

Like the other fictional women Ludmer describes in her study, Emma Zunz circumvents statutory justice in exerting a justice of her own:

Emma es la Virgen justiciera, enviada de Dios, y también la obrera que se levanta contra el patrón durante la huelga [...] La que mata representa todas “las justicias”: la de Dios, la del padre, la justicia de clase, la racial y la sexual. Y se burla de la justicia estatal, porque al fin llama a la policía, confiesa su crimen y acusa al patrón de haberla violada, cuando unas horas antes se disfrazó de prostituta y se acostó con un marinero [...] Hace ante la justicia una farsa de la verdad; usa la ley y el estereotipo de la virgen vejada [...] para burlar la justicia del estado y poder ejercer todas las justicias, el alegoría. (363-364)

Ludmer’s analysis focuses on Emma as an alternative instrument of justice. Indeed, both the original motivating narrative of the avenging daughter and the fabricated story of the avenging rape victim fit Ludmer’s model. The latter narrative takes advantage of preconceptions of a woman’s role as victim, which is precisely the “torsión” Ludmer notes. That “torsión,” however, is known only to Emma and to the reader. The greater societal threat of a female killer is tempered through the understanding of Emma as a female victim striking back in distress.

While Emma acts out of revenge, the text leaves murky which affront ultimately motivates her killing of Loewenthal. Loewenthal dies not just for the embezzlement Emma believes he committed, but also for what Emma has subjected herself to: “Ante Aarón Loewenthal, más que la urgencia de vengar a su padre, Emma sintió la de castigar el ultraje padecido por ello. No podía no matarlo, después de esa minuciosa deshonra” (64). Between the overlapping emotions of her desire to avenge her father, her recent traumatic sexual experience, and her fear of men, “un temor casi patológico” (61), Emma’s pulling of the trigger is not simply an act of justice.

The multiple layers of deception and ambiguity surrounding the story suggest that Emma is possibly deceiving not only the police, but also herself. As J.B. Hall explains, many things remain unclear: “the facts of her father’s death, his alleged innocence, Loewenthal’s alleged guilt, and indeed many aspects of this *cuento* in which the reader must often conclude—like Emma when Loewenthal’s death fails to go as expected—that perhaps ‘las cosas no ocurrieron así’ ” (263). The superficial narrative Emma constructs of a woman as victim killing her rapist we know to be false, but the ambiguity underlying the story also challenges the other narrative she has constructed: that of a woman as familial victim avenging her father’s death. The doubt as to the veracity of even the latter narrative allows for its interpretation as a containment of a female killer. Both narratives serve to position the woman as a victim carrying out justice by means outside the state, a role that may challenge the efficacy of that authority as well as women’s traditional relationship with the execution of justice, but that simultaneously reinforces women’s status as victim even when she kills.

While we can read “Emma Zunz” and other works discussed by Ludmer through the theme of justice, Ludmer’s model of female killers can be expanded upon with the inclusion of themes such as containment, as demonstrated above, and nation. My analysis of women who kill further permits a reading of other works in which justice is not a predominant theme, allowing for the interpretation of a greater range of representations of female killers. For example, although Gioconda Belli’s character Lavinia can be read as an agent of social justice, popular representations of *La Quintrala* and *Las Poquianchis* often depict these women’s violence as distinctly unjust, or at times in Ibargüengoitia’s *Las muertas* as accidental and without malice, intent or justification. In the case of *Rosario Tijeras*, the titular character is indeed wronged and avenges that wrong, but her other violence is motivated by money,

directed by anonymous forces, and does not serve a personal or social justice. By examining these representations of women who kill through the construction of containment mechanisms that combat the reverberation of the threat they pose to the nation, we expose the anxieties of race, class, and gender that permeate each production's respective society.

This study has attempted to reveal the complexities of women's relationship with violence by exploring the inverse of the female-as-victim paradigm. Females raise more anxieties than males when they kill, bringing forth a need to contain their threat through dominant tropes of femininity, because they do not just go against the law, but violate patriarchal structure and gendered expectations. Furthermore, to force the reality of a female killer into the confines of accepted female identity is to restrict our understanding of that identity. Ultimately, we must recognize our own illusions about women, even if positive, that lead us to view their relationship with violence through the naive prism of victims, femme fatales, and monsters.

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