The New Queens of Crime:
Images of Women Detectives in Contemporary Argentinean and Mexican Literature

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Introduction

Detective fiction is flourishing in Latin America today. The genre, which has since its inception been dominated by men,[1] is now being adopted by more and more women writers. Even J.K. Rowling has ventured into the detective genre, writing novels, *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013) and *The Silkworm* (2014), under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith.[2] In the last fifty years, there has been a veritable boom in Latin American women's detective fiction. Writers such as Syria Poletti, María Angélica Bosco, Luisa Valenzuela, Angélica Gorodischer, and Claudia Piñeiro from Argentina, and Cristina Rivera Garza from Mexico, and Marcela Serrano from Chile (Simpson, *Encyclopedia* 257), among others, have adopted the detective fiction frame, reworking the conventions of the detective genre in fascinating ways. In their innovative revisions of the detective figure, female authors challenge the masculinization of the genre, defying gender roles and stereotypes. While both male and female Latin American writers tend to write detective fiction that voices socio-political criticisms (Braham x), female writers adopt and modify the genre, using it also as a platform to defy stereotypical gender roles and challenge patriarchal dominance. This compelling use of detective fiction and film in Latin America has, nonetheless, received little critical attention thus far. This dissertation examines recent contributions by female writers from Argentina and Mexico, the countries that produce the largest amount of detective fiction in Latin America.[3]

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[1] One major exception is, of course, Agatha Christie, a prolific crime novelist.
[2] J.K. Rowling's novels feature a male detective, Cormoran Strike, and a female sidekick.
[3] Looking back to his first years of scholarship, Yates argues that by 1960 Mexico and Argentina were the " . . . two nations where [detective fiction] had been most extensively cultivated" (Forward 9). Despite detective fiction's growing presence throughout Latin America, these countries continue to produce the largest amount of detective fiction in the region.

Detective Fiction: A Brief History

The vast majority of critics cite Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) as the inception of the modern detective story (Giardinelli 16-17, 55; Klein, *The Woman Detective* 15; Rivera-Taupier 14; Simpson 10, 29; Thoms 133). Some critics, however, trace the roots of the genre to an even earlier date. Fereydoun Hoveyda, for example, considers the eighteenth-century Chinese manuscript entitled "Cases of Judge Dee" as an early example of detective fiction (35). Several other critics cite *Caleb Williams* (1794) by William Godwin as a vital text (Andreu 37; Horsley 21; Lehman 73; Vázquez de Parga 34-5). Nevertheless, the majority of critics, including the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, a great admirer of Poe (Bennett 263-64), agree that this American writer should be credited for truly initiating the genre. As David Lehman maintains,

> Nearly all the conventions of the classic whodunit—from locked rooms to least likely culprits, eccentric sleuths and their admiring companions, dullard cops, and wrongly accused bystanders—originate with Poe. The rules of detection, the crime involving a cipher that needs decoding, the theme of the murderous double, the city as a criminal landscape, the identification of the man in the crowd as 'the type and the genius of deep crime': All date back to a handful of Poe's tales. (71-72)

Poe's detective, C. Auguste Dupin, enjoys investigative success thanks to his "ability to read the city's inhabitants, to occupy their minds and perspectives," and therefore uncover the perpetrator of the crime (Thoms 138). Despite the formative importance of Poe's detective stories, Kathleen Klein appropriately suggests that many readers' awareness of detective fiction starts with Arthur Conan Doyle's works featuring Sherlock Holmes, the most famous character of detective fiction

(*The Woman* 15). Scaggs, among others, affirms that Poe's Dupin clearly served as a model for Sherlock Holmes, noting their shared aptitude for astute observations of minor details, as well as their "reclusiveness, eccentricity, and penetrating analytic ability" (20). Indeed, both Poe and Conan Doyle were fundamental in formalizing the conventions of the classic detective story, and their detectives continue to shape detective fiction today.

Detective Fiction in Latin America

Translated works of detective fiction written by American and French authors have long been enormously popular in Latin America (Simpson, *Detective* 16). Writing in 1964, Donald Yates affirms, "ningún otro tipo de ficción en prosa es más popular y ninguno cuenta con una demanda más firme entre el público lector de Hispanoamérica, que el relato policial" (5). Similarly, in 1968, Alfonso Reyes affirms, "es lo que más se lee en nuestros días" (339). Despite Latin Americans' avid readership of the classic detective story, writers from the region have found the genre's paradigm to be awkward and unworkable within their own political context. The Argentine writer Leonardo Castellani, for example, once famously stated: "the genre is artificial for us" (Simpson, *Detective* 21). Mexican writer and journalist Carlos Monsiváis agrees, declaring, "We [Latin Americans] don't have any detective literature because we don't have any faith in justice" (21). Monsiváis indicates that Latin American writers' resistance to the genre stems from a lack of trust in the state and its justice system following years of political repression in their countries: "A quién le importa quién mató a Roger Ackroyd . . . si nadie sabe (oficialmente) quién fue el responsable de la matanza de Tlatelolco o quién ordenó el asalto a los Halcones el 10 de junio?" (10). In an interview with Goran Tocilovac, Mempo Giardinelli explained that while the British and American classic detective story demonstrates confidence in

the state and its institutions, such confidence is impossible in Latin America where "los Estados e instituciones . . . han sido, históricamente, enemigos de los pueblos."[4] Far from reliably restoring order, the state and police in countries like Mexico and Argentina historically have been at best hindrances to investigations and at worst the very perpetrators of the crimes. Marcie Paul explains: "[d]uring the decades-long rule of the PRI (the Institutional Revolutionary Party), the Mexican criminal justice system was so utterly venal that the citizenry came to fear the officers of the law more than the 'criminals' themselves. The mission of the detective, traditionally the revelation of truth and the restoration of order appeared not merely difficult but absurd in this milieu" (180). Argentineans likewise felt similar mistrust of their own state and its institutions following the state-endorsed violence and political oppression during the years known as the Dirty War (1976-1983).

The Hard-boiled Subgenre

While the classic detective story has seemed at odds with lived reality for many Latin American authors, Amelia Simpson rightly affirms the influence of the hard-boiled subgenre, which, unlike the classic detective story, maintains a critical stance towards the state and its institutions. The hard-boiled variant of detective fiction first emerged in the United States during the surge in organized crime and the rampant corruption of the 1920s and 1930s during the Prohibition era. This socio-political climate inspired a gritty, more realistic picture of crime, which we see in hard-boiled detective fiction. Hard-boiled detective writers like Raymond

[4] Elsewhere, Giardinelli elaborates further: "If Scotland Yard was—even still is—a source of pride for the English (writers or readers) and the FBI and the North American abstract concept of the 'law' remain the basis for public conduct in the United States, that has no equivalent within the Latin American world. The fact is that the vast majority of law-enforcement agencies in Latin America are not only fallacious sources for detective fiction, but they are considered to be highly suspect institutions by the social body of each nation" (Introduction xix).

Chandler and Dashiell Hammett wrote more complicated plots without the neat, tidy endings typical of classical detective fiction. While Poe and Doyle's sleuths solve mysteries through their powers of "ratiocination," detectives in the hard-boiled genre work on cases in the streets, often putting themselves in harm's way and without a companion like Watson by their side. Not only does the hard-boiled genre restructure the detective story, it dramatically reconfigures the way in which we view crime itself. As Amelia S. Simpson explains, "The conservative, aristocratic ideology of the classic model that presents the individual criminal act as an aberration in a basically stable, secure society contrasts sharply to the antielitism of the hard-boiled model with its distrust of institutions and its view of crimes as all-pervasive" (12). Braham expresses the distinction in nearly identical terms, affirming, "[w]hile classic detective stories present crime as the transgression of norms in an essentially just system, hard-boiled stories present the pursuit of justice itself as a transgression of norms in an essentially corrupt system" (1). In other words, the hard-boiled genre proposes that solving crimes in the modern world would not only be a never-ending endeavor, but that the actual pursuit of justice is in and of itself a subversive disruption to the status quo. This is the sub-genre of detective fiction that has been most influential on Latin American detective fiction writers.

Again, while hard-boiled detective fiction flourished during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, Amelia Simpson affirms that this more violent subgenre of detective fiction "received little exposure in Latin America until relatively recently" (Simspon, *Detective* 22). In Brazil, for example, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, originally published in 1929, was the best-selling crime novel in 1984 (22). Likewise, in Argentina, Simpson indicates: "Works by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and others of the hard-boiled school were . . . first translated and distributed in Argentina in the forties, [but] they received little attention until they

were republished and reevaluated two decades later" (*Detective* 190).[5] Due to its late-blooming popularity in these countries, Latin American authors have only recently adopted the hard-boiled model, re-fashioning it for their own literary projects. Braham maintains that innovation in the detective genre has always coincided with political upheaval (68), which, in recent decades in Latin America, has also spurred writers to experiment with the hard-boiled subgenre. While some Argentine writers used the detective fiction genre to satirize and critique the Peronist regime during the late 1940s and 1950s (Simpson, *Detective* 35), more contemporary writers have adapted the hard-boiled subgenre, with its critical view of political institutions, to condemn the violence suffered by Argentine civilians at the hands of their own government during the Dirty War (1976-1983). Similarly, Persephone Braham points to the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968 as prompting the recent boom in detective fiction in Mexico. Thus, in Braham's words, "the real dawn of the detective genre in . . . Mexico was in the early 1970s" (3). In such politically volatile conditions, the hard-boiled genre grants Latin American writers a medium through which they can voice their socio-political critiques.

The Gendering of the Genre

Although there are important exceptions, detective fiction has traditionally been a genre dominated by male authors writing about male detectives.[6] Joy Palmer argues that as an heir of the "legacy of positivist knowledge," the genre is "defined by its masculinist drive to know, with

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[5] It seems that part of the problem was that the major cultivators of the genre in Argentina at that time, particularly Jorge Luis Borges and Bioy Casares, rejected the gritty realism of the hard-boiled subgenre (Simpson, *Detective* 38). See Borges's comments, for example, in "El cuento policial," in *Borges, Oral* p. 79.

[6] Some exceptions include Agatha Christie and her elderly detective Miss Marple, Sara Paretsky's tough sleuth, V.I. Warshawski, Sue Grafton's alphabet series with detective Kinsey Millhone, Carolina García Aguilera's detective, Lupe Solano, Alicia Giménez Bartlett's series with Petra Delicado, Patricia Cornwell's Dr. Kay Scarpetta, and so on.

the detective functioning as the very epitome of ratiocinative logic" (56). The notion of a female detective protagonist has been at odds with the traditional dichotomy of the rational male and the intuitive female, leading to the relatively limited and delayed occurrence of the female sleuth.[7] Heather Worthington argues that the problem lies in the fact that detective fiction was developed primarily in "white, Western, patriarchal societies in which agency was granted to men rather than women" (41), and thus the genre reflects this gendered power structure by repeatedly portraying the detective as a man. Even upon the increasing emergence of female detective fiction authors, "the overwhelming majority of detectives in fiction have until quite recently been men" (Berglund 138). Detective fiction is "So strongly gendered . . . that the fictional feminist private detectives of the 1970s and 80s, such as Sara Paretsky's independent, assertive V.I. Warshawski, were described by Susan Geeson as 'Philip Marlowe in drag'" (Worthington 108-9). Even so, Amelia Simpson maintains "The masculinization of the genre is even more pronounced in Latin America because of its 'gendered history of literary culture' (Simpson, *Encyclopedia* 257).

Despite the fact that men have historically dominated the production of culture in Latin America, in recent years, female Latin American detective fiction writers have experimented with the genre, using it to re-vision gender roles, defy patriarchal dominance, and achieve breakthrough literary accomplishments. In their study of the female-authored hard-boiled genre Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones explain that the hard-boiled genre has been and continues to be an especially attractive subgenre for women writers because the "hard-boiled . . . posit[s] the tantalizing possibility that one can speak and act outside of pervasive and defective institutional structures—a possibility even more tantalizing to and meaningful for women, who have often

[7] Although he is famous for *The Moonstone* (1868), Wilkie Collins, wrote a lesser-known novel, *The Law and the Lady* (1875), which is one of the earliest examples of a detective novel featuring a female sleuth, albeit an unofficial one.

been systematically excluded from and routinely oppressed by such structures (194). Female hard-boiled detectives represent an even more marginalized position than their male counterparts. As Jane S. Bakerman observes of male hard-boiled detectives: "Though they are not widely respected members of 'the system,' they are obviously members of the male power structure" (128). The female hard-boiled detective, on the other hand, works both outside of the corruption of the law and the oppressive patriarchal structure, allowing women writers to envision bold female characters who challenge reductive gender roles and refuse to submit to subjugation.

Detective Fiction as a Popular Genre

There is one final issue that must be considered before outlining the specifics of my project. Detective fiction is, of course, a genre of popular literature. Along with romance, fantasy, and science fiction, crime fiction has often been dismissed by the academy as unworthy of critical study. According to David Glover, this contentious, "well-rehearsed" debate began in the public sphere as early as the sixteenth-century, and is still being argued today (68). Writing in 1996 about detective fiction, Mempo Giardinelli maintains: "a pesar de tan masiva aceptación esta literatura todavía es considerada 'menor.' Como si lo policiaco estuviera condenado, más allá de la masividad de sus cultores, a seguir siendo un 'subgénero,' una especie de hijo ilegítimo de la literatura 'seria'" (13). Indeed, the academy tends to hold "serious" and "challenging" literature in high regard, while distancing itself from the more formulaic popular literature. In their discussions of the classic detective story, many critics liken the genre to a drug that soothes the reader with a "pattern of reassurance" (Holquist 153), invariably culminating in the comforting restoration of order. Michael Holquist, for example, maintains that classic detective fiction has a "narcotizing effect" (173). Anna Wilson likewise asserts, "Whether the form is

thought to provide psychological or social satisfaction, the end is the same: the reader is narcotized" (253). The metaphor of detective fiction as an addictive drug is even replicated in readers' denials of or guilty admissions to being consumers of detective fiction. W.H. Auden, for example, admits his addiction to detective novels, likening it to his dependency on tobacco and alcohol ("The Guilty"). Patricia Duncker, on the other hand, delivers a quintessential rejection of popular fiction, including detective fiction, in *Sisters and Strangers* (1992), avowing: "I am not an addict of escapist fantasy and never read myself to sleep with thrillers, predictable science fiction, or romance pulp. I prefer fiction which directly confronts difficulty rather than evades it, and usually sitting upright" (195). Gillian Whitlock forcefully, but rightly, rebukes Duncker's dismissive and reductive stance on popular literature:

> the values of the academy and the self-characterization of the highly literate are evident: popular forms are 'pulp,' 'predictable' and sleep inducing. Readers are 'addicts,' lacking discernment and seeking escape into a fantasy world which denies, social, moral, ethical, political issues. The vigilant, politically informed reader—both physical and mentally 'upright,' aware and engaged—prefers fictions which 'confront difficulty.' (99)[8]

Like Whitlock, I find the derisive comments often made about genres of popular literature like detective fiction to be simplistic. Instead I agree with Ross MacDonald, that popular literature houses and challenges some of our principles, adapting to reflect the current moment:

> Popular fiction, popular art in general, is the very air a civilization breathes . . . . It reaffirms our values as they change, and dramatizes the conflicts of those values

[8] In her recent study on feminism, Felski argues that popular art has long been deprecated because it is "associated with intense emotion, mindless absorption, and sensual cravings—in other words, with stereotypical feminine traits. The image of a bored and frustrated housewife gobbling up romance novels like Valium remains our most familiar symbol of the insidious effects of mass culture, itself a deeply etched and ubiquitous cultural cliché" (*Literature* 32).

> . . . It describes new modes of behavior, new versions of human character, new shades and varieties of good and evil, and implicitly criticizes them. (8-9)

Latin American detective fiction in particular defies the notion that popular literature is escapist and does not "confront difficulty." Contemporary Latin American writers work within the detective fiction frame to denounce widespread corruption and challenge repressive political regimes. Indeed, according to Giardinelli, "la novela negra . . . tiene las mejores posibilidades de reseñar los conflictos político-sociales de nuestro tiempo" (13). [9] Similarly, Rolo Díez underscores the crime novel's function as " . . . a critical, admonitory eye, that lays bare hypocrisy and reveals the grotesque in society" (Braham 108). In recent decades Latin American women writers have joined their male counterparts, penning detective fiction that subverts stereotypical gender constructions and confronts patriarchal structures.

A Closer Look at the New Queens of Crime

The first chapter of my dissertation examines three stories from the collection *Historias en rojo* (1967) by the Argentine writer Syria Poletti. "Estampa antigua," "Mala suerte," and "Rojo en la salina" are three family-based detective stories in which a mother or a child acts as a detective when the official investigators' findings are inconclusive or inaccurate. Rather than relying solely on physical evidence or scientific proof to determine guilt, as the official detectives do, Poletti's perceptive female investigators are able to interpret other people's behavior and imagine the killer's potential motivations. They also resourcefully use both stereotypically "feminine" and "masculine" investigative means—intuition and deductive reasoning—affording them a fuller picture of the crime. Whereas earlier works such as Wilkie

[9] Spanish writer Manuel Vazquez Montalbán shares Giardinelli's high regard for the genre, affirming: "the only legitimate and ethical novel of our time is the detective novel" (Braham 108).

Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875) feature female detectives who attempt to exonerate their husbands of the crimes for which they stand accused, Poletti's sleuths are determined to uncover the truth, and in "Rojo en la salina" the protagonist ultimately discovers her own husband's guilt. The narrative thread that is repeated throughout these three stories is that a male family member threatens the integrity of his family in his relationship with a woman. Poletti juxtaposes the weakness and emotional frailty of men with the strength and cunning of her female protagonists, who work to rebuild the stability of their respective families and communities following the male family member's betrayal.

In her consideration of gender roles and family dynamics, Poletti is unique among the authors examined in this dissertation in her emphasis on children. They play a prominent role in each story. For example, in both "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte," an older narrating protagonist relates events that took place when the narrator was a child. Perhaps the most disturbing of Poletti's stories is "Estampa antigua" in which the narrator recounts her discovery of and becomes an accomplice to her grandmother's plot to kill the narrator's aunt. This story in particular challenges the notion that children are inherently innocent and that they have no place in detective fiction. Finally, in "Rojo en la salina," Poletti's detective, Mecha, is able to discover the killer thanks to a painting her daughter did the night of the murder. In addition to playing various roles in the investigation or the crime itself, Poletti's child protagonists also function as mouthpieces for the author. In "Mala suerte," Francesca's daughter denounces her mother for not standing up to her husband but rather submissively accepting abuse. Similarly, in "Rojo en la salina," Yessy criticizes her mother, Mecha, for not perceiving the duplicity of her husband, Guillermo.

Angélica Gorodischer's two humorous thrillers, *Floreros de alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara* (1985) and *Jugo de mango* (1988) are the focus of my second chapter. In both novels Gorodischer features elderly women who defy notions of "feminine" timidity and embark upon dangerous investigations in foreign countries. The protagonist in *Floreros,* a grandmother-to-be, leaves her four daughters and her comfortable home in Argentina to conduct an espionage mission in Mexico. Unlike Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, who offers her investigative assistance without pay, Gorodischer's protagonist is sought out and paid handsomely for her services. Thanks to her experience in espionage during World War II, the protagonist of *Floreros* possesses stereotypically "unfeminine" expertise such as how to break into someone's house without being detected and valuable knowledge of car mechanics. Delmira Luzuriaga, the middle-aged female protagonist of *Jugo de mango*, on the other hand, has no investigative experience whatsoever and demonstrates a preference for the predictability of the familiar. After thwarting an unexpected terrorist attack while on a flight bound for the United States, Delmira and her fellow passengers are forced to spend a few days in a Caribbean country governed by a repressive dictator. During her stay on the island, Delmira learns about the dictatorial regime and the constant threat of violence facing the country's inhabitants. Her inquisitiveness and good fortune in being at the right place at the right time makes her an unwitting detective who, by the end of the novel, is willing to fight back physically against those who aim to oppress her. As in *Floreros*, Gorodischer uses humor in *Jugo de mango* to ridicule those who unquestioningly conform to gender roles and submit to patriarchal dominance. Instead, Gorodischer proposes these two assertive protagonists as models of female empowerment.

The third chapter of my dissertation compares *Elena sabe* (2007) by the Argentine writer Claudia Piñeiro and *Morena en rojo* (1994) by the Argen-Mex writer Myriam Laurini. Rather

than presenting the reader with a single perpetrator who acts "as an aberration in a basically stable, secure society," Piñeiro and Laurini's novels epitomize the hard-boiled aesthetic in their " . . . distrust of institutions and [their] view of crime as all-pervasive" (Simpson 11-12). Piñeiro's novel features a very unusual detective, a woman who suffers from Parkinson's disease whose daughter has died in what the police have deemed to be a suicide. Nevertheless, the eponymous character refuses to accept the police's conclusion, and thus, despite her physical limitations, Elena embarks upon a quixotic investigation in order to discover the culprit behind her daughter's death. The novel follows Elena in her arduous journey to Isabel Mansilla's house—a woman whose connection with Elena's family is initially unclear—and along the way, Elena reflects upon her troubled relationship with her now-deceased daughter, Rita. As we discover, the illness that now restricts Elena's physical movements mirrors the socio-political and religious norms of behavior to which Elena has faithfully adhered all of her life. In one notable flashback, for example, we see the great pains Elena has taken to conceal her own menstruation, and the shame she feels when she is unable to do so. Piñeiro's novel is, to my knowledge, the only detective novel that depicts the social stigma associated with women's menstruation, bringing to the fore an issue that has, until very recently, been avoided by men and women alike. Despite Elena's acceptance of Catholic doctrines and societal norms, which have dictated her behavior all of her life, by the end of the novel, Elena rejects these restraints, determined to no longer allow repressive institutions to dictate her behavior.

Like *Elena sabe*, *Morena en rojo* deals with crimes perpetrated by repressive and exploitative institutions, rather than deviant individuals. Writing in 1996, Gustavo Pellón identifies three trends in Spanish American narrative following the Boom (282), two of which—documentary novel (*novela testimonio*) and detective novel—are seamlessly intertwined in

Laurini's *Morena en rojo*. The novel centers upon la Morena, a mulatta reporter who, like the marginalized women whose testimonial accounts she chronicles, suffers from discrimination due to her race and gender. Thus, rather than centering upon one individual crime, *Morena en rojo* narrates a series of abuses, giving the reader a sense of the widespread scale on which these crimes take place. La Morena's stories are repeatedly censored before they run in the papers since they threaten to reveal the rampant venality and exploitation in which the police and many members of the press, including her boss, are involved. Nevertheless, la Morena persistently struggles to recount the atrocities these women endure. In that sense, la Morena embodies a reality of Mexican contemporaneity; given the widespread police corruption, reporters like la Morena now perform work that used to be limited to the police. Laurini applauds la Morena's selfless resolve and her refusal to be deterred by danger, but in spite of la Morena's determination to unveil the vast world of crime, she enjoys relatively limited success. In that sense, Laurini's novel exemplifies Walton and Jones's description of feminist detective novels, which "explore—and exploit—the possibilities of individual agency even as they expose the limitations of that agency. In the process they convey to their audience, especially women readers, both a sense of potential empowerment and a consciousness of systematic oppression" (208). In other words, while Laurini commends women like la Morena who assume agency, the author simultaneously recognizes the magnitude of the challenge that women and other marginalized individuals face in combatting widespread oppression.

In the final chapter of my dissertation, I examine two works, Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's *Backyard/Traspatio* (2009) and Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da* (2007). Carrera and Berman's film is a fictionalized account of the femicide that has plagued Juárez, Mexico since 1993. The film centers upon a new police captain, Blanca Bravo, who discovers

how commonplace these horrific crimes have become. Despite her determination to bring the perpetrators to justice and effect a change in Juárez, Blanca's efforts are thwarted by her own colleagues. Unbeknownst to her, many of those on the Juárez police force, especially her boss, el Comandante, have a hand in the crimes she is trying to solve and prevent. Using René Girard's theory of the scapegoat, I explain how the Comandante ostracizes her from the rest of the force and effectively drives a wedge between her and her partner, Lieutenant Fierro. Many of the victims of the femicide in Juárez have been *maquiladora* workers, and thus, in addition to rampant police corruption, Carrera and Berman condemn the foreign-run *maquiladoras*, which lure impoverished women to Juárez, enticing them with rarely fulfilled promises of economic independence while exploiting them for cheap labor. Despite losing numerous members of their work force to femicide, *maquiladora* owners refuse to spend the resources necessary to protect their workers.

While Carrera and Berman's film centers upon the brutal rapes and murder of women in Juárez, Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da,* features a serial killer whose male victims are castrated, their bodies displayed in the city streets. Alongside each victim, the murderer places verses by the Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik written in pink nail polish or lipstick. This leads la Detective, the investigator in charge, to believe that Pizarnik's poetry holds some clue to murderer's identity. Furthermore, the proximity of the verses to the corpse suggests that the victim's body is, like the poetry itself, a text to be read. The crime in question, castration, serves as a metaphor through which Rivera Garza explores language, writing, and critical reading—of both written and bodily texts. Although *La muerte me da* begins, as do most detective novels, with the discovery of the body in the opening pages, the author subverts nearly all of the conventions of the detective genre by alternating between several unidentified points of view,

making numerous intertextual references, and ultimately denying the reader a tidy or conclusive ending. Rivera Garza also experiments with metafiction by featuring a character named Cristina Rivera Garza, who is the primary informant and the leading suspect in this case. More than any of the other works included in this dissertation, this novel pushes the boundaries of detective fiction.

Chapter One:
Syria Poletti and the Family-Centered Detective Narrative

Syria Poletti was an Italian-born novelist, short story writer, and author of children's literature who immigrated to Argentina in her early twenties. Her parents emigrated from Italy when she was a child, leaving Poletti in her grandmother's care (Hernández-Araico 461), an experience that is reflected in many of Poletti's works, including two of the short stories analyzed in this chapter.[10] This chapter centers upon "Rojo en la salina," "Mala suerte," and "Estampa antigua" from Poletti's collection *Historias en rojo* (1967).[11] These are family-centered detective stories in which a woman—a mother or a young girl—solves the mystery at hand.[12] Although Poletti's protagonists, like several other female characters analyzed in this dissertation, do not hold the official title of detective, it would be erroneous to state, as Martínez does, that Poletti's characters do not fulfill the role of detective (426). The reader recognizes these women as *de facto* investigators, as they seek to uncover the truth when the police are unable or unwilling to do so, or when the murder is presumed to be an accident (Martella 32). Faced with the incompetence or the indolence of the official investigators, Poletti's female protagonists take the law into their own hands.

The most striking aspect of Poletti's detective fiction, a unique feature among the works examined in this dissertation, is the inclusion of children in her short stories. As Martella

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[10] Poletti alluded to this traumatic experience, among other autobiographical events that shaped her work, in affirming: " . . . confieso que me arrebatan los temas que me tocan de cerca, los que antes de ser temas, fueron problemas concretos" (Fornaciari 149). Poletti addressed the autobiographical elements in her work in greater detail on pp. 145-46.

[11] In the future, I would like to incorporate "El hombre de las vasijas de barro," another fascinating short story from *Historias en rojo,* in which a grandmother, accompanied by her granddaughter, solves the mystery at hand. This story centers upon a mentally retarded man who is wrongly accused of the murder of Minda, another mentally handicapped person. Like Rosita, Minda prostitutes herself for money.

[12] As I will explain later in this chapter, while the young girl in "Estampa antigua" ultimately acts as an accomplice in the murder of her loathed aunt, she initially fulfills the role of detective in her discovery of tía Wanda's adulterous affairs and her grandmother's plan to eliminate tía Wanda.

appropriately observes, " . . . in traditional detective stories, there are practically no children who appear as characters of significance, [n]or [are there] even references to children" (32-33). Similarly, Routley affirms: " . . . in the world in which Holmes moved, as in that in which Poirot was at home, children were about somewhere but simply didn't bother adults" (165). Children are even less common in hard-boiled detective fiction, as the tough, hard-boiled detective is by definition a loner without a family (Grella 106). Routley attributes the absence of children to their presumed innocence and "the obvious assumption . . . that . . . children have no place in these incidents at all" (165). Furthermore, Routley argues, detective fiction has gained wide readership among those from the middle class precisely because it has avoided middle class subjects such as parenting and children, offering readers an escape from domestic reality. Unlike most detective fiction, children are at the forefront of Poletti's short stories, focusing the detective story inward towards the family. In "Estampa antigua" and "Rojo en la salina," the child-protagonists even influence the outcome of the investigation.[13] Poletti's unconventional inclusion of children subverts the common stereotype that children are inherently innocent and challenges the belief that one can or should always shield children from unpleasant adult affairs.

As Routley has observed, the presence of children in detective fiction is, at times, unsettling, and this is perhaps best exemplified in Poletti's short story "Estampa antigua" in which a young girl is not only complicit in her aunt's murder but also orchestrates its cover-up. "Estampa antigua" features an older narrator-protagonist who recounts life-changing events from her childhood. The story begins when the narrator's uncle, Nando, unintentionally kills his wife, Wanda, when firing a gun he believes to be unloaded. In an attempt to protect her son, Nando's

[13] Poletti indicated that in featuring children in detective fiction she strove to illustrate "las insospechadas consecuencias que acarrean, para un adolescente, ser testimonio de un crimen, por legítimo que éste parezca" (159-60). In both "Estampa antigua" and "Rojo en la salina" the child protagonists are witnesses to crimes, but they react in markedly different ways to this shared experience.

mother—the narrator's grandmother—plots Wanda's murder, loading the gun after learning of Wanda's unfaithfulness to Nando. Expecting someone else to shoot Wanda, Nando's mother inadvertently causes her own son to be charged with murder. At the sentencing, Nando's mother rushes towards the witness stand, and in her haste she overlooks a set of stairs, stumbling to her death. The grandmother manages to avoid suspicion herself thanks to her granddaughter, who disposes of the bullet—the only piece of evidence that could incriminate her grandmother.

The narrator-protagonist who recounts the events outlined above is unreliable (Booth 158-59), largely because of her role in her aunt's murder, though her unreliability manifests itself in other ways, which I will examine subsequently. In 1929, Ronald A. Knox codified ten rules of the detective fiction genre, one of which expressly prohibits the merging of the narrator and the culprit: " . . . the criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow" (200). Nevertheless, in 1926 Agatha Christie shocked her readers with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* a novel Lisa Zunshine calls " . . . something of a watershed in the history of the genre" (138), as the narrator, Dr. James Sheppard, is, in fact, the murderer. Like Christie's novel, Poletti's "Estampa antigua" also challenges Knox's dictum forcing us to consider *everyone*, including the narrator as a possible suspect. While Christie's novel and Poletti's short story differ significantly in that the former features a narrator who is a murderer and the latter features a narrator who is an accomplice, in both cases the narrators' involvement in the respective crimes is unexpected. The narrator of "Estampa antigua" is much more forthcoming than Dr. James Sheppard*,* and yet like him she does not fully reveal her role in her aunt's murder until the end of the story. I would argue that the surprise we feel when we learn that an eleven-year-old child deviously covers up her

grandmother's crime is comparable to our shock upon learning the murderer's identity in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

Not only does the narrator's complicity in the crime point to her unreliability, she also denies any lapses in memory despite the number of years that have elapsed since the events she describes. Like Carmen Laforet's *Nada*, "Estampa antigua" " . . . is written in the first person, narrated by a somewhat older [version of the protagonist], looking back on her younger self" (Anderson 542).[14] That is, the narrator in the present, relates events of the past, and like Andrea of *Nada*, " . . . for much of the time she lulls us into a state of mind where the past acquires a kind of immediacy, and we follow along vicariously with the . . . protagonist as she experiences the many events that are recounted" (Anderson 543). We see the same double focus in picaresque novels such as *Guzmán de Alfarache* and *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Poletti carefully crafts this sense of immediacy by interspersing episodes narrated in the present into the narrator's account, which is predominantly recounted in the past tense. The shifts to the present tense are seamless and intentionally inconspicuous, making the reader feel even more acutely this sense of immediacy; in doing so, Poletti achieves a number of things, not least of which is leading us to conceive of the narrator as the little girl.[15]

In Lisa Zunshine's thought-provoking book, *Why We Read Fiction* (2006), she considers how, as readers of detective fiction, we have more or less become conditioned to "*disbelieve*, from the very beginning and for as long as possible, the words of pretty much every personage

[14] Two of Poletti's novels likewise feature narrators who " . . . engage the reader in . . . retrospective vision[s] of [their] childhood" (Hernández-Araico). Although the particulars of the stories examined in this chapter do not align perfectly with Poletti's own childhood, all three feature a child who suffers a traumatic incident at a very young age, suggestive, if not entirely representative of Poletti herself.

[15] As I argue subsequently, the narrator also creates a sense of immediacy in an attempt to ward off doubts surrounding her memory. It is unclear how many years separate the moment of narration and the recounted events, but this story is, significantly, based upon the unreliable narrator's recollections of events.

we encounter" (124) because everyone, indeed *everyone* as Christie illustrated, must be considered as a potential suspect. This is, as Zunshine notes, contrary to how we normally read fiction; generally we presume that what we are told is true, unless, of course, given a reason to distrust the narrator. Zunshine describes the complicated yet nearly automatic way in which we "tag" information in detective fiction as being potentially untrue:

> [We] store nearly every attribution of the mental state behind each character's behavior with a very 'strong' metarepresentational tag. If, for example, a potential suspect, Flora, says that she left her room on the night of the murder because she wanted to get some water, the Flora says part of the representation—that is, its source tag—ensures that we will take her explanation into account, but we are strongly prepared to find that it is not true. (129)

Although we are normally somewhat wary of characters' interpretations in detective fiction, I would argue that, despite our better judgment, we view the narrator's account in "Estampa antigua" with somewhat less suspicion than we might otherwise. The way in which the narrator creates the sense of immediacy described above causes us to conflate the older narrating protagonist with the child featured in the recounted events. Like the detectives in the story, then, we erroneously presume that the girl's young age ensures the veracity of the account.

In addition to disarming the reader, the unreliable narrator of "Estampa antigua" insists that her memory of tía Wanda's death and the investigation that followed is not only sound but virtually seared into her in a corporeal way: "Está todavía patente en mí . . . Ha de ser cierto lo que dicen: Que los dramas de la infancia nos marcan. Nos dejan su impronta en los huesos" (45). As we learn in the final lines of the story, this remark has an additional, darker meaning that

reveals the protagonist's role in protecting the guilty,[16] but initially it functions to assure the implied reader of the veracity of the events the narrator is to describe. Like the older, narrating Andrea in *Nada*, the narrator of "Estampa antigua" reproduces conversations from years ago in implausible detail (Anderson 543). When the narrator recounts her own thoughts and feelings from childhood, as Anderson suggests of *Nada*, " . . . we have to ask ourselves to what extent the narrat[or] . . . can be 'faithful' to her younger self" (543). Poletti's story differs from *Nada* in that we have in the former a double—child and adult—perspective, rather than simply an adult looking back on events of her youth. Nevertheless, I would argue that we should view the older narrator-protagonist's account in "Estampa antigua" with suspicion, as well.

Issues of memory aside, the narrator's point of view is unquestionably subjective. Throughout the story, she juxtaposes herself and her family members, whom she portrays in an overwhelmingly positive light, with tía Wanda, whose licentious behavior the narrator describes in detail. The reader's first indication of the narrator's thinly veiled hatred for her aunt appears shortly after her uncle shoots Wanda, and the protagonist fears that her aunt might survive: "¡Por Dios! . . . ella era capaz de no morirse" (45). Immediately following Wanda's death, the narrator makes no effort to conceal her relief that she and her family are "libres ya de la mujer de los pechos con la que él [tío Nando] nos había humillado" (48-49). This quotation lays bare the narrator's bitterness towards her uncle, which I will address later in this chapter, but it also points to Wanda as the root of her family's problems. Foreshadowing Herminio and Franco Franchi's fall into temptation, the narrator affirms: " . . . una no podía mirar [ese cuerpo] sin acordarse del séptimo mandamiento" (47), the commandment that prohibits adultery. Rather than offering any

[16] The final lines of the story, recalling the first ones, point to the protagonist's role in obscuring the truth by eliminating the key piece of physical evidence from the scene of the crime and the indelible memory of what she did: "tengo la impronta de esa bala entre los dedos. Es inútil que llene mi mano de tierra" (70).

reproach for the men who pursue Wanda even after she marries, the narrator places the blame squarely upon her aunt for attracting this kind of attention, underscoring her outsider status[17] and provocative manner of dress: "fue con sus cócteles, con su rubio de tintorería, con su corta pollerita de tenis, con sus rodillas desnudas, que atrajo hacia casa a Herminio. . . . y fue con su traje de montar, sus canciones en inglés y los largos esquíes que atrajo hacia casa al conde Franco Franchi" (51-52). While the narrator loathes Herminio for his greed and for having snubbed her family,[18] she nevertheless offers no rebuke of him or Franco Franchi for becoming involved with tía Wanda; instead she uses their affairs with her to convince the implied reader of Wanda's malevolence. In other words, Wanda is portrayed as a temptress who, recognizing the power of her sexuality, uses it—abuses it, in the narrator's mind—to take advantage of the men around her.[19]

By highlighting Wanda's immoral conduct, the narrator attempts to turn the reader against her and convince us that there is justice in her death. In that way, she cunningly inverts the role of victim, suggesting that she and her family have been the victims of Wanda's tyranny. "Estampa antigua" is an early example of the "tough-minded feminism" Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt called for in the 1980s—one "that would be willing to see women as both

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[17] The narrators in all three stories examined in this chapter emphasize the marked differences between those from the city and those from the small, rural towns. As I address later in this chapter, both Wanda and the investigators in "Estampa antigua" are seen as threats in the narrator's mind. She emphasizes their foreignness and implies that these outsiders have no place in her provincial town. The outsiders are juxtaposed with the narrator's grandmother who, in Hernández-Araico's words, represents "the struggle to remain faithful to one's origin and destiny, the battle to retain one's roots—dug in with hard claws, if need be—against the winds of change" (464).

[18] Herminio, who became wealthy after inheriting the brick and tile factories in town, had always selfishly ignored the protagonist and her family before Wanda's arrival. The narrator criticizes his greed, recalling how her uncle, her grandmother and she would " . . . burl[ar] de la cara de hambriento de Herminio, el primo soberbio, día y noche apegado a las chimeneas de su fábrica" (50). Wanda's arrival provokes a sudden change in his behavior, however, causing him, in the narrator's words, to "descubrir su parentesco . . . conmigo" (52).

[19] As I will argue subsequently, the narrator's depiction of Wanda in "Estampa antigua" is remarkably similar to the portrayal of Rosita in "Mala suerte." The narrators in each story depict their aunts as the "ícono de la mala mujer" (Martínez 428).

victims and agents" (Felski 89). Felski explains that Newton and Rosenfelt wrote in response to the " . . . tendency to pit male domination against female powerlessness and virtue, to present women as both totally dominated and essentially good" (89).[20] Nevertheless, Poletti's "Estampa antigua," like "Mala suerte," avoids succumbing to such Manichean differences, recognizing instead "the possibility of female error and cruelty" (125) as represented by Wanda and Rosita respectively. Both characters amply demonstrate that women, too, are capable of despotic and manipulative domination.

As mentioned previously, the narrator argues that, as a woman from Milan (50), Wanda's outsider status is one of the primary sources of conflict because she threatens not only the stability of the protagonist's family structure but also the traditions of the protagonist's town. Like the investigators who are also depicted as outsiders in the protagonist's mountain village, the narrator notes that Wanda's revealing clothing visually marks her as " . . . [la] intrusa privilegiada" (50). Most damaging, however, is the way in which Wanda upsets the traditional power structure, forcing her husband to submit to her. In the narrator's words: "Tía Wanda trastocó modas y costumbres. Allí las mujeres eran esclavas de los hombres. Con ella, el esclavo era tío Nando. Un esclavo imprevisible, a veces sumiso como un perro, implorante y clownesco, y otras violento, atropellado. Vivíamos en vilo. Ella, audaz, avasallaba con todo. Dominante, sorpresiva" (51). The narrator, again manifesting an outwardly traditional attitude towards gender roles, emphasizes the unnaturalness and humiliation of having her docile, submissive uncle yield to his domineering and abusive wife. Even when Nando tries to stand up to Wanda, he quickly retreats: "Sí, también tío Nando una noche, en la mesa, le había largado a ella dos cachetadas violentas. Pero en seguida, cuando ella lo amenazó con irse él se arrodilló, se arrastró,

[20] See Newton and Rosenfelt's "Introduction: Toward a Material-Feminist Criticism" in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, pp. xv-xxxix.

pidió perdón como un pordiosero" (55). Again, the narrator is ashamed of her uncle, who allows himself, and by extension their family, to be dominated by Wanda. By placing this tyrannical power in the hands of Wanda, a kind of power the reader more often sees in the hands of a man, Poletti creates a surprising image that reveals the stark injustice of such domination, regardless of gender. In other words, by portraying Wanda as authoritarian and despotic, relatively unconventional traits for a woman,[21] Poletti argues not for the upholding of the status quo but rather illustrates the injustice of tyranny by either gender.

Although the narrator seems, at first glance, to cast only Wanda in a negative light, the narrator also criticizes her uncle, whom she resents for getting involved with Wanda.[22] Nando is, as the narrator emphasizes, a privileged, well-educated individual who nevertheless becomes ensnared and is subjugated by Wanda: "Tío Nando viajaba. Hablaba idiomas. Tocaba la corneta. En uno de sus viajes a Milán conoció a Wanda, el cataclismo que usaba faldas cortas y maquillaje" (50). In *Literature After Feminism*, Felski, following Newton and Rosenfelt, argues for "a more nuanced account of how maleness is formed under intense ideological and social pressures" (89), insisting that not all men have equal access to power. Again, rather than seeing men as uniformly powerful, Felski affirms that one's authority is determined by a number of factors including race, class, and sexuality (89), but one's partner can also influence the amount of power or prestige a person has. Despite his talents, Nando reveals an underlying sense of insecurity in pursuing a relationship with a wealthy, attractive woman who so openly flaunts her

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[21] There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule. Celia Correas de Zapata, in fact, astutely compares the image of Rosita with the eponymous character of Rómulo Gallegos' novel, *Doña Bárbara* (1929), affirming, "el perfil de Tía Rosita en 'Mala suerte,' la iguala a esa hembra predatoria de Doña Bárbara, aunque a la primera le obsesione el dinero y a la segunda, el poder" (204). In that sense, Wanda bears a closer resemblance to Doña Barbara than Rosita, as both Wanda and Doña Barbara are driven by their desire for power.

[22] As we will see, this is a common thread in each of the three stories examined in this chapter; each features a man who threatens the honor and integrity of his family in his involvement with another woman.

sexuality. He is disloyal to his own family for " . . . prestige, as represented by . . . [his] superficial wife" (Hernández-Araico 464-65), yet, ironically, his relationship with Wanda does nothing but diminish his authority.

While the narrator resents Nando for his involvement with Wanda, she is nevertheless protective of him, portraying him in a particularly positive light when trying to persuade the investigators of his innocence. Although the detectives charge Nando with the murder of Wanda, the protagonist maintains that their understanding of him, like their grasp of the case itself, is far from complete. The narrator expresses a favorable opinion of Nando in part because she wants to maintain the integrity of her family,[23] but she also obviously feels indebted to him for having saved her life when an avalanche killed her parents and demolished her home. She calls him a hero (50), insisting: "¿Qué sabe el oficial del tío Nando, muchacho luchando contra el aluvión de piedras y nieve para rescatarme, él que ni siquiera sabía usar hondazos para matar pájaros? ¿No ven que él no entiende nada de balas, de cargadores, de fechas [*sic*]?" (61-62). As she does earlier when she points to the detectives' naïveté, Poletti's narrator underscores her uncle's ingenuousness. In this case, however, the narrator has different motives; while she takes advantage of the detectives' naïveté to manipulate them, she emphasizes her uncle's inexperience with weapons to try to prove his innocence. As when she ties bows in her hair to appear even more like a child, this obviously biased narrator emphasizes Nando's youthfulness by lovingly referring to him as "nuestro tío Nando, tan adolescente y tan enamorado" (61). Her

[23] The narrator underscores the unity of her family before Wanda's arrival: "Éramos tres en uno. Los tres con la sumisión a las cosas milenarias y las palabras hacia adentro. Los tres felices con poco" (50). In addition to emphasizing the strength of her familial structure, this quotation also highlights her family's strict adherence to tradition, again, before Wanda marries into the family. The final line is a pointed criticism of Wanda, Franco Franchi, and Herminio who flaunt their lavish lifestyle filled with cocktails (51), purebred horses (52), and cars (52) respectively.

comment also underscores his complete, albeit misguided and unreciprocated, adoration for Wanda.

The section quoted above is also significant in terms of revealing the psychology behind the young, female narrator who, like her grandmother, feels that her family structure has been disrupted by Wanda's intrusion into Nando's life. Even Nando, whom, again, the narrator considers a hero, becomes a completely different person once Wanda marries into their family. Even when Nando hits his niece, she still shifts blame upon Wanda, arguing that this is not the real Nando, but the cruel person Wanda has made him become: " . . . [É]l ya no era él. Estaba embrujado" (55). Upon her aunt's death, the protagonist gazes at her uncle and affirms that she feels " . . . ganas de abrazarlo de besarlo, y de quererlo *como antes*, *ahora que finalmente habíamos vuelto a ser como antes*, libres ya de la mujer de los pechos con la que él nos había humillado" (48-49, emphasis mine). Wanda, who is portrayed as a seductress, disrupts the balance of the familial structure such that the narrator has to compete for her uncle's affection. As she describes it, even her uncle's expressions seem to reflect his conflicted state: "Y tío Nando, con la sonrisa como partida por la mitad, sin saber si estar con ella o con nosotras" (51). Having "helped" her uncle "choose" between them, the narrator is hopeful that everything will go back to the way it was before Wanda's arrival. In almost identical language as before, the narrator reiterates, as if trying to assure herself: "Después todo volverá a ser como antes. Tío Nando volverá a ser mío" (54). The protagonist's traumatic loss of her parents at a young age undoubtedly makes her even more desperate to re-claim the familial arrangement she had with her grandmother and uncle before Wanda interfered. Therefore, she is hopeful that with the elimination of Wanda, her grandmother, Nando, and she will go back to being the close family unit they once were (50).

Although Poletti emphasizes the narrator-protagonist's disturbing role as accomplice in her aunt's murder, I would argue that she also functions as a detective figure. While she does not act as an investigator in as obvious a fashion as, for example, Mecha, the mother in "Rojo en la salina," her discovery of Wanda's adulterous affairs and the subsequent unearthing of her grandmother's plot to murder Wanda make her a detective, albeit a very unconventional one. Despite her youth, the protagonist rightly intuits that Herminio, her grandmother's wealthy nephew, and Franco Franchi, the painter and count, are sexually involved with Wanda. The young girl uses her investigative prowess to confirm Franchi and Wanda's sexual liaison, despite Herminio's attempts to divert her attention (52-53). The narrator, who shrewdly perceives adults' desires to shield her from the truth, learns by covert observation of Wanda's affairs and her grandmother's plot to eliminate Wanda. As when Herminio tries to veil Wanda's affairs from her, the narrator uncovers her grandmother's plans by watching her carefully:

> Aquella noche anterior a lo que había sucedido . . . Ella [la abuela] salía sigilosamente de su habitación . . . Descendía . . . ¿Iría a prepararme sorpresas como en la noche de Reyes?. . . . Ella se inclina para cerciorarse si duermo… Sí, yo cierro los ojos . . . Revuelve algo en sus manos, o debajo del chal . . . ¿Por qué las manos se esconden debajo del chal? ¿Qué juguete oculta, o toca, con sus dedos cubiertos? Algo resbala, algo brillante, que queda entre los pliegues de la colcha. . . (68)[24]

As in more traditional detective fiction, the reader discovers alongside the detective—in this case the little girl—that her grandmother is, in fact, concealing a bullet, which is intended to kill

[24] In "El hombre de las vasijas del barro," another short story from Poletti's *Historias en rojo*, the young, female protagonist likewise pretends to be asleep, intuiting that she is about to witness something that might otherwise be censored in her presence (128). Both "El hombre de las vasijas de barro" and "Estampa antigua" suggest that children are often more perceptive than adults realize.

Wanda. Although the narrator's grandmother will not fire the shot herself, the grandmother loads the gun, expecting Herminio will follow through with his threat to kill Wanda if he catches her going out with Franco Franchi again (58).[25] Her age notwithstanding, the protagonist resembles a typical detective up to this point, but she diverges from this fairly traditional trajectory upon discovering her grandmother's involvement; having grasped her grandmother's intentions, the protagonist becomes an accomplice in the murder of Wanda.

The excerpt quoted above merits closer attention, as it reveals another facet of the protagonist's manipulative nature that is, perhaps, less apparent than her deception of the investigators. Like the notoriously unreliable Pascual in *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942), who admits to killing his own mother and his dog Chispa, among others, the narrator-protagonist in "Estampa antigua" does not deny her role in Wanda's death. On the contrary, when the narrator recalls how the investigators allowed her to leave the house, not knowing that she carried with her the one crucial piece of physical evidence, she seems to gloat as she thinks to herself: "La matamos, abuela" (69). While earlier in the story the narrator strives to create the *appearance* of innocence in the presence of the official investigators, this line lays bare the devious nature of the narrator. Perhaps more important is the way in which the narrator tries to justify her behavior to the implied reader, making her actions seem more comprehensible, until, of course, the final pages of the story. There are suspicious moments in which the young girl exhibits inconsistencies in her maturity level; I would argue that the moments in which the narrator-protagonist portrays herself as childish are designed to make the reader believe in her innocence. As Leon Livingston remarks of Pascual Duarte, the narrator is "perfectly aware of his duplicity and . . . deliberately attempts to mislead the reader in order to create a more favorable

[25] Like doña Carmelina in "Mala suerte," then, the grandmother involves herself in a murder in order to protect a loved one. Unlike Rosita's murder, however, which goes perfectly according to the murderer's plans, the grandmother's actions in "Estampa antigua" have unanticipated consequences.

picture of himself" (96). Nevertheless, the way in which the narrator takes relish in her ability to cunningly deceive the official investigators belies her efforts to depict herself as a young, innocent child.

Again, the narrator in "Estampa antigua" attempts to make herself a more sympathetic character by underscoring moments of her own supposed naïveté. When the narrator hears her grandmother sneaking around the house the night before Wanda's death, for example, she seems to feign her own ignorance as she wonders: "¿Iría a prepararme sorpresas como en la noche de Reyes?" (68). She is, of course, still a child, but this moment of innocence is inconsistent with a girl who revels in her ability to dupe the official investigators and throw out an incriminating piece of evidence. While it is conceivable that the narrator might not actually know what her grandmother carries in her hand the night before Wanda's murder, I would argue that on a certain level she must suspect her grandmother's intention to kill Wanda. The protagonist further contradicts her contrived naïveté when she exhibits no reaction whatsoever after her aunt is shot and dies before her eyes. Instead, she admires the way her grandmother faints,[26] deeming it to be an appropriate reaction: "Yo quería imitarla, pero no sabía cómo caerme" (48). In other words, the narrator admits that even though she did not involuntarily have this reaction, she would have liked to, as it would have made her surprise and horror seem more authentic.

In observing the narrator's duplicity with those around her, the reader's confidence in the narrator's account also begins to erode. One particularly suspicious moment occurs after the protagonist discovers Wanda in a compromising position with Franchi. The latter threatens the girl in an effort to keep their affair quiet, and she assures the reader that she does as she is told, but then immediately contradicts herself: "Y yo callé. No, no es cierto. No callé. Le conté todo a

[26] Interestingly, the grandmother's own reaction is also somewhat deceptive, as she faints not because tía Wanda's death is a surprise to her, but because her own son, not Herminio, shoots Wanda.

abuela" (53). The way in which the narrator seems to automatically lie, and then revise her original statement, finally indicating that she had, in fact, told her grandmother, strikes the reader as extremely calculated. This is not a minor detail that might easily be forgotten; it changes the course of all of their lives, and thus the narrator's initial, inaccurate response makes the reader even more distrustful of her account. Furthermore, I would argue that the girl's decision to tell her grandmother about Wanda's illicit behavior likely reflects her knowledge that proof of Wanda's infidelity would inspire such a reaction in her grandmother.

Poletti's depiction of the narrator in "Estampa antigua" therefore openly challenges the assumption that children are innately innocent;[27] the young girl not only knows who really kills Wanda, but she also acts, without instruction or remorse, as an accomplice to the murderess, her grandmother. Not only does the protagonist voluntarily eliminate important physical evidence, she also refuses to reveal anything that might incriminate her grandmother when she is forced to make a formal statement. Again, the narrator seems to obscure the truth instinctively, choosing to remain silent: "abuela jamás me asesoró. Teníamos los mismos ojos y la misma manera de callar" (64). These seemingly superficial similarities in their behavior and physical characteristics point to an extremely important link between these two female characters. As with Yessy and her mother, Mecha, in "Rojo en la salina," there exists an implicit solidarity, an unspoken understanding between them that they are to protect each other.[28] At the end of "Estampa antigua" the narrator imagines having a conversation with her grandmother as she

[27] We see this idea yet again in "El hombre de las vasijas de barro" when Minda is murdered and the doctor argues that discussing whether or not she was pregnant at the time of her death is an inappropriate conversation to have in front of a young girl (122). Her grandmother, on the other hand directly challenges the idea that children like her granddaughter are as naïve as adults presume: "hablo delante de 'los niños' porque ni Minda, ni el que se fue a mirar la luna, ni ésta, son tan inocentes" (124). Moreover the grandmother asserts that shielding things from children is shortsighted, as "los chicos viven en el mundo y deben saber las cosas del mundo" (100).

[28] In "Rojo en la salina," Yessy tries to keep her mother from learning of Guillermo's crime and his affair with Valeria by hiding her painting (36), and then refusing to explain it when her mother finally sees it.

visits her grave with Nando. In it she makes abundantly clear how much she relished obscuring her grandmother's crime: "Dime, abuela; ¿sabías que yo, al arrojar la bala al río, me aliaba contigo? ¿Sabías de la alegría de ese recreo?" (69).

Even more disturbing than the protagonist's guilt in and of itself, is her delight in the knowledge that her age all but grants her immunity from suspicion and also allows her to influence the investigators' findings because, as she puts it: "yo era el testigo más válido por el candor de la edad" (54). Thus, the narrator cunningly takes advantage of the common assumption that children are inherently innocent in order to divert the detectives' attention away from the real criminal. When the officials insist that no one is to enter or leave the house following Wanda's death, the reader observes a scene in which the narrator acts with disconcerting guile, purposefully accentuating her youthfulness in order to escape the trusting investigators:

> Me enlacé las trenzas con dos lindos moños de terciopelo rojo y descendí. En el rellano, uno de los investigadores me detuvo, dulcemente, como si me quisiera acariciar el pelo. Y con la mirada interrogó al jefe.
>
> —Tengo que ir al colegio.
>
> —Déjala pasar. La chica puede salir.
>
> ¿Y cómo no iba a salir? *Una chica de once años no debía presenciar esas escenas.* Y sonrieron ante mi inocente desaprensión: la de ponerme los moños rojos. (49, emphasis mine)

The italicized sentence above is a phrase the narrator has undoubtedly heard adults like the investigators say when trying to shelter children from witnessing things supposedly beyond their maturity level; in that sense, the young girl uses adults' own reasoning to her advantage, allowing her to escape scrutiny. This is a fascinating role reversal in which Poletti underscores

the naïveté, not of the little girl, but of the officials who believe in her innocence. As the reader discovers later, the narrator-protagonist manipulates the investigators into allowing her to leave the house in order to eliminate a crucial piece of evidence and protect her grandmother. While the young girl's manipulation of the investigators is, indeed, atypical in detective fiction, the presence of incompetent police officers is a common trope of the genre.[29] Since Poe's foundational story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), countless writers of detective fiction have juxtaposed the obtuse police with the astute detective. What is unique about Poletti's handling of this trope, however, is that the perspicacious detective—in this case, the child narrator-protagonist—never reveals what she knows. Thus, there is no scene in which the detective methodically explains how he or she has pieced together the story of the crime, uncovering the criminal's identity. Instead, Poletti's female detectives "become the secret bearers of knowledge, . . . conceal[ing] their knowledge of crimes" in order to protect themselves or their family (Simpson, *Detective* 48).

While Poletti underscores the young girl's complicity in her aunt's death, her role as detective must not be overlooked; indeed, her discovery of her aunt's unfaithfulness is critical, as it triggers the action of this story and leads to Wanda's death. Like Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, the protagonist is successful because those around her underestimate her intelligence and perceptiveness, believing her to be naïve (Chouteau and Alderson 140). Once she discovers her grandmother's plan to indirectly kill Wanda, she works towards her own approximation of justice. Wanda has, in the narrator's mind, intruded upon her family, embarrassing them with her licentious behavior, and thus the narrator believes her grandmother was justified to act as she

[29] The novels of classic detective fiction, such as those featuring Sherlock Holmes, include police characters, whose strict adherence to protocol, ironically, seems to ensure their failure to crack the case every time. This trope is also common in female-authored detective fiction, as women writers contrast these characters with "unlikely," but successful detectives such as Gorodischer's protagonist in *Floreros* or Poletti's protagonist in "Estampa antigua."

did. Although the narrator acts according to a rather twisted moral code, she, like the hard-boiled detective, "works outside the established social code, preferring h[er] own instinctive justice to the often tarnished justice of civilization" (Grella 106). The "tarnished justice of civilization" would, of course, punish her grandmother for setting up Wanda's murder, a consequence the narrator finds unthinkable.

Again, while the protagonist of "Estampa antigua" does not systematically investigate a crime in the traditional sense, like Mecha in "Rojo en la salina" and Francesca in "Mala suerte" she is successful in unraveling the human elements of the crime because she is observant in ways that the official investigators are not. Unlike the investigators who rely upon physical evidence that, much to the protagonist's delight, can be destroyed or removed from the crime scene, the protagonist has a keen understanding of human nature and grasps the motivations behind the crime. As Poletti herself indicates, this psychological, human aspect of crime is a fundamental, unifying theme throughout *Historias en rojo*. In the author's words, " . . . en los cuentos reunidos en *Historias en rojo,* hay un común denominador: investigar quién fue el autor de un crimen para desentrañar el misterio del ser. Importa saber 'por qué' se mata y no cómo se descubre un crimen" (Fornaciari 159). In "Estampa antigua," the protagonist observes her aunt's cruel treatment of Nando and recognizes that her grandmother's protective instincts might drive her to kill Wanda. In other words, she understands the psychology and motivations behind people's actions, the crucial piece of the crime the official investigators are missing.

As mentioned previously, a frequent argument throughout the protagonist's remarks is that the investigators' insistence upon the scientific and physical evidence blinds them to the human and psychological aspects of the case. Classic detective fiction writers often feature investigators who, to their detriment, rely almost exclusively upon physical evidence; Scotland

Yard investigators Lestrade and Inspector Japp, in mysteries featuring Sherlock Holmes and Poirot, respectively, are quintessential examples. The official detectives in Poletti's short stories perform this function as well. Schiminovich compares Poletti's "Rojo en la salina" to Borges's and Robbe-Grillet's antidetection stories, but I propose that this comparison should also be extended to Poletti's "Estampa antigua"; in Schiminovich's words, these stories " . . . underscore the limits of knowledge, and support Poletti's contention that intelligence and reasoning alone are not enough to solve any mystery. What is needed is a keen sense of human nature, a fundamental perception of the complexities of human foibles and experiences" (20). Nevertheless, instead of imagining what might have motivated the killer, the investigators in "Estampa antigua" and "Rojo en la salina" are determined to find physical evidence to solve the case, as the following remark on behalf of the narrator indicates: "Siguen emperrados en la bala que falta, la bala de la primera carga" (62).[30] As the reader learns at the end of the story, this is the crucial piece of evidence that the narrator has removed from the scene; in removing the most damaging piece of evidence,[31] the protagonist keeps the investigators from discovering the murderess's identity. She continues to ridicule their investigative tactics, particularly their reliance upon technology, in the following scathing remarks:

> ¿Por qué tantos líos con las impresiones digitales? Porque al oficial se le ocurre que si aciertan con el misterio de esa bala sabrán quién vació el tambor de la

[30] Similarly, in "El hombre de las vasijas de barro," the grandmother who investigates the murder of Minda, accuses the doctor, Juan Franco, of giving too much credence to the physical evidence, which we later discover is planted by the criminal to incriminate Basilio. Like the investigators in other Poletti's stories, the doctor lacks imagination.

[31] At the beginning of the story, the narrator frantically considers where to hide the one piece of physical evidence incriminating her grandmother, the bullet upon which the detectives are doggedly fixated throughout their investigation: "Entré en al [*sic*] habitación que compartía con abuela. El guardapolvo . . . La cartera escolar . . . ¿En el bolsillo? ¿En la cartera . . . ?" (49). Again, although the reader does not understand this initially, this is the moment in which the narrator becomes an accomplice in her grandmother's crime.

> primera carga, dando así con la mano criminal que cargó 'intencionalmente' el arma después del lunes, es decir, después de la partida de tío Nando . . . Revisaron la casa como peritos que eran. Y acabaron por irse sin encontrar ningún rastro. Irían a continuar las investigaciones en la ciudad con sus peritajes, impresiones digitales y todos esos acertijos que hoy inventa la ciencia para suplir la falta de imaginación de los hombres. (63-64)

Again, the young girl mocks the detectives' procedures, insisting that they will not lead to any substantial conclusions. Rivera Garza's la Detective in *La muerte me da*, whom I analyze in the fourth chapter, is likewise criticized for lacking in imagination, suggesting that this is, for women writers, an essential characteristic of a successful detective. Lacking imagination, the detectives in these works are unable to picture what might drive someone to kill—an exercise that would likely help them ascertain the criminal's identity.

The officials in "Estampa antigua" share another commonality with a detective featured in my fourth chapter, this time in Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's *Backyard/Traspatio*; both Blanca Bravo, the female investigator in this film, and the officials in "Estampa antigua" are strangers to the places where they conduct their investigations. The narrator in "Estampa antigua" suggests that the officials' foreignness handicaps them, dooming their investigation of the crime. She underscores the fact that they are from the city by calling them "forasteros" (48, 54) and she repeatedly emphasizes their peculiarities. Poletti's narrator remarks, for example, upon their strange manner of dress when they first arrive: "Imprevistamente llegaron señores de sobretodo y bufanda. Investigadores oficiales, forasteros tajantes que parecían saberlo todo" (48). While the investigators may *seem* to know everything, the protagonist continually draws the reader's attention to gaps in their knowledge, which, in her mind, will cause them to fail. She

maintains that the detectives lack the intelligence to investigate when she describes them "arrugando las comisuras de los ojos para hacerse los sabuesos" (60). Most damaging to the detectives' investigation, however is their lack of a psychological understanding of the people in this town, which the protagonist affirms is needed to solve this case. She explicitly challenges their authority by drawing attention to this in the following rhetorical question: "Qué saben de nosotras y de nuestros muchachos los inspectores de ciudad?" (69). The narrator's question is answered implicitly when the investigators finally admit defeat: "El oficial de investigaciones acabó por declarar que se trataba de un crimen psicológico y, por lo tanto, sin solución. Y oí hablar también de crimen perfecto" (65).

Although the investigators find Wanda's murder to be an impossible case to crack, the narrator argues, on the contrary, that its explanation is quite simple. After the older narrator-protagonist relates the scene of Wanda's death in the past tense, the narration shifts to the present tense and we see the child narrator-protagonist as she is in school having just thrown out the bullet that would incriminate her grandmother. She juxtaposes her teacher's arithmetic explanation, which her dull-witted classmates will invariably fail to comprehend (49),[32] with the equally fruitless investigation carried out by '"Esos forasteros de sobretodo . . . " (54). While in school, the narrator turns over, for the first of many times in her mind, the scene that will become "[una] escena fija en la memoria como cinta fotomagnética" (68). She then reconstructs the events in the past that led to Wanda's murder. Although the case seems perfectly clear to the narrator, as simple as basic arithmetic, the detectives, like her simple-minded classmates, are hopelessly incapable of understanding it: "Nuevamente la maestra escribe operaciones de aritmética sobre la pizarra y sobre la pantalla está la explicación simplísima de un hecho que

[32] In the narrator's words, "la maestra explicaba aritmética a los burros de mis compañeros de clase que no entendían nada" (49).

inútilmente el señor de sobretodo intenta reconstruir con sus peritajes e impresiones digitales" (69). Again, to compensate for their lack of investigative prowess, the detectives rely upon technology that likewise fails to provide them with any answers.

The detectives' investigation is doomed in large part, of course, because the narrator and her grandmother refuse to tell them the truth. The narrator insists that the investigators would be unable to relate to her and her family and see what in their eyes is the incontrovertible justice of Wanda's death. She notes, for example, the detectives' strange official jargon, a veritable foreign language, which the narrator and her family find alienating and confusing:

> 'Antecedentes' era un término impresionante, jamás oído, que nada tenía que ver con nuestro pasado. ¿Cómo decir a gente que no era de la familia, que hablaba en lengua oficial, eso de la gruta, de la mano de Franchi crispada sobre la elástica blancura y ese oscuro pezón y la manos de ella golpeando mi cara? . . . . ¡Antecedentes! Imposible hablar de todo esto. *Esas cosas se guardan. Se ocultan para siempre.* Son los basamentos sobre los que se enquista el futuro. Son esos sedimentos secretos e indestructibles sobre los que se plasma esa complejidad de pasiones y de odios, de resentimientos y apegos, que es la familia. (54-55 emphasis mine)

In the narrator's view, the investigators' questions seem to have no bearing on the case, and regardless, she insists that these are private, family matters. The italicized lines above hint at the narrator's intention to guard such family secrets, protecting those closest to her.[33] Not only does she conceal information to protect her grandmother and herself, but at the end of the story, we

[33] Although the narrator protects Nando to keep him from being incarcerated, she nevertheless hints that families can also have a darker side in which this sort of information might be used for revenge or blackmail instead. In either case, the narrator maintains that this sort of information belongs exclusively to the family.

see the lengths to which the narrator goes to shield Nando from emotional pain as well (70). This is, as I will argue subsequently, a fascinating role reversal in which Poletti depicts her female characters protecting a weak, emotionally fragile man.

Just as the narrator's grandmother orchestrates Wanda's murder in order to protect her son from enduring more emotional abuse, the narrator also seems to protect her uncle instinctively. She defends him, for example, as he flounders in his responses to the investigators' line of questioning, which she deems "preguntas inútiles" (56). The narrator also attempts to account for his unease by arguing: "el oficial jefe tenía una forma de interrogar que acorralaba a cualquiera" (56). In her estimation, the officials overlook some of the most pertinent aspects of the case that would alter the direction of their investigation. She switches to second person narration, as though she were speaking to Nando, arguing, for example, "no te preguntan lo más importante: por qué querías demostrarle que sabías matarla" (62).[34] In other words, the protagonist suggests that if the police investigators knew the details of Wanda's affairs and the way she emotionally abused her husband, they would realize that her death is justified. Here, as in other moments, the protagonist also suggests that the investigators from the city operate according to a different moral code, and that this too will influence their investigation. The officials from the city function as enforcers of the law, which views murder as a punishable crime. Poletti's protagonist, on the other hand, insists that protecting one's family is more important than abiding by the laws of civilized society. In her words, " . . . la ley de Cristo no borra aquella ley que milenios de montañas marcaron en nosotras" (66). Both the narrator and her grandmother, "nosotras," act in accordance with the savage laws of the land, not those of investigators. The narrator underscores the difference between the investigators' and her own

[34] On the previous page, the narrator answers this very question, revealing that Nando "manejaba el revolver con fingida naturalidad solo para hacerse el hombre ante su mujer" (61).

beliefs again when she recalls Wanda's violent reaction after catching her aunt in a compromising position with Franchi: "Esos investigadores de ciudad no creerían que Dios castiga a los que pegan" (55). As in "Mala suerte," the narrator-protagonist insists that people will be punished for their misdeeds.

In addition to defending Nando throughout the investigation of Wanda's death, in the final pages of the story the narrator reveals that she has also taken measures to protect Nando's memory of his mother. While visiting her grave, the narrator explains in an imaginary conversation with her grandmother that she has never revealed the role her grandmother played in Wanda's death: "No temas. No; nuestro Nando, este viejo muchacho enamorado, no sabrá nada de todo esto. Si, él llora. El te llama. El te necesita todavía. No rompió contigo. El es hombre y necesita creer en la paz de los cementerios, en la certidumbre de las campanas y en la santidad de las madres" (69-70). Poletti presents an intriguing inversion of typical gender roles in this relationship between uncle and niece. Rather than depicting a man protecting a woman, the female narrator describes Nando as the weak individual whose naïveté she has carefully preserved by hiding the fact that his own mother killed his beloved Wanda. As before (61), the narrator insists upon calling him "*nuestro* tío Nando" (emphasis mine), verbally reclaiming him from Wanda. Her childlike uncle is, in the narrator's estimation, too immature and emotionally fragile to understand his mother's justifiable protective behavior, and thus the narrator keeps her grandmother's role in Wanda's death a secret. In that respect, then, these two female characters control virtually every aspect of Nando's life, from his short-lived marriage to Wanda to his understanding of the past. In that sense, Poletti disrupts conventional gender roles, subversively placing power in the hands of her female characters.

One particularly intriguing element of this story, which the narrator introduces in her recollections of the past is the *theatrum mundi* motif; she underscores the seemingly fictitious nature of exchanges or actions of those around her, noting that they seem as though they belong in a movie or a play. One such moment takes place when Franco Franchi's purebred horse licks the lump of sugar out of Wanda's hand, and the narrator describes him then cleaning her hand, a romanticized scene the narrator deems " . . . una escena de película" (52). Later, when the investigators try to establish a timeline for the morning Wanda dies, Herminio, who had also been sleeping with Wanda, admits that he had been in her room that morning. The narrator recalls Nando's reaction, and describes it in the following way: " . . . tío Nando volvía a abalanzarse sobre el primo como en los ensayos de teatro" (57). Once again, this entire sequence of events is so unusual, so unreal, that the protagonist likens it to film and theater. Even the robe Wanda wears when her husband finds her with Herminio is described as a " . . . bata como de cine" (58). Finally, the most exaggerated moment of theatrics is the first time that Wanda ridicules Nando and goads him into shooting her. The first time, as the narrator notes, the gun is not loaded, and thus she affirms: "Sí, gracias a Dios, todo era teatro. Electrizante pero teatro" (59).[35] The fact that the gun is not loaded the first time gives tío Nando a false sense of security that nothing bad could happen when playing his part in a drama that allows him to regain some of his masculine authority: " . . . aun cuando estaba a punto de bajar el gatillo creyó, esperó, rogó representar el papel de héroe vengativo. El revolver no podía estar cargado. Tampoco lo estaba dos meses antes" (59). In the final lines, the reader observes Nando's flawed rationale that this drama will be no more dangerous than the last time. Interestingly, the narrator seems to notice the blurring between fiction and reality most often when recalling exchanges with Wanda. It is as

[35] Here, the reader must, of course, read " . . . gracias a Dios" as feigned relief.

though Wanda and the events that followed her marriage into the family were so nightmarish that the protagonist can hardly conceive of them as reality.

Like "Estampa antigua," "Mala suerte" is narrated by a woman looking back upon her childhood, recalling the years her parents, Francesca and Roberto, worked in tía Rosita and tío Silverio's inn in the small town of Galarza. Rosita, like Wanda, is a seductress who eventually is murdered for her immoral behavior, and although it is unclear if she is ever unfaithful to her husband,[36] the mystique surrounding her drives her inn's profits. "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte" are almost identical structurally; both begin with the murder of Wanda and Rosita respectively, and then go back to the beginning in order to explain the events that led to their premature deaths. In "Mala suerte" Roberto, the narrator's father, and don Bonifacio, doña Carmelina's husband, are seduced by the temptress. While the narrator's mother, Francesca, is unable to confront her unfaithful husband, doña Carmelina, who is also wronged by Rosita, imposes her own sort of justice much like the grandmother in "Estampa antigua." Rosita lures don Bonifacio into her inn and Francesca observes how she and Roberto take advantage of don Bonifacio's inebriation, stealing money and a necklace from him. Hours later Rosita is found murdered, and Francesca sets out to determine who is behind her death.

As in "Estampa antigua," the narrator of "Mala suerte" causes the reader to question the reliability of her account; like the narrator of "Estampa antigua," the narrator of "Mala suerte" was a child when the events of the story took place. That is, a number of years separate the events recounted and the moment of narration. Unlike the narrator of "Estampa antigua," however, the narrator of "Mala suerte" raises more explicit doubts with regards to her own

[36] Martínez claims that "Rosita los tienta [a los hombres] con su cuerpo sensual y juega con ellos sin darles más que frustración" (428), and while this seems to be the case wit, the narrator's father, Rosita's involvement with other men who frequent her inn remains ambiguous. Despite her sexually provocative behavior, the narrator admits: " . . . nadie pudo afirmar jamás si Rosita le fue infiel o no [a tío Silverio]" (141).

memory of the events. The moment in which the narrator's father strikes her mother during an argument, for example, seems like a particularly traumatic moment that the narrator would remember vividly, even if she did not want to, and yet she claims to recall only the broad outlines of what happened: "recuerdo vagamente la escena, su violencia, el miedo y la repugnancia" (146).[37] We are left to believe that either the narrator was too young to remember even upsetting moments such as these, too many years have passed between the event and the present time, or she has blocked the memory of these events out of her mind.

In order to supplement her own memories, which are evidently too confused and scattered to give the reader a clear sense of the story, the narrator also includes her mother's account of the events. Like the narrator, Francesca recounts the events some years afterwards, although the amount of time that separates the moment of narration and the events is never specified.[38] While the narrator uses her mother's recollections—especially those of the night before Rosita was murdered (153-58)—to fill the gaps in her story, she does so while conspicuously exposing holes in the timeline her mother presents. In the following scene, for example, the narrator stresses: "*Así cuenta mamá*. Pero nunca dijo dónde fue en ese rato en que salió. Sólo dice que volvió" (158, emphasis mine). Her mother, perhaps cognizant of her own subjectivity or her daughter's doubts, seems to anticipate her interlocutor's skepticism by insisting, as she does twice on 152, "no miento." Still, the narrator reveals her own disbelief as to

[37] I will return to this scene in subsequent pages, as the narrator, likely functioning as a mouthpiece for Poletti, argues that women must do more than Francesca in order to effectively challenge oppressive male dominance.

[38] As the narrator affirms, Francesca's version of the events is one that has been recounted many times over the years: " . . . a mamá siempre le gustó evocar esa época como quien recuerda los años de la guerra . . . lo hace sufriendo y regodeándose en cada detalle, como si buscara una suerte de justificación a esa mala suerte que la persiguió, a la pobreza, a su fracaso de mujer y de madre. Esos años con tía Rosita son su obsesión" (144). Although the narrator insists upon her mother's fondness for recounting every detail, her narrative has undoubtedly been simplified in the numerous retellings or suffered from loss of memory over the years, like many war stories.

her mother's version of the events, particularly her account of how Roberto and Rosita rob don Bonifacio, shortly after which Rosita is discovered " . . . muerta a golpes" (137). The narrator insists, " . . . todo eso me pareció una historia inventada por mamá. Una coartada moral ante nosotros, los hijos" (162).[39] The narrator's suspicion of her mother's account has the dramatic effect of leaving ambiguous her mother's involvement in Rosita's murder until the end of the story. Moreover, this seems to be an overt gesture of contrived transparency on the narrator's behalf; she goes to great lengths, supposedly willing to implicate her own mother in the crime, in order to present the reader with the most "accurate" picture of what happened.

Again, the narrator of "Mala suerte" presents a subjective account, although unlike the narrator of "Estampa antigua," she acknowledges significant changes in her outlook, particularly with regards to Rosita. Indicative of the all-encompassing spell Rosita cast upon Galarza, the narrator admits that tía Rosita had been " . . . la que hace unos años me hubiese gustado tener por madre" (138). Nevertheless, the narrator reverses this opinion as she realizes the way in which her aunt took advantage of Roberto, bringing shame to her mother and their family. Later she expresses admiration for tough women like Doña Carmelina, whom she ironically applauds for having " . . . sabido levantar una fortuna y honestamente, sin necesidad de sucios manejos políticos ni de utilizar la cama" (167). The way in which the narrator is unable to see the cruel side of Rosita and the ruthless side of Carmelina further underscores the limits and unreliability of her perspective. Again, though this story is narrated in much the same way as "Estampa antigua," "Mala suerte" is more obviously supplemented by information the narrator learns after the fact as well as Francesca's version of events. It is highly improbable, for example, that as a

[39] At other times, the narrator draws attention to the fact that she is recounting her mother's subjective version of events—although, interestingly, without recognizing the subjectivity of her narration—as she does here when her mother describes Roberto's reaction after the investigators look underneath their bed for clues: "Mi padre palideció intensamente, insiste mamá" (163).

child she had known the details of Rosita's upbringing (139-40) or that she had perceived with such clarity the way in which Rosita manipulated her own father.

As mentioned previously, both "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte" feature women who use their sexuality to take advantage of men, but unlike Wanda, Rosita appears to seduce and manipulate men exclusively for their money. The narrator repeatedly insists that "la secreta, fervorosa, constante pasión de tía Rosita fue el dinero" (141), later reaffirming: " . . . el amor de ella era el dinero" (152). Rosita drinks alongside her customers, encouraging them to consume more and more, but she is careful to not let it, or anything else, interfere with her earnings: "Ella aceptaba cualquier clase de bebida. Y tomaba. Pero no tanto . . . como para no aprovecharse inmediatamente y a su favor al cobrar la cuenta de este cliente, o de los que quedaban trastornados por el relámpago de intimidad entrevisto en el alza de polleras" (148). Or, as the narrator puts it simply: "Era capaz de privarse de cualquier diversión por dinero" (151-52). Rosita lures men, particularly " . . . gente dispuesta a gastar" (140), into her inn by acting coquettishly and dressing provocatively, displaying her breasts, for example, in " . . . corpiños siempre a punto de reventar, de modo que a uno le hervían las manos por desatar a esos pechos rebeldes y constreñidos. Y ya se sabe que los hombres no aguantan la opresión" (141). The narrator's choice of words here is intriguing; initially she does not specify that *men* had burned with desire to untie Rosita's bodice, but rather she uses the all-inclusive "a uno." Prior to this description, the narrator also indicates of Rosita: "Bastaba verla para desearla" (138), again leaving ambiguous, or making all-inclusive, those who desire her. The narrator is either expressing homoerotic desire, or, more likely, she identifies with male desire in order to confirm and emphasize Rosita's seductive appeal. In acknowledging Rosita's allure, the narrator minimizes men's culpability when they act upon their desire for Rosita.

In the line quoted above and throughout "Mala suerte," the narrator underscores Rosita's devious nature, making clear her role as a femme fatale who knowingly torments the men at her inn. As we will see later, the way in which she taunts the narrator's father is perhaps the most Machiavellian (149). The line above also reminds the reader of the following description of Wanda: " . . . una no podía mirar [ese cuerpo] sin acordarse del séptimo mandamiento" (47), which, again, forbids adultery. Indeed, in both stories, the narrators highlight the ease with which the temptresses manipulate men. Commonplace in hard-boiled detective novels, the femme fatale " . . . ruins the lives of men and is at the same time victim of her own lust for enjoyment, obsessed by a desire for power" (Žižek 64). In hard-boiled novels featuring male sleuths, she is "the person who lures the detective and 'plays him for a sucker'" (63). However, since Poletti's stories feature female detectives, her handling of the femme fatale figure diverges from that of male-authored hard-boiled detective fiction. In "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte," Wanda and Rosita lure in men, but the other women in the stories assume agency and eliminate the femme fatale, thereby protecting themselves and their families.

Like his wife, Silverio appears to be almost exclusively motivated by money and would, as the narrator describes, " . . . cerr[ar] un ojo, o los dos, ante diputados y 'gente bien' que ayudaron a la pareja a levantarse" (140). That is, he all but gives full license to his wife to do whatever it takes to earn money, and for this reason " . . . las malas lenguas decían que ése no era un matrimonio sino una sociedad en comandita" (141-42). The narrator contests this, perhaps voicing her opinion as a child, arguing that Silverio and Rosita's was " . . . un verdadero matrimonio de almas" (142). Later, however, she more aptly suggests of her uncle: " . . . quizá prefería dormir sobre billetes que con su mujer" (150). Finally, in the following description, the narrator compares him to a bird, looking out over Galarza, hunting for his next prey: "Ahí a la

entrada del pueblo, oteaba tío Silverio como ave de rapiña. Ahí . . . había amasado su oscura fortuna" (138). Again, Silverio's money comes from the success of his inn, La Estrella, in which " . . . la verdadera estrella allí era tía Rosita" (138). He is, in other words, financially dependent upon his wife, a detail that does not escape her. Cognizant that men are sexually attracted to her, Rosita " . . . dominaba a los hombres como a los caballos: en pelo y a horcajadas, a latigazos y a caricias, segura y feliz con su exuberancia física" (139).[40] Her character seems even more domineering when juxtaposed with her sickly husband over whom she wields not just economic, but total control: "En este medio, tío Silverio, de físico débil y enfermizo, se dejó avasallar por su emprendedora mujer" (141).

While Rosita takes advantage of virtually all the men in Galarza, the narrator suffers most, of course, from Rosita's manipulation of her own father, who works as her bodyguard in the inn. Roberto's job, as the narrator describes it, is to "protegerla de peligros o imprevistos . . . [i]nterven[ir] en todas las peleas para poner orden con su fuerza mansa y formidable. Papel que por cierto no hubiese podido desempeñar Silverio, siempre ocupado en contar billetes y tan delgado y enclenque que hubiese causado gracia" (147). The narrator once again emphasizes Silverio's obsession with money and his small, unimposing, almost feminine stature, a physical reminder of his relative unimportance in relation to Rosita. In addition to offering protection for Rosita, Roberto, " . . . dispuesto a todo" (148), also participates in an elaborate act[41] they perform in order to boost business:

> Él la ayudaba a alcanzar las botellas alineadas en los estantes altos con un solo golpe de mano en esas nalgas impertinentes y movedizas: ¡Upa! ¡Y arriba! Todos

[40] This description in particular reminds the reader of the similarities tía Rosita, like tía Wanda, has with the eponymous character of Rómulo Gallego's novel, *Doña Barbara*.

[41] Although very different in function within the respective plots, Rosita and Roberto, like Wanda and Nando, both put on acts. In depicting two pairs of characters that play different roles, Poletti draws attention to the abundant fictionality in our lives.

> aplaudían. Ella reía, trepada a los estantes, feliz y traviesa, *casi inocente*. Entonces él, con el pie, tiraba el banco o la escalerilla y la sostenía con la mano abierta, rojo por el esfuerzo, y luego cada vez más pálido. Y la balanceaba en el aire, de botella en botella, con el aliento entrecortado y los dedos enardecidos debajo de esas carnes cómplices, por las que él arriesgaba la vida a cada rato. *Ella gozaba al torturarlo*, al verlo palidecer, y fingía desequilibrios para desesperarlo. Y de pronto, botella en mano, se deslizaba por su lomo, felina. Y a cobrar, con la habitual destreza. (149, emphasis mine)

The reader sees the cruel way in which Rosita derives pleasure from tormenting Roberto, knowing that like her customers, he too desires her. Only those willing to pay a large sum of money, like don Bonifacio, can take over Roberto's coveted position, "helping" Rosita reach the top shelf liquor (149). Carmelina, well aware that her husband frequents Rosita's inn "murmuraba por ahí que Rosita engordaba con los cerdos de ella y de Bonifacio" (143). Although the reader might pay little attention to this line initially, later in the story it is clear that this is not merely an observation; Carmelina's watchful eye over her husband's affairs spurs her to action.

Like Wanda in "Estampa antigua," Rosita's power over men, particularly Roberto and Silverio, is not celebrated, but rather is seen as cruel and exploitive. While Rosita is a woman in a position of authority, her rule is nearly synonymous with patriarchal domination, for it has an identical effect: " . . . esta 'libertadora de la mujer' no ayuda a las otras mujeres, sino las trata como esclavas, incluso la madre de la narradora" (Martínez 428). Thus, the narrator clearly does not applaud this tyrannical means of subverting—in essence, replicating—patriarchal domination, but rather condemns Wanda and Rosita's behavior, critiquing by extension those

who abuse others in order to empower themselves (429).[42] Again, while Rosita and Wanda partially subvert traditional power structures, they do so in despotic, oppressive ways of their own, and thus the narrators suggest that women who exploit others deserve punishment like that which Wanda and Rosita receive.[43] It is in her portrayal of doña Carmelina that the narrator suggests more appropriate means of challenging male dominance.[44]

In 1985, Newton and Rosenfelt argued that the "tragic essentialism" (xvii) with which feminist critics have often fought patriarchy—one that invariably juxtaposes male domination with female subservience—not only reproduces the very structures to which they are opposed, but also effectively " . . . subsumes women into the sisterly category of 'woman' despite real differences of race, class and historical condition, or posits women's nurturing and relational qualities as in themselves a counter to male domination" (xvii). In other words, feminist criticism has often glossed over disparities between women, which in fact represent tangible differences that significantly alter their access to power. In her depictions of Rosita, doña Carmelina and Francesca, however, Poletti avoids such essentialism, portraying three radically different women with varying approaches and degrees of success in confronting male domination. As mentioned previously, Rosita defeats patriarchy in a sense, but only does so by replacing it with her own form of tyrannical oppression. She becomes rich from the profits of her inn, but at the expense of others and by shunning all familial responsibilities. As the narrator explains, "Tía Rostia tenía

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[42] Despite differences in their storylines, Gorodischer's *Jugo de mango* and Poletti's "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte" all critique tyrannical abuses of power. As I will argue of Gorodischer's *Jugo de mango* in my second chapter, such condemnations of repression are highly suggestive of the political violence carried out by Argentina's authoritarian regime during the Dirty War.

[43] The narrator of "Mala suerte" likewise notes that Rosita's death vindicates a moral wrong: " . . . la muerte dio satisfacción a esa mezcla de resentimiento y de sentido ético con que las mujeres del pueblo defienden las buenas costumbres. El asesinato cauterizaba el escándalo" (158-59).

[44] While Poletti certainly applauds Carmelina's assertiveness and the way she protects herself and her livelihood, I do not mean to suggest that she would condone Carmelina's crime in actuality. Carmelina, is, of course, an artistic exaggeration, but Poletti presents her approach as a model for challenging oppression.

hijos, sí, pero los mantenía al margen, entregados al cuidado de las criadas y de los peones de la barraca" (147). Similarly, when Silverio grows ill with hemoptysis, Rosita, "una mujer sabia," delegates the responsibility of his care to " . . . una criada casi india, ni joven ni vieja, ni gorda ni flaca: lo ideal para cuidar al enfermo" (150). This way, Rosita may focus her attention exclusively upon the inn without fear that her husband might become romantically involved with his caretaker.

The narrator underscores the unnaturalness of Rosita's callous behavior, contrasting her with Francesca, her own mother. Francesca rebels against raising her children, particularly her daughters, in Galarza, insisting: "'Quiero criar a mis hijos como Dios manda. Tengo hijas mujeres. Quiero enseñarles a trabajar con sus manos. Quiero criarlas como me criaron a mí!'" (145). Her refusal to live in a place almost entirely dictated by Rosita and Silverio, however, is shortlived, as it ends in an argument in which the narrator's father strikes Francesca. Again, while the specifics of the dispute itself are allegedly confused in the narrator's mind, she learns a fundamental lesson that night: "Y yo aprendí que la peor mala suerte es la de no saber desprenderse del hombre. Esa es la mala suerte de la mujer. Y supe también que los hombres son siempre unos chicos de pecho, que arremeten y chillan contra los que quieren destetarlos" (146). The narrator's bitterness towards her father is plain, but she also reveals profound disappointment in her mother's inability to rebel against her father's wishes; Francesca is, in fact, the least successful of the three female characters in challenging patriarchal domination. Instead, the narrator recalls, "Mamá se quedó. Se quedó por nosotros, decía. Yo creo que se quedó por él" (146). Here again, the narrator underscores her own doubt and suspicions surrounding her mother's motivations to stay.

Poletti juxtaposes Francesca's meek timidity with Carmelina's assertive, at times violent, means of confronting those who threaten her or her livelihood. While Francesca is, in the narrator's words, " . . . una ingenua, sonrosada y púdica montañesa de los Alpes, de mirada azul cielo, la que tía Rosita relegó a la cocina a lavar platos" (143-44), Carmelina, who refuses to fall victim to Rosita, avoids her inn entirely. Carmelina is also quite different physically from Rosita whose voluptuous breasts, a dual symbol of her femininity and power, are likened to the "anzuelos" with which she ensnares men.[45] Like Blanca, the female investigator featured in Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's *Backyard/Traspatio*, which I examine in my fourth chapter, Carmelina is an androgynous figure who, in many ways, possesses more stereotypically "masculine" than "feminine" qualities. For example, the narrator describes her physique in the following way: "Ruda, flaca, puro huesos, sin pechos y sin edad, como al margen del tiempo, era un misterio imaginar cómo pudo amantar a tantos hijos" (143). Again, unlike most people in Galarza, Carmelina keeps her distance from the inn, looking on disapprovingly at the establishment where her husband spends their money: "Carmelina pasaba todas las madrugadas ante ese cuartel militar. Pasaba bien erguida en el pescante de su carro, rodeada de tarros de leche, fusta en mano, arreando a los caballos y chasqueando la lengua *como un varón*" (143, emphasis mine). Carmelina's position in the driver's seat is, of course, symbolic of her authoritative command; she refuses to be dominated by Rosita like Francesca, and deftly resolves the problem that Rosita and her inn pose.

As in the other two stories examined in this chapter, the official investigators, who the narrator claims are "más atónitos y desconcertados que todos los demás," make virtually no progress in their investigation into Rosita's murder; their role is, in fact, even less significant

[45] Tía Rosita privately gloats about her most valuable asset to other women: "'¡Mis pechos valen oro! ¡Hay que cuidarlos!'" (141).

than that of the detectives in "Estampa antigua" and "Rojo en la salina." The narrator's mother, Francesca, likely voicing some of Poletti's own criticisms of Argentina, rails against the country to which she has recently immigrated, insisting: "este es un país . . . 'en el que la justicia no es una pasión y menos una idea. Es burocrática que por lo general está de franco y empieza a andar si se le paga'" (159). As with Rosita and Silverio, money above all else appears to motivate the police. Later, the narrator insists, in language essentially identical to that of Poletti herself (Fornaciari 159), that this case would be better suited for " . . . psicólogos que para cómodos investigadores de provincia.[46] Ninguna presión hizo accionar el lento, implacable, indicado rodeo con que se suelen descubrir—u ocultar—los crímenes que a las fuerzas políticas interesa descubrir u ocultar" (159). These lines are suggestive of the police corruption tied to the political violence that had taken root in Argentina by the time *Historias en rojo* was published. The narrator is quite emphatic upon this point, repeating her mother's opinion: " . . . si nadie tiene interés en descubrir un crimen, todo país a cuarto intermedio. La justicia se reduce a un trámite burocrático engorroso, kafkiano, que suele dejarse de hoy para mañana, especialmente en los meses en que el sol achicharra cualquier pensamiento de significación moral" (163). Again, Francesca harshly critiques the police, who appear to care very little about justice; instead their efforts are often financially motivated and sporadic at best.

In addition to criticizing the police, Francesca also admonishes those who try to protect or withhold information about the murderer or murderess. In the narrator's words: "Mamá dice que jamás se hará un país con gente que no denuncia a nadie, que calla aunque le violen a las hijas" (162). As before, Francesca's words warn of the dangers of a country without ethical

[46] In discussing her collection, *Historias en rojo*, Poletti notes, "En realidad si nos atenemos estrictamente al género, mis cuentos no son policiales. Son más bien psicológicos" (Fornaciari 159). She indicates that, unlike classic detective fiction, the motivations behind the crime at hand are more important in her stories than the process of identifying the criminal.

standards, and, yet again, recall the real political violence in Argentina at the time of this collection's publication. Ironically, Francesca's words become a self-criticism because rather than denouncing Carmelina once she learns she is the killer, Francesca, too, remains silent. Like the narrator in "Estampa antigua," Francesca considers the temptress's (in this case, Rosita's) death to effect a close approximation of justice. While Francesca and the protagonist of "Estampa antigua" initially fulfill the role of detective, they both feel a sense of solidarity with the respective murderess (Martínez 429), and therefore choose not to denounce the killer. In that sense, both become accessories to the crime.

Faced with the police's indifference about the case, Francesca doggedly persists in looking for clues, trying to piece together the story of Rosita's murder. As the narrator puts it, "Era su obsesión. Pero no encontró el menor rastro; *por lo menos así lo decía*" (164, emphasis mine). Here again, the narrator reaffirms her belief that her mother withholds information from her. It is only much later when helping doña Carmelina on her farm that Francesca finally discovers the killer's identity. She and her daughter, the narrator, help Carmelina with a pig that is about to give birth, as pigs often try to eat their own piglets after giving birth. Although they try to scare the pig away, Carmelina soon concludes: "'Ustedes no sirven para nada'" (168), and insists that one must be more forceful with such animals: "'¡Hay que matar a las perras chanchas que se comen la sangre y el sudor de uno! ¡Hay que matar a las puercas!'" (169). These lines are, of course, symbolic; doña Carmelina believes that one should aggressively protect one's own livelihood by whatever means necessary. In that sense, as Francesca realizes, the "perras chanchas" are symbolic of the social parasitism of those around her, particularly that of Rosita, who ruthlessly takes advantage of both don Bonifacio and Roberto. Francesca, on the other hand, is described as a "campesina . . . [que] no tenía valor ni para matar una gallina" (166). This lack

of forcefulness translates to Francesca's inability to defy her husband and leave Galarza when she threatens to do so. Carmelina, astounded by Francesca's diffidence on her farm, exclaims: "'Vaya una mujer que no sirve para luchar en la América ésta!'" (169). Like Francesca, Carmelina is a recent immigrant and her remark implies that one must be even more assertive to survive in this environment.

Like "Mala suerte," "Rojo en la salina"[47] centers upon a small town largely comprised of Italian emigrants in which a young girl named Yessy plays a significant role in uncovering the culprit of a crime. Yessy's mother, Mecha, fulfills the role of detective in this story, investigating a disappearance that the police chief from a neighboring town wrongly presumes to be an accident. Despite the inconclusive physical evidence, Mecha persists in her investigation, confirming her suspicions that Malinosky has been murdered. By following the clues and perceptively observing those around her, Mecha solves the mystery at hand, much like the narrator of "Estampa antigua." The decisive clue, however, lies in the most surprising place, a painting by her daughter that accurately depicts the scene of the crime. It is this painting that leads Mecha to Malinosky's murderer. As we will see, this story, like "Mala suerte" and "Estampa antigua," ultimately places women, rather than the official investigators, in the position of negotiating justice for their families and themselves.

Throughout this short story, as in "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte," there are persistent distinctions made between those who are "in" or "out" of various social milieus. The workers at Salinas Grandes, namely don Fabián and Alonso, single out Malinosky, the new manager, as an unwelcome coworker in the salt mine. Don Fabián urges Mecha to fire Malinosky, insisting that he does not belong in Salinas Grandes because Malinosky and his wife are "Gente de ajuera [*sic*]" (17). As Martella indicates, Mecha incorrectly believes don Fabián

[47] According to Flora Schiminovich, this was one of Jorge Luis Borges's favorite stories (19).

and Alonso to be disappointed with her choice of Malinosky as manager "since the locals wanted to see one of their own as manager of the salt mine, but [she] fails to see the real causes behind this resentment . . . the common knowledge that Malinosky's wife and Mecha's husband are having an affair" (34). When don Fabián's initial attempt is unsuccessful, he attacks Malinosky's politics, insisting that he and Alonso "no son bichos pa'una mesma [*sic*] cueva […]" (17). The people of Salinas Grandes are initially suspicious of Malinosky and his wife, recent immigrants to their small town, but Don Fabián continues to voice his misgivings about them in the hopes that Mecha will fire Malinosky before she discovers her husband's affair with Malinosky's wife. At the end of the story, Mecha looks back on Alonso's comment: "¡Cuide lo suyo, patrona!" (39), understanding it retrospectively as a plea for her to open her eyes to Guillermo's infidelity. This line recalls Francesca's admiring affirmation of doña Carmelina at the end of "Mala suerte": "¡[…] supo defender lo suyo!" (170). In both stories, Poletti insists that women must be vigilant and, even more importantly, willing to protect the integrity of their families.

Not only do we see an emphasis on the differences between Malinsoky and his wife and the others in town, in both "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte," the narrator also draws a stark contrast between those from the city, in this case Choele Choel, and Salina's Grandes. In Poletti's stories, the people from the rural villages call upon investigators from the city because of their alleged expertise, yet none of their investigations are successful. Like the investigators in "Estampa antigua" who unsuccessfully search for the missing bullet, the official detective in "Rojo en la salina" soon closes Malinoksy's case due to a lack of physical evidence, deeming his death to be an accident. The detective, whose lack of importance is suggested by the fact that he remains unnamed (Martella 34),[48] conducts an inconclusive investigation despite his careful

[48] Indeed, none of the official detectives in Poletti's collection, *Historias en rojo*, are named. The same is also true of Cristina Rivera Garza's novel, *La muerte me da,* which I analyze in my final chapter.

search of the salt mine: "Recorrieron los lugares más espesos, los que podían llevar a una salida o a una trampa. Los tractores recorrieron la laguna en todo sentido, sin ningún resultado. Y las averiguaciones sólo aumentaron la desorientación" (23). This ostensibly thorough, yet fruitless search of the salt mine bears some similarities to la Detective's doomed investigation into the castration and serial killing of four men in *La muerte me da*, which I examine in chapter four. As in "Estampa antigua," Poletti features an incompetent investigator from a nearby town, Choele Choel, whose ignorance on matters crucial to solving the case dooms his investigation. When examining the salt in the tires of the Chevrolet driven by Malinosky shortly before his death, for example, Guillermo and Mecha must explain, much to the astonishment of the police chief, that there are different kinds of salt (23).[49] More devastating to the investigations in all of Poletti's stories examined in this chapter, however, is the detectives' inability to grasp the human motivations behind these crimes.

Despite the police investigator's conclusion that Malinosky's death was accidental, Mecha remains skeptical, suspecting that others share her doubt: "Sintió que no creían en el accidente, que se resistían" (30). By repeatedly using verbs such as "sentir" and "presenter," Poletti underscores that Mecha " . . . trusts her intuition at an emotional rather than an analytical level" (Martella 33), and that they are what drive her to investigate the murder as such. Nevertheless, no one, not even Malinosky's co-workers, cares to pursue the case any further. For example, when Mecha asks Alonso to accompany her to the scene of the crime, he tries to dissuade her: "¿No ve que llueve, señora?" (25). Mecha thus embarks upon the investigation alone, apparently accustomed to relying upon herself: "*Sintió* que como siempre debía hacer

[49] Zunshine makes the seemingly obvious, but important observation that physical evidence "matters only insofar as it helps the detective to reconstruct the state of mind behind it" (135). She points to a passage in "The Red Silk Scarf" (1907) by Maurice Leblanc in which, much to the irritation and astonishment of Ganimard, Lupin is able to draw several conclusions from small scraps of evidence. Obviously, crimes will go unsolved without a detective with the expertise to deduce information from the evidence at hand.

frente a la situación por sí misma y contar sobre su gente. Su marido se evadía en sus tallas coloniales, en sus pipas, en su artritis" (25, emphasis mine). While Malinosky's co-workers seem especially eager to forget the investigation, their reluctance only makes Mecha more determined, as she affirms in a conversation with the police chief assigned to the case: " . . . todos creen, o simulan creer que se trata de un accidente . . . si bien quieren disuadirme, en particular Alonso, yo me convenzo cada día más, que se trata de lo contrario" (31-32). At the end of the story, the reader realizes that her employees' hesitance to assist her stems from their compassion for Mecha; they know that in solving the mystery, she will inevitably learn of her husband's infidelity, and in an effort to protect her, they try to discourage her from investigating at all.

Mecha, with her self-reliance and authoritative command of her employees, contrasts dramatically with her withdrawn, arthritic husband, Guillermo,[50] who, unlike Mecha, is never depicted in a position of power. Mecha consistently acts with confidence, somehow able to conceal feelings of doubt when they arise: "Nadie hubiera advertido que en su tono autoritario se retorcía el desaliento de la soledad" (30). Her conviction that Malinosky was murdered compels her to drive to Choele Choel to speak with the police chief, who is clearly stunned by her persistence and her independence: "¿Cómo? ¿Sola? ¿Manejando usted?" (31). The stark contrast drawn between Mecha and her husband represents a reversal of traditional, gendered power structures similar to what the reader sees in "Mala suerte" and "Estampa antigua." Not only is Mecha a commanding figure in the salt mine and in the investigation of Malinosky's murder, but like Francesca in "Mala suerte" and the grandmother in "Estampa antigua," Mecha also "assumes almost total responsibility for the household" following her husband's infidelity (Hernández-Araico 465).

[50] Guillermo's arthritis reminds the reader of Silverio's sickly nature in "Mala suerte." Guillermo's disability restricts his movements, making it such that he can only drive vehicles with automatic transmissions, a detail that becomes important in solving the Malinosky case.

Mecha makes significant strides in her informal investigation by being inquisitive and perceptively observing seemingly insignificant changes in those around her. She notes, for example, that Yessy spends less time with her friend, Adriana, and confronts the latter about it:

> —¿Y vos no saliste a caballo con Yessy hoy?
>
> —No.
>
> . . . .
>
> ¿Por qué? Antes se las veía todo el día juntas…
>
> —Sí, antes sí.
>
> —¿Y por qué ahora no?
>
> Adriana bajó la cabeza…Mecha le tomó el mentón e insistió —¿Qué pasó entre vos y Yessy?
>
> —¿Entre 'nosotras'? Nada—dijo con voz ronca. Levantó un instante la mirada húmeda, espantada, y echó a correr hacia su casa. (15)[51]

Despite the girls' reticence, Mecha continues to watch them, wondering of Adriana: "¿Qué ocultaba esa chiquilla tan extraña? ¿Por qué se había alejado de Yessy?" (14). As the reader understands later, the sudden change in the girls' behavior stems from their discovery of the affair between Yessy's father and Adriana's mother. While details of her daughter's behavior seem to have no obvious bearing upon Malinosky's disappearance, Mecha's shrewd observations of such changes, eventually help her piece together the story behind Malinosky's death. Mecha also notices the way Adriana interacts with her mother and discerns " . . . una chispa de resentimiento" (14). Again, although she cannot yet account for these abrupt changes in

[51] As we will see, this line has an intriguing parallel with the final words Yessy utters at the end of the story.

behavior, we later discover that Adriana's bitterness towards her mother also emanates from the girl's knowledge of her mother's adulterous affair.

As in most detective stories, it is not until the final pages that Mecha, the *de facto* detective, discovers who killed Malinosky. Midway through her investigation, however, Mecha recalls a story, which dates back to when the salt mine was first discovered, that foreshadows the way in which the Malinosky case will end. The metadiegetic narration of a story Mecha's father told her likewise recounts the sudden disappearance of a man who, like Malinosky, was murdered: "Había sido apuñalado y hundido en la ciénaga. El asesino jamás fue descubierto" (25). Mecha's recollection of this story, which bears a strong resemblance to the case at hand, suggests that history will repeat itself; the culprit will not be punished for Malinosky's murder.

As in "Mala suerte," the narrator highlights the relationship between mother and daughter, in this case, Mecha and Yessy. As this story progresses, the reader observes an evolution in Yessy's attitude towards her mother, beginning with complete admiration to open frustration with her mother's inability to see what is going on around her. At the beginning of the story Yessy waits for the Comandante to leave his post so she can paint, and she recalls a moment in which her mother had adeptly prevented a violent conflict between the Comandante and Malinosky from coming to a head (10-11). Remembering how Mecha had deftly disarmed the Comandante, Yessy exclaims: "Su madre era […] ¡Era extraordinaria!" (11). Yessy applauds her mother's authoritative command, as Mecha stands firm, rather than giving in to the Comandante or don Fabián's requests to fire Malinosky.[52]

[52] Again, both Alonso and don Fabián urge Mecha to fire Malinosky because they know Guillermo, Mecha's husband, is having an affair with Malinosky's wife, Valeria. Although Mecha does not realize it at the time, the conflict between Malinosky and the other workers primarily stems from the latter's loyalty to her.

Yessy's opinion of her mother changes, however, when she discovers that her father, Mecha's husband, is having an affair with Malinosky's wife. The reader observes a dramatic shift in Yessy' perception of her mother after Yessy witnesses her father's crime and learns, as have most others in the provincial town, of his adulterous affair. Now, Mecha is no longer the insightful, powerful woman Yessy once proudly believed her to be; instead she exasperates Yessy with her failure to detect Guillermo's infidelity. Yessy, who like Mecha's employees, tries to hide Guillermo's affair from her, finally expresses her frustration with her mother: "Por qué querés saber todo, si después, no ves nada?" (37). Indeed, in both "Rojo en la salina" and "Mala suerte," the reader witnesses moments in which the narrators are highly critical of their mothers, in each case because their mothers reveal, in the narrators' eyes, weakness in their relationships with their husbands. The narrators seem to function as a mouthpiece for Poletti, admonishing women for moments of ignorance ("Rojo en la salina") and passivity ("Mala suerte"), encouraging them to be both vigilant and assertive like Doña Carmelina in "Mala suerte."

Just as Yessy's opinion of her mother evolves, so too does Mecha's perception of her daughter. At the end of the story she senses that Yessy knows much more than she lets on: "Mecha la escrutó ávidamente, pero la sonrisa de Yessy ocultaba algo inviolable: ¿era la prematura sabiduría de mujer, o 'no' había visto al asesino? . . . . Sintió que tal vez, su hija conocía también el móvil del crimen; tal vez, poseía la prueba aplastante" (41). She realizes that everyone, including her own daughter, knows more than she, and despite the fact that Yessy has witnessed her father kill Malinosky, both Yessy and Mecha seem to instinctively know that the murderer will go unpunished. Although Martella claims that "Mecha . . . chooses to save her dignity and the integrity of her family instead of accusing her husband of murder" (34), I would argue that, on the contrary, Mecha simply comprehends the futility of trying to convict her

husband without physical evidence, and thus does not denounce him. Furthermore, she has preserved for herself no dignity whatsoever because virtually everyone in Salinas Grandes knows of Guillermo and Valeria's affair. Therefore, it is impossible for Mecha to salvage the integrity of her family, a reality even Yessy recognizes when she indicates the way her father's infidelity creates new familial groupings: "Se irán 'ellos'. Adriana se quedará a vivir aquí […] con nosotras" (41). This exchange between Mecha and Yessy in which Yessy puts particular emphasis upon the word "'ellos'" (42) parallels the conversation between Mecha and Adriana in which the latter insists that nothing is going on between Adriana and Yessy. Adriana stresses that while there is no conflict between the two girls, "'nosotras'" (15), the implication is that there is something amiss.

Like the narrator and her grandmother in "Estampa antigua," Mecha and Yessy's familial bond and mutual understanding is central in this story. In the former, the women are linked by their common guilt, while in the latter Mecha and Yessy are bound as victims of Guillermo's betrayal. Just as the protagonist of "Estampa antigua" tries to protect her grandmother by concealing her crime, Yessy attempts to shield Mecha from emotional pain by trying to prevent her mother from discovering Guillermo's crime and his affair with Malinosky's wife. When Mecha discovers the painting Yessy did the night of Malinosky's murder, Yessy, still determined to protect her mother, insists that she had not seen anything. Mecha, then, ironically reproaches Yessy for not being observant, urging her daughter: "¡Hay que saber ver!" (37). Mecha, however, is the one who has, until now, failed to perceive her own husband's unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, what finally allows Mecha to establish her husband's guilt is the fact that, unlike the official detective, she is knowledgeable about the salt mine and, more importantly, she grants Yessy's behavior (not to mention her artwork) a certain level of importance. Although Yessy is

still a child, her actions are important; indeed, they alert Mecha to the fact that something is profoundly wrong. While Yessy tries to shield her mother from the truth, Mecha's perceptiveness allows her to recognize when something is wrong with her daughter, and ultimately leads her to the murderer.

Again, while Mecha's careful observations of her daughter point her in the right direction, like investigators in classic detective stories she uses reason to corroborate her hunches. The final piece of information is revealed when Mecha presses her daughter about the details of her painting, noting Yessy's unease. Based upon Yessy's unusual behavior, she *senses* that her daughter is hiding something: " . . . presintió que esa zozobra tan insólita en su hija, no se debía a una travesura, sino a un motivo oscuro" (36). Mecha struggles to interpret the painting herself since her daughter refuses to explain it: "¿Qué objeto pudo sugerirle la imagen de una cucaracha de cuatro patas, si ella sabía que las cucarachas tienen seis?" (37). The reader recalls the story's opening scene, in which the third person omniscient narrator describes how Yessy looks over the salt mine her mother manages at the end of the day, waiting for her chance to paint the scenery. She gazes at the long line of tractors, and the narrator, voicing Yessy's own thoughts, describes them as " . . . cucarachas que transportaron nieve." The reader thus recalls how at the beginning of the story, Yessy identifies the tractors as "soñolientas y oscuras cucarachas" (9), marching along the hillside carrying loads of salt from the mine. This initial "inside view" of Yessy's perspective is crucial to the reader's ability to interpret, alongside Mecha, the seemingly innocent painting that depicts a murder scene (Booth 160). The reader then observes Mecha's step-by-step reasoning: "Su hija llamaba 'cucarachas viejas' a los tractores. Entonces la imagen fue sugerida por un vehículo, un coche, un coche rojo […] ¡el Buick!" (37). Mecha likewise reasons that the killer would not drive a *red* car to a salt mine to

commit a crime unless he had to. Recalling the Buick's other distinguishing characteristic, its automatic transmission, she concludes that this must be why the murderer chose the Buick. This realization is what leads Mecha to discover that her arthritic husband, who can only drive automatic cars, must have killed Malinosky. Thus, Mecha's methodical reasoning ultimately leads her to the knowledge that her husband is the killer.

In 1929, Dorothy L. Sayers lamented that although detective fiction writers had begun featuring female sleuths, the results had been deeply disappointing. She argued that "In order to justify their choice of sex, [female investigators] are obliged to be so irritatingly intuitive as to destroy that quiet enjoyment of the logical which we look for in our detective reading" (357). Nearly forty years later Poletti challenges Sayers's assertion by depicting three effective female detectives[53] who use their logical reasoning *and* their instincts to uncover the killer's identity. In this way, Poletti insists upon the utility of the latter—a stereotypically "feminine" sort of knowledge—but she also directly challenges the sexist western stereotype to which Sayers alludes, namely that women are unable to reason. Seidler explains:

> In Western Europe since the period of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, men have assumed a strong connection between their rationality and their sense of masculine identity. They have learned to appropriate rationality as if it were an exclusively male quality denied to others, especially women. . . . Since 'rationality' is identified with knowledge, it is denied to women. Emotions and feelings are likewise denied as genuine sources of knowledge within the culture. Rather, they are associated predominantly with weakness and femininity" (82).

[53] Even though the killer is not brought to justice in any of the stories analyzed in this chapter, I would argue that each of these three protagonists are successful detectives, as they are all able to uncover the killer's respective identities.

Like Angélica Gorodischer's Delmira, the unlikely sleuth in *Jugo de mango,* which I examine in chapter two, the female characters' instincts prove to be incredibly important in Poletti's short stories. Poletti's protagonists begin their own investigations into the respective crimes when they sense that the official investigators' findings are inaccurate. Nevertheless, Poletti emphasizes the fact that these protagonists would be incapable of solving the mysteries at hand without using reason to make sense of the evidence. In "Estampa antigua," for example, the protagonist intuits her grandmother's intention to kill Wanda, and deduces her plan to frame Herminio, thereby eliminating two of their nemeses. Similarly, Francesca of "Mala suerte" suspects that Carmelina might be ruthless enough to commit murder, and after observing her wearing the necklace Rosita had stolen from don Bonifacio hours before Rosita's murder, Francesca concludes that Carmelina must have killed Rosita to reclaim her husband's necklace and put an end to Rosita's tyranny. Finally, Mecha's instincts and careful observations alert her to inconspicuous details and others' suspicious behavior, both of which help her piece together the story of the crime. Nevertheless, her ability to reason through the killer's behavior and her daughter's painting is equally important in determining who has killed Malinosky. In all three stories, then, Poletti posits an alternative detective model that blurs the line between what are often considered "feminine" and "masculine" abilities; instead she proposes that a hybridity of these capabilities is needed for a successful investigation into any given crime. In short, Poletti's female protagonists resist gender classification, using their imagination to consider the possible motives of the crime, their powers of observation and both stereotypically "feminine" intuition and "masculine" deductive reasoning to solve the crime at hand.

In the three family-based detective stories examined in this chapter, the investigation of a crime affords the reader an intriguing view of family dynamics, particularly the relationships

between women—that of a mother and a daughter in “Mala suerte” and “Rojo en la salina,” and the bond between a young girl and her grandmother in “Estampa antigua.” Indeed, in Poletti’s stories, the detective genre serves as a vehicle to examine “human and cultural patterns of behavior” (Simpson, *Detective* 48). Although Poletti’s stories center upon the family milieu, her female protagonists resist typical gender roles, and are depicted as beacons of strength who support and protect their respective families and communities. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as emotionally and physically fragile in Poletti’s stories, and their disloyalty to their own families is posited as further evidence of their weakness. Nevertheless, as tía Wanda and tía Rosita’s characters demonstrate, women are also capable of abusing their own power, and thus Poletti avoids casting women into a homogeneous group of victimized people (Newton and Rosenfelt xvii). Interestingly, unlike more conventional stories, Poletti’s detectives do not reveal what they have learned in their investigations at the end of each story, as they, like hard-boiled protagoinsts, prefer their “own instinctive justice to the often tarnished justice of civilization” (Grella 106). Thus, in “Estampa antigua” and “Mala suerte,” the protagonists conceal the killer’s identity, as they feel a sense of solidarity with and wish to protect the respective murderess, while Mecha is the last in her community to discover her husband’s betrayal.

Chapter Two:
Reinventing Miss Marple: Angélica Gorodischer's Comic Detectives in *Floreros de alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara* and *Jugo de mango*

I. *Floreros de alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara:* The Aging Detective in Action

More than twenty years ago, Ángela Dellepiane confirmed the remarkable diversity of Angélica Gorodischer's works, which explore such disparate genres as science fiction, gothic, fantastic, and detective short stories and novels ("La narrativa"). Gorodischer's first published work was a detective short story entitled "En verano, a la siesta y con Martina" (1964), which won the second place prize in the Concurso de Cuentos Policiales (Dellepiane 18). Nevertheless, Gorodischer has, in a seemingly contradictory posture, confessed that she is unable to write detective stories: "soy incapaz de sujetarme . . . a la lógica interna del cuento policial . . . Puedo urdir la trama más absurda, la más complicada o la más simple, lo que sea, pero no puedo resolver, como pide la novela problema, el argumento con lógica" (Sánchez, "Reportaje" 156).[54] Gorodischer's remark is, in fact, less paradoxical than it initially seems because her short story is a parody of the conventional "tales of ratiocination."[55]

After exploring other genres, Gorodischer published her first thriller in 1985 ("La narrativa" 27). In an interview with Collette, Gorodischer reveals that she was inspired to write *Floreros* after watching a James Bond film starring the aging Sean Connery: "Pero yo mientras veía esa película, decía: mirá vos, qué lindo sería escribir un novelón con un detective viejo, porque a mí los novelones me encantan. Y me dije: por qué un detective viejo, mejor una detective vieja. ¡Qué bien no! Y eso quedó allí" (62). Her first thriller, entitled *Floreros de*

[54] Gorodischer's comment is notable in that, like the narrator of *Floreros*, she claims she is unable to work within the confines of reason. This is one of the many commonalities Gorodischer shares with this protagonist.

[55] In this story, two friends, Barragán and Villada, reason through the hypothetical murder of Martina, only to discover later that she has, in fact, been murdered.

alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara, was published in 1985 and was shortly followed by a second, *Jugo de mango*, published in 1988. Gorodischer's two thrillers are the focus of this chapter.

In both of these thrillers, Gorodischer centers upon older, female protagonists from bourgeois families who, despite all odds, succeed in their dangerous investigations. Like detectives in hard-boiled novels, Gorodischer's protagonists eschew—indeed, disdain—reason, preferring brute force, a debilitating gaze, or their "female intuition" (González 397). Humorously, they seem to persevere largely due to chance (Ferrero, "Politización de los 'géneros menores'" 81). Rather than panicking, the women comically, and quite unexpectedly, foil the plans of their enemies thanks to strengths that at times not even they are aware they (still) possess. In that sense, these novels have parallel structures;[56] they begin with the protagonists embarking or stumbling upon criminal investigations and evolve into simultaneous explorations or reevaluations of themselves (García Pinto 44). The female protagonists' haphazard entry into the world of crime, then, not only results in unexpected triumph over their adversaries, but we find that the mere act of being in a foreign country prompt self-reflection that is atypical in detective fiction.

The foreign countries in which these women conduct their criminal investigations challenge them in such a way that they prove to be fertile grounds for humorous, but ultimately profound self-discovery despite the women's maturity (de Fernández 277; González 399). While the protagonists journey to foreign countries for different reasons—the unnamed protagonist in *Floreros* travels to Mexico for an espionage mission while Delmira of *Jugo de mango* lands on an unspecified Caribbean island[57] after thwarting a terrorist attack—, both characters are

[56] Gorodischer herself has recognized the many similarities, affirming that *Floreros de alabastro* and *Jugo de mango* "' . . . son la misma novela' (Ferrero, "Politización de los 'géneros menores'" 81).
[57] In an interview with the author, Ramón Alfredo Blanco asks Gorodischer about her apparent reluctance to specify the geographic spaces in which her stories take place citing *Prodigios* (1994), *Doquier* (2002),

apprehensive of and reveal elitist, somewhat xenophobic attitudes about the places to which they travel. As García Pinto indicates, both protagonists manifest "una aparente satisfacción con la vida previsible y ordinaria característica de su clase" (43).[58] While the protagonist of *Floreros* has discovered the thrill of the unknown in her younger years, her first reaction when Dr. Kerr announces that she must travel to Mexico is one of uneasy trepidation:

> México, oh dioses. En México hay un smog amarillento, pesado y mortal que hace que una se despierte con los pulmones doloridos y que desde Reforma apenas se vea la Torre Latinoamericana. En México los conductores están locos y no han oído hablar de las reglas más elementales de tránsito y mucho menos de la prioridad del peatón. En consecuencia en México los peatones también están locos y se largan a cruzar las calles y las avenidas por cualquier parte en medio de los ríos de autos. México está lleno de turistas insolentes y antipáticos y, lo que es peor, de mexicanos insolentes y antipáticos. En México una no puede viajar en ómnibus ni en metro porque la roban, la toquetean, la aplastan y en una de ésas hasta la asesinan. En México los tacheros cobran lo que quieren que siempre es demasiado. En México hay veintinueve calles Emiliano Zapata y treinta y siete Benito Juárez y no hay numeración para cada casa y edificio y todo es un laberinto que reíte del señor con cabeza de toro y de Jorge Luis Borges. (21)

Tumba de jaguares (2005), and *Querido amigo* (2006) as examples. Gorodischer responds: "Me encanta dejar esa tarea para el lector. Que se ocupe quien lee de ubicar mis novelas en un entorno geográfico y sensato. Yo visualizo muy bien el lugar en el que ocurren las cosas, pero ¿para qué explicar?" (322).

[58] Like her protagonists, Gorodischer's relatively sheltered formative years were also marked by limited, if any, interactions with people unlike herself. As Gandolfo puts it, "AG nació y pasó los ocho primeros años de su vida en el barrio norte de Buenos Aires, sin mayores contactos con el mundo exterior, en un contorno de sobreprotección" (11). In fact, Dellepiane explains, Gorodischer's primarily interacted with those in her family: "Sin amigas de su edad, en medio de una familiar perteneciente a la alta burguesía española y profundamente católica, la niña creció rodeada por una nutrida *coterie* de tías beatas" ("La narrativa" 17)

Obviously, the narrator's gross oversimplification of Mexico as an uncivilized country is not only a product of her privileged background, but it also reveals her reluctance to come into contact with the unfamiliar. Despite her apprehension about leaving the tranquil predictability of her daily life in Argentina, the narrator's appetite for adventure, along with one hundred thousand dollars and all expenses paid, ultimately convinces her to accept the job.

Similarly, when the plane Delmira takes while en route to visit family in New York is taken over by terrorists who announce they are going to Cuba instead, Delmira's response is almost identical to that of the protagonist in *Floreros*. While Delmira's situation is, of course, notably different in that she is being flown somewhere against her own will, her generalizations, like those of the *Floreros* protagonist, lay bare her elitist, conservative background:

> Dios mío, Cuba, qué horror, Cuba está llena de comunistas barbudos y sucios, ateos, impresentables y partidarios del amor libre, qué horror. No quería seguir pensando en Cuba porque seguro que si seguía, si llegaba al Cienfuegos, al Guevara ése o al mismo Fidel Castro, seguro que me hacía encima de veras. Traté de pensar en cualquier otra cosa pero no había caso, no me salía y seguía pensando en esos horrendos comunistas. (12)

Again, this fear of the unfamiliar and of those with differing political orientations, points to the protagonist's preference for the predictable. Indeed, as García Pinto affirms, Delmira and the protagonist of *Floreros* believe the world to be "coherente y ordenado," but both are forzada[s] a repensar[lo], al tener que enfrentar una situación que interpreta como un asalto a su integridad de mujer ordenada y burguesa" (43). The passage above also reveals Delmira's limited knowledge of foreign politics, which the reader finds somewhat surprising given that the protagonist is a geography teacher. She gradually develops a keener political consciousness, but this remark from

the very beginning of Delmira's journey provides the reader with a point of comparison in her evolution. Delmira manages to prevent the terrorists from landing in Cuba, but instead, they must divert to an unnamed country that a fellow passenger describes as a " . . . país de mierda . . .país bananero . . . muy pobre, muchos indios . . . Muy atrasados" (19-20). This, of course, does not reassure Delmira, who humorously presumes that the people of this country will also be "malhumorados… y probablemente barbudos" (20). Evidently, Delmira finds it unproblematic to presume that people of one country will be similar to the way she imagines Cubans, two groups of people about which she is largely ignorant. Gorodischer uses Delmira's humorous yet groundless generalizations to critique the political ignorance that she sees as a ubiquitous problem among the upper and bourgeois classes.

Many critics, such as Mathieu and Dellepiane, have noted that humor is a crucial element of *Floreros de alabastro* and *Jugo de mango*.[59] In *Comic Relief* (2009), John Morreall outlines several theoretical models of humor including the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, [60] and the Incongruity Theory.[61] Elsewhere he critiques all three for their "lack of comprehensiveness" (*Philosophy* 132), as none of the aforementioned theories is able to account for *every* incident of laughter; nevertheless, he indicates that the Incongruity Theory is currently " . . . the dominant theory of humor and psychology" (*Comic Relief* 10). Morreall explains that we learn to

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[59] See "Femenismo y humor en *Floreros de alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara"* and "Dos heroínas improbables" p. 576 respectively.

[60] Morreall explains that proponents of the Superiority Theory, such as Plato and Hobbes, maintained that we laugh when someone's inferiority is revealed to us (*Comic Relief* 4-7). This theory was proven inadequate; indeed if true it would seem that "laughter would… have no place in a well-ordered society, for it would undermine cooperation, tolerance and self-control" (*Comic Relief* 7). The Relief Theory holds that laughter is a physiological mechanism that allows us to release excess nervous energy (*Comic Relief* 17). Like the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory may account for some instances of laughter, but is ultimately incomplete.

[61] These theories are also known by the names "cognitive-perceptual, the social behavioral or the disparagement theory, and the psychoanalytic or the suppression-repression theory. See "Between Women: A Cross-Class Analysis of Status and Anarchic Humor" by Regina Gagnier.

anticipate certain outcomes in given situations based upon previous experiences. The Incongruity Theory of humor posits that when the outcome diverges from what we expect, the result is often humorous. For example: "When we reach out to touch snow, we expect it to be cold. If a chipmunk is running toward us, we expect it to avoid us, not leap up and bite our jugular vein" (*Comic Relief* 10). Again, should an unanticipated event occur, there is potential for the situation to be comical, but as critics like Clark and Morreall have noted, incongruity in and of itself does not necessarily lead to humor. One can imagine countless scenarios in which the unexpected is devoid of comic effect (*Comic Relief* 12-13). Throughout his work Morreall attempts to define the moments in which incongruous events lead to humor rather than negative emotions, such as fear, shock, and so on.

This model of incongruity posits that most humor stems from "cognitive shifts" or " . . . rapid change[s] in our perceptions or thoughts." Jokes, Morreall explains, involve a sudden change in perception, as we experience in the following: "I love cats – they taste a lot like chicken" (51). Following the first half of this statement, we expect the speaker to comment upon cats' companionship and his or her relationship with them as pets, but instead, and quite contrary to what we expect, the speaker refers to cats as food. Morreall indicates that we are able to enjoy cognitive shifts like these when we are, as he puts it, in "play mode" or when the interpretation of events is devoid of any practical concerns (*Comic Relief* 50). In other words, because we know that this statement is intended to amuse and that our own pet cat is not at risk of becoming dinner, we can laugh at this joke.

While *Floreros* and *Jugo de mango* employ numerous cognitive shifts like the one above, humor is not the sole aim for Gorodischer; humor, specifically the variety stemming from incongruity, proves to be a valuable instrument of social criticism in both novels. As Walker

affirms, " . . . frustration and anger at gender-based inequities have had to be expressed obliquely" and thus "incongruity has been a major device for decoding the myths of the patriarchy" (*What's So Funny?* 174). Barreca agrees, noting that "women writers" have often " . . . coupl[ed] comedy and anger . . . " (8) to subvert gender stereotypes and challenge social constructs. Women's humor, like that which we find in Gorodischer's two thrillers, works to " . . . expos[e] the discrepancies between the realities of women's lives and the images of women promoted by the culture" and in doing so " . . . target[s] the patriarchal social system" (*What's So Funny?* 174). In other words, humor can effectively allow women to challenge the sexism and "objectification" inherent in " . . . the stereotypes that have governed our lives" (Merrill 279).

Although some may believe this to be an overly optimistic appraisal of humor's potential, Morreall, for one, insists that comedy has long been misjudged and severely underestimated: "Since ancient times, evaluations of comedy have compared it with tragedy, and tragedy is usually deemed superior . . . Comedy is often counted as 'light' and inconsequential, while tragedy is thought 'heavy' and important" (*Comic Relief* 75). Like Morreall, Merrill and Walker find this evaluation of comedy to be simplistic and join Freud in calling it an "assertive" genre ("Feminist humor" 272; *A Very Serious Thing,* 12-13). Comedy has, arguably more often in the past than in the present, been used by the powerful to reinforce societal structures that disfavor the powerless, ridiculing the latter's intellect, behavior, appearance, and so on (Merrill 272; Weisstein 51). As Weisstein notes, often those who have been made the butt of jokes—women, ethnic and racial minorities—have been encouraged, or even required to join in laughing at their own alleged deficiencies (51).

Nevertheless, there is another brand of humor, so-called "rebellious" (Weisstein 88) or "corrective" (Walker, *A Very Serious Thing* 17) humor, which has dynamically achieved the very

opposite, cunningly subverting the status quo. Many critics have noted comedy's effectiveness in challenging social norms,[62] and as Joseph C. Neal suggests, part of what makes comedy so effective is the satiric wit with which it delivers its "wisdom" (Whitcher x).[63] As Walker puts it, humor "soften[s] the message" (*A Very Serious Thing* 19), thereby making the underlying critiques less abrasive. In her chapter on women's stand-up comedy, Fraiberg describes how the medium can effectively take on sensitive topics such as sexism and race relations, highlighting Korean-American Margaret Cho's work as an example:

> In an interview on CNN after the Los Angeles riots in 1992, Cho was asked about how she addresses racism in her work. 'What I do,' she responds, 'is I take a stereotype and I enlarge it to the point where it seems ridiculous.' A large part of her routine draws on her experiences of racism and she presents those scenes to her audience. When she is asked if a comedic forum makes it easier to deal with these issues, she emphasizes how comedy grants a certain sense of permission. Cho argues that 'when you use humor people are less apt to be guarded.' (324)

Like Cho, Gorodischer presents the reader with characters who more closely resemble caricatures that are subsequently ridiculed to the point that the reader can only assume a critical stance towards them.[64] Not only does the reader disapprove of these characters themselves, we

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[62] See Biamonte's "Gender and Genre in Women's Detective Fiction" pp. 232, 236-37, 240; Merrill's "Feminist humor: Rebellious: and Self-Affirming" 271-80; Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* pp. 12-14; Weisstein's "Why we Aren't Laughing Anymore" p. 88.

[63] In a letter Neal wrote to Frances Whitcher, in which he urges her to continue writing comical sketches, he affirms: " . . . those gifted with truly humorous genius . . . are more useful as moralists, philosophers, and teachers, than whole legions of the gravest preachers. They speak more effectually to the general ear and heart, even though they who hear are not aware of the fact that they are imbibing wisdom" (Whitcher x). Neal published Whitcher's humorous "Widow Bedott" pieces in the publication he edited, *Neal's Saturday Gazette* (Walker, *A Very Serious Thing* 16-17).

[64] In *Jugo de mango*, the women who represent exaggerated stereotypes are the so-called "pálidas mujeres" who, when they dare to speak at all, make only trivial remarks and remain completely ignorant of the political situation in their country. The overweight, blond woman on television who gives advice on how women can make their husbands happy in *Floreros* is, of course, another caricature. In addition to

ultimately, and more importantly, find their subservient, "feminine" behavior reprehensible. Walker argues that this "assertive" genre is especially important for women who traditionally have been deemed the "passive" sex (*A Very Serious Thing* 12), and describes the humorist's charge as the following:

> The humorist is at odds with the publicly espoused values of the culture, overturning its sacred cows, pointing out the nakedness of not only the Emperor, but also the politician, the pious, and the pompous. For women to adopt this role means that they must break out of the passive, subordinate position mandated for them by centuries of patriarchal tradition and take on the power accruing to those who reveal the shams, hypocrisies and incongruities of the dominant culture. To be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless. (Walker, *A Very Serious Thing* 9)

As we will see, Gorodischer does precisely this in her humorous thrillers, *Floreros* and *Jugo de mango,* ridiculing those who submissively accept traditional gender roles. By featuring female detectives who behave in decidedly "unfeminine" (Esplugas 95) ways—using force when necessary and openly defying authorities—Gorodischer suggests new empowered models for female behavior.

In their chapter in *Comic Crime* (1987) entitled "The Little Old Ladies," Chouteau and Alderson catalogue and describe the characteristics of seven humorous, elderly protagonists in Anglophone detective fiction who, as we will see, share some commonalities with Gorodischer's protagonists. The two critics explain their rationale behind such a label: "Within the three words 'little old lady' we have little as opposed to big, strong, or powerful; old as opposed to young,

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laying bare the absurdity of common stereotypes of women, these characters also provide stark contrasts to the respective protagonists themselves.

resilient, or sexy; lady, as opposed to a crook or murderer. In the world of mystery fiction the little old lady . . . stands out from the crowd of tough-guy private eyes, and she certainly is not invincible" (128). Traditionally, little old ladies have been featured in "cozies"—which normally avoid sex, gore, and violence—and are curious, observant, and affable sleuths. These protagonists are often mistaken for doddering or naïve old ladies due to their advanced years, becoming nearly invisible to those around them, but other characters underestimate them to their peril. Since these protagonists are frequently overlooked, they are able to more discretely and effectively conduct their investigations (140-41).[65]

Throughout *Floreros* and *Jugo de mango* the humor stems primarily from the incongruities between the reader's expectations of the aging, female protagonists and how they actually think and behave. As Chouteau and Alderson affirm, the very choice of such a protagonist is already amusing, as ". . . the notion of a little old lady being mixed up in crime tickles our sense of incongruity" (128). Furthermore, the first person narration allows us to see the sequence of events from the protagonists' often-humorous and sarcasm-laden perspectives. *Floreros*, for example, begins with the unnamed, widowed protagonist gardening outside of her home, and while readers of Agatha Christie might initially be tempted to presume that Gorodischer's heroine will be another docile Miss Marple,[66] this grandmother-to-be immediately

[65] This is also the case with Valerie Wilson Wesley's African American sleuth, Tamara Hayle, who explains how her "social invisibility" is, in fact, an asset when doing her investigative work (Walton and Jones 162). In *Devil's Gonna Get Him* (1996), she states: "It's easy to follow somebody who doesn't know you from nothing, especially if you're black and a woman. The world takes you for granted then… I do my best work when people are limited by their own expectations. I smile a lot. Flash my toothiest grin. I've even been known to bend my head slightly and nod a bit to the left. A pleasant young Negress. A dependable, unassuming presence. And while I'm doing my act, I can follow some all-assuming fool to the ends of the earth, making all the notes I please. I love it when they realize that all the while I was bowing and scraping I was steadily kicking ass" (27-28).

[66] Chouteau and Alderson appropriately describe Miss Marple as a "bird-watching spinster who spends a great deal of time gardening or knitting fluffy pastel wool, wears sensible, proper clothes, and looks upon gentlemen as creatures from another planet" (139-40). While Miss Marple is, to the surprise of many

assumes a surprisingly hostile attitude towards Doctor Marcelo J. Kerr, a supposed professor of political science, who interrupts her "magnífica soledad" (75) to propose an espionage mission to her. The protagonist initially refuses to take the job, so Dr. Kerr tries to persuade her by insisting: "No es nada ilegal ni siniestro ni misterioso ni peligroso." The reader expects the protagonist to be reassured and perhaps accept, but instead she responds with biting sarcasm: "No me diga que está programando un picnic con los sordomudos del Hospicio de Santa Águeda" (19). Contrary to common portrayals of elderly women as passive and naive, Gorodischer's protagonist astutely recognizes the danger in Dr. Kerr's proposition. Moreover, her quips reveal her spirited nature, which endears her to the reader and guarantees that we share in her victory when she succeeds.

In addition to a proclivity for sarcasm, the protagonist of *Floreros* differs from many other "little old ladies" in that she is specifically sought after for the job in question; Miss Marple, Lucy Ramsdale, and Hildegarde Withers, on the other hand, are driven by their own inquisitiveness to investigate crimes. We discover that Dr. Kerr and the narrator knew each other years ago when the two worked as spies for the Allies during World War II, and thus she has experience in espionage. This difference—having the *savoir-faire* as opposed to mere curiosity—is important in that it portrays an investigation carried out by an older woman as legitimate work rather than merely unwelcome meddling.[67] This experience also bestows upon the protagonist many skills atypical of "little old ladies" such as the ability to fix cars and break into people's houses (González 394).

The protagonist's mission in *Floreros* is to travel to Mexico to befriend and investigate a compatriot and millionaire, Teodoro Félix Pedro Brüslen, for reasons that are never explained.

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other characters, an effective detective, she does not transcend as many conventional stereotypes about elderly women as both of Gorodischer's two female detectives do.

[67] As Gail González notes, while Gorodischer's protagonist is not actually a professional, the work she does is essentially indistinguishable from that of a private investigator's (394).

The fact that the heroine eventually agrees to what is ultimately a rather dangerous mission without a clear understanding of any of the details—for example, why Brüslen is of interest to Dr. Kerr and in what sort of criminal activity Brüslen might be involved—marks a significant shift not only from female-centered detective fiction, but detective fiction in general. The protagonist seems to be entering morally nebulous territory; rather than attempting to restore order after a particular crime, she agrees to investigate someone about whom she knows virtually nothing and who, for all she knows, has done nothing wrong (García Chichester 168-69). Halfway through the book the protagonist still continues to grapple with the purpose of her mission: "¿Qué estaría buscando yo? Pruebas de que Brüslen estaba metido en el narcotráfico, la venta de armas, la trata de blancas, el espionaje o el contraespionaje o el recontraespionaje, alguna cosa delictuosa, terrible, asombrosa, increíble. Eso estaba buscando" (96). Given the wide range of possibilities, it is clear that at this point the protagonist is no closer than she was at the beginning of the novel to completing her mission.

In her insightful study, *Detective Fiction from Latin America* (1990), Amelia S. Simpson identifies the hard-boiled subgenre of detective fiction as being of seminal importance in shaping contemporary Latin American crime literature. She identifies one of the fundamental distinctions between classic detective fiction and the hard-boiled genre as the following: "The conservative, aristocratic ideology of the classic model… presents the individual criminal act as an aberration in a basically stable, secure society" while the " . . . antielitism of the hard-boiled model [manifests] its distrust of institutions and its view of crimes as all-pervasive" (12). Stated almost identically, Grella likewise affirms: " . . . in the devastated society of the hard-boiled novel, crime is not a temporary aberration, but a ubiquitous fact" ("The Hard-Boiled" 111). This subgenre of detective fiction reflects a world in which crime and corruption are not only

omnipresent, but the very distinctions between right and wrong can blur to the point that even the detective's moral position seems unclear in the reader's eyes. In García Chichester's words, "Gorodischer's detective is less a woman trying to right the world, as she is a woman caught in a world lacking in ethical imperatives" (168), and thus she pursues this investigation regardless of whether a crime has been committed or not. Consequently, the reader follows the heroine of *Floreros* who, without a clear objective, must determine for herself whom to trust and what to look for. Not only do the scarcity of details about her mission and Brüslen himself underscore a morally murky world, this ambiguity also fulfills a narratological function. As I discuss later in this chapter, the focus of *Floreros* centers upon the protagonist in her dual role as mother and detective and while her investigation is crucial to her role as the latter, the details of it remain unimportant.[68]

In a world that is, as García Chichester affirms, "lacking in ethical imperatives" (168), it should come as no surprise that detectives like Gorodischer's protagonist operate in dramatically different ways than those from classic detective novels. Critics have commented, for example, that although she stoutly refuses at first, the narrator agrees to investigate because of the enticing financial compensation—one hundred thousand dollars—with which she states she will buy a Bokhara rug (García Chichester 169). This is yet another way in which Gorodischer's unorthodox protagonist contrasts with other "little old ladies," because she acts, in Dellepiane's words, "no por razones altruistas sino, sórdida y realísticamente, por dinero" ("La narrativa" 27). In fact, it is only after shrewdly negotiating her compensation that the grandmother-to-be takes on the job:

–Me pagan además el pasaje y el hotel y los gastos.

[68] Similarly, Dellepiane has argued, in *Floreros* "lo que interesa al lector no es la dilucidación del misterio sino el éxito de la heroína en la empresa que ha acometido" ("Dos heroínas improbables 575; "La narrativa" 27).

–Ah, no.

–Ah, sí. Si no, no hay trato.

–Está bien –le dijo con una sonrisa.

Venía preparado para eso, sin duda. (*Floreros* 23)

Dellepiane argues that the narrator's calculating responses surprise the reader, as she demonstrates "una venalidad a la que sólo estamos acostumbrados en el sexo masculino" ("Dos heroínas improbables" 574). Indeed, Gorodischer has described her own novel as "escandaloso," because her heroine "hace lo que hace . . . por dinero; no lo hace por generosidad, por abnegación, no… lo hace por dinero" (Elgorreaga 5). In addition to making her a desirable job candidate, the heroine's experience in this line of work has clearly taught her how to be savvy in negotiating business deals. Nevertheless, she appears to be disappointed with herself when Dr. Kerr quickly agrees to what she demands, and she implicitly reprimands herself for not insisting upon being paid more: "venía preparado para eso, sin duda." Readers of Agatha Christie novels are certainly unaccustomed to seeing female sleuths barter in exchange for their investigative work, but despite the heroine's insistence on her compensation, I would argue that her demands are, in part, about being recognized, not just monetarily, but also symbolically, for her expertise and the work she does. Certainly, the protagonist does not appear to *need* the money because, as she boasts, she lives in an "hermosa casa [con] un jardín . . . que es una belleza" (16)[69] and has a

[69] This is another moment in which the protagonist shares at least a superficial likeness with Gorodischer herself. In describing herself the author states: "Tengo una casa alejada del centro con un gran jardín lleno de árboles . . . soy feminista. Hago jogging. Me analizo. Amo a Góngora, a Balzac, el verano, a los gatos y a sentarme en el café a charlar con los amigos . . . " (Vázquez 572). Gorodischer and the characters from both *Floreros* and *Jugo de mango* are bourgeois women who enjoy activities that their stable economic status affords them. It is also worth noting that Gorodischer would have been 57 and 60 years old respectively when *Floreros* and *Jugo de mango* were published, roughly the age of her protagonists. Although Gorodischer indicates that Sean Connery's advanced years in the Bond movie that inspired her to write *Floreros* was the reason why she features an aging protagonist, it is nonetheless suggestive that she would have had such a close proximity in age to her female detectives.

live-in maid, Zulema; instead the protagonist seems intent upon proving her sagacity in her exchanges with Dr. Kerr.

Another such moment in which the protagonist manifests her cupidity is near the end of the novel when the real villain, a woman she had previously mistaken for a prostitute,[70] holds her captive, and the narrator begins to despair.[71] The protagonist's exasperation, an emotion rarely seen in detective figures, is palpable, and she imagines a conversation with Dr. Kerr in which she indignantly tells him what little she has discovered: "¿Sabe una cosa, doctor Marcelo jota Kerr? Brüslen no anda en nada y yo me alegro. Es decir, quizás ande en algo, en eso en que anda todo tipo que tiene una fortuna más que considerable, pecaminosa. Pero no en nada que a ustedes les interese. Vengan mis cien mil verdes . . . y después me deja en paz que tengo que ir a comprarme una Bokhara en el supermercado de la esquina" (140). Again, the narrator insists upon her compensation and repeats that she intends to—though, curiously, she never does—buy a Bokhara rug (Mathieu 117). Even though the novel is nearing its end, the heroine still does not understand why she has been sent to investigate Brüslen, and expresses utter indifference towards the outcome of the investigation; now she is solely interested in escaping. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this comment is the protagonist's suggestion that although Brüslen does not appear to be involved in criminal activity, his immense wealth nearly guarantees his

[70] It is worth noting that both books studied in this chapter feature either a prostitute or a woman disguised as a prostitute, and in both cases the women are more intelligent and powerful than the protagonists presume. In *Floreros*, for example, the cunning villainess pretends to be a prostitute, allowing her to avoid suspicion and dupe the heroine. In Pepi's case, on the other hand, her profession grants her access to important government officials, and allows her to glean information that she can then use to their detriment.

[71] Gorodischer not only subverts the traditional detective figure, but also the typical characterization of the lead villain. After being rescued by her homosexual friend, Hekke, the heroine informs Dr. Kerr that Mejía is the one involved in "algo gordo," but Dr. Kerr, one step ahead of her, corrects her saying, "Lamento decirle que está usted equivocada, querida señora . . . Mejía era un segundón. Andaba en algo, sí, pero a las órdenes de otro, de otra. Ahí tiene el cerebro de todo esto" (150). Dr. Kerr then points to the woman the heroine mistook for a prostitute and helped evade the police. The heroine, like Dr. Kerr, at least initially, had presumed that the villain would be a man, and this erroneous assumption undoubtedly helped the real mastermind avoid suspicion.

involvement in some sort of "sinful" behavior, a notion highly reminiscent of hard-boiled novels.[72] This is characteristic of the way in which Gorodischer's humor functions: while the protagonist comically lashes out in frustration, the seemingly off-handed suggestion that the wealthy almost always have their hands dirty is, in fact, a pointed social critique that Gorodischer develops more fully in *Jugo de mango*.

While the money to buy a Bokhara rug is the only reason the protagonist outwardly appears to accept this job, it is clear, as Dellepiane herself and many other critics have noted, that the aging heroine also feels nostalgic for the thrilling days of her youth and secretly welcomes this new adventure (Berg 54; "Dos heroínas improbables" 571; de Fernández 276; López Rodríguez 30; Mathieu 117). Her emphatic affirmations of happiness and tranquility are rather suspect, as she offers very short-lived resistance to Dr. Kerr's proposal. Indeed, this trip gives her a chance to " . . . ir[se] un poco de la rutina" (*Floreros* 26), and, Berg adds, " . . . escaparse del rol de madre" (54). Again, although she initially acts as if she would never dream of getting involved, the aging protagonist clearly revels in her preparations for her trip, now driven to quit smoking and start exercising every day to get in shape. That is, just as do hard-boiled detectives like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, Gorodischer's protagonist "liv[es] in a lawless world" and her investigation demands "physical rather than intellectual ability" (Grella, "The Hard-Boiled" 107). When one of the protagonist's four daughters discovers noticeable changes in her mother's habits, she interrogates her:

> – ¿Qué te pasa? ¿Estás enferma? ¿Qué tenés?

[72] Grella points to Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* and Ross Macdonald novels, affirming: "the affluent are so often responsible for social problems that a quasi-Marxist distrust of the wealthy becomes a minor motif; the rich are merely gangsters who have managed to escape punishment" ("The Hard-Boiled" 111).

– Terminala, Inés, parecés una cotorra amaestrada. Animales desagradables, por otra parte…¿Son o no son desagradables las cotorras? Y los loros y los tucanes y todo eso.

. . . .

– Adelgazaste.

– Me alegro de que se note. Estoy haciendo régimen.

– Pero, ¿por qué? ¿ Te hiciste ver?

– Me hice ver por quién, Inés? Hacé el favor de hablar con propiedad y exactitud.

. . . .

Desde que nací que te veo con el pucho en la mano. O en la boca. O buscando un pretexto para fumar. De repente no fumás más, estás más flaca y andás con evasivas.

. . . .

– Lo que pasa es que me voy de viaje. (23-24)

The protagonist's evasive responses illustrate her obvious excitement with regards to her unanticipated and enigmatic mission. This capricious and adventurous side of their mother is something of which neither Inés nor her sisters approve as they protest her trip before she leaves (25-29), and later they criticize her harshly for being an absent and detached mother, insisting that this trip represents an established pattern of behavior (166-70). Despite her daughters' disapproval and her own half-hearted attempts to refuse it, this job offers the protagonist a new purpose and a sense of vitality.

Although the protagonist of *Floreros* does her best to prepare herself for the physical demands of her mission so that she can either run from or defend herself against those who might threaten her, the narrator laments that she can no longer transform her aging arms back into the muscular ones she used to have: " . . . no eran lo que habían sido y ningún entrenamiento podría volver a convertirlos en aquéllos" (*Floreros* 93). Nor does she carry a gun, " . . . el símbolo fálico por excelencia" (González 396), as hard-boiled detectives do; instead Gorodischer's protagonist possesses a weapon capable of dismantling patriarchal aggression: her piercing and relentless stare.[73] One of the first nights she is in Mexico, the heroine goes to several restaurants and bars alone, and she grows keenly aware of the fact that she is the only woman out unaccompanied. Her lone presence attracts the attention of the clientele in each establishment, and many men comment or gaze at her lasciviously, assuming that she is seeking a male companion. We see the power of this unconventional weapon when one of her victims slowly crumbles under the persistence of her stare:

> Me abordó un tipo a la salida y me dijo con una sonrisita sobradora que él tenía lo que yo andaba buscando. Me hubiera encantado decirle que por lo que él tenía yo no me desprendía ni un solo botón, pero soy una dama y la sonrisita era tan asquerosa que se merecía algo más. Lo miré en silencio. Lo miré nada más. Lo miré y lo miré y lo seguí mirando, con los ojos míos fijos en los ojos de él sin pestañear, sin hablar, mirándolo con todo el asco que se puede poner en una

[73] In her characterization of feminist detective fiction, Maggie Humm oversimplifies the matter, claiming, "feminist detectives prefer self-defence tactics to the violent and phallic gun" (186). She fails to mention one particularly notable exception, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, who arms herself with a Smith & Wesson pistol. Furthermore, I would argue that while the protagonist in *Floreros* begins to stare at the man in the bar out of self-defense, the persistence with which she gazes makes it an aggressive, combative stare. The second time the protagonist casts her menacing stare upon someone—the woman who leads her to and from the bathroom during the protagonist's captivity—she does so out of defiance, not to protect herself. Thus, both V. I. Warshawski and Gorodischer's protagonist illustrate that female detectives sometimes employ violent, aggressive tactics in addition to fighting back in self-defense.

> mirada . . . trató de seguir sonriendo pero al rato el filo de los dientes de arriba le hizo un ruidito contra el filo de los dientes de abajo. Todavía le quedaron arrestos como para preguntarme si no le había entendido y yo lo seguí mirando. Podíamos haber estado al pie del Vesubio en el verano del 79 y yo lo hubiera seguido mirando sin pestañear. Las cosas simples de la vida son las más efectivas: eso no lo dice la sabiduría popular, eso lo digo yo. El labio de arriba hizo lo mismo que los dientes pero sin ruidito. Retrocedió. Ya no me miraba pero yo sí a él, yo lo seguía mirando. Y en cuanto al asco, ahí estaba. Intentó decirme puta y no llegó ni a la u. (46-47)

Not only is the protagonist's unorthodox defense against those who mean her harm amusing, it also represents a significant reversal in traditional gender roles by inverting what Mulvey calls the "controlling and curious" male gaze (16). Mulvey, whose work centers upon modern film, argues, "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form . . . In their traditional exhibitionist role, women . . . can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (19). In this sense, Mulvey insists, modern film reproduces patriarchal domination, placing men, not women, in active positions of power (16). Although the man in the excerpt above tries to impose his libidinous desires upon Gorodischer's protagonist, she neutralizes his voyeuristic gaze by boldly refusing to look away. Ultimately, this grandmother-to-be gains control of the role of the active spectator and the man is forced to become the passive spectacle.[74]

[74] The female detective duo featured in the American television series, *Cagney and Lacey* (1981-1988), employs a similar approach. As Gamman affirms, "Cagney and Lacey are not simply passive objects . . . *They look back*" and "point out to colleagues (and viewers) in a witty and amusing way why the male gaze is sexist" (16). While Cagney and Lacey playfully mock their sexist colleagues, they do so, Gamman

Similarly, during the time in which the protagonist is kidnapped and sees only the same woman who escorts her to and from the bathroom, Gorodischer's protagonist employs the same defense mechanism, gradually defeating her enemy as in the manner described above:

> Volví a comer, fui al baño con la tipa y no le dije nada. Pero la miré, soy una entusiasta de las miradas: la miraba de arriba abajo y de abajo a arriba y me sonreía con una sonrisita irónica y despreciativa. Hice eso durante todo el tiempo y la puse tan nerviosa que creí que me iba a pegar. No hizo nada y no dijo nada y me llevó arriba. Me encerró y se fue. (145-46)

As the example above demonstrates, the heroine's defense is not only effective against men's lascivious gazes, but against all those who aim to oppress her. In both instances, Gorodischer exaggerates the power of her female protagonist's penetrating stare—a distinctly "masculine" behavior associated with male protagonists like James Bond—satirizing the male gaze.[75] Arming her detective with a weapon from male detectives' arsenal, Gorodischer criticizes men's sexist attempts to objectify women while simultaneously, and humorously, illustrating the utility of a vitriolic female gaze in confronting and destabilizing patriarchal control.

In addition to wielding an unorthodox weapon—a piercing stare that unflinchingly challenges male dominance—Gorodischer's protagonist differs from hard-boiled detectives in her admissions of fear ("Dos heroínas improbables" 577). As Grella indicates, the protagonists of hard-boiled novels boldly face down danger, " . . . display[ing] stoic resistance to physical suffering . . . Their insults and wisecracks are the badge of their courage; refusing to show pain or fear, they answer punishment with flippancy" (107). Although the heroine of *Floreros* also

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argues, without alienating their other male colleagues and by "distanc[ing] themselves from mastery" (15). That is, unlike Gorodischer's protagonist, who steadily asserts her dominance over the man in the bar, Cagney and Lacey stop shy of assuming supremacy themselves.

[75] It is worth mentioning once again that the inspiration to write this book came after Gorodischer watched a James Bond movie.

acts with courage, she professes, if only to herself, that she is scared. Before breaking into Brüslen's house, she paces back and forth and tells herself: "tenés miedo, eso es lo que pasa. Sí. Todo iba a andar bien, si lo sabría yo, pero en ese momento tenía miedo" (92). After acknowledging her fear, the protagonist is able to proceed, adroitly drugging the Doberman standing guard outside and sneaking into Brüslen's house. Once inside, she feels another even more terrifying moment of panic in which she convinces herself that someone has caught her: "De pronto apareció el miedo, sin previo aviso . . . se me erizaron los pelitos de la nuca, la frente se me cubrió de sudor. Alguien sabía que yo estaba ahí, me miraba y se sonreía. Me obligué a darme vuelta despacio, a mirar alrededor, arriba, al frente, atrás. Seguía sintiendo la mirada de alguien clavada en mí" (97). In spite of her fear, the protagonist has experience with espionage, and thus has experienced such moments of panic before, so she does not allow it to paralyze her:

> Recordé que yo conocía esa sensación, que la había sentido en medio de la noche otras veces, hacía mucho tiempo. Si una se le rendía, estaba frita. Podía ser que no fuera una vigilándome, siguiéndome. No era ésa la cuestión. La cuestión era no dejarse vencer por el pánico. Primero venía la reconquista de la tranquilidad, y recién después se podía pensar en lo que se haría para encontrar y manejar a ese alguien. Si existía. (98)

García Chichester contends that " . . . th[ese] confession[s] of fear in the face of danger [are] a modest but significant departure from the cold, objective, and calculating convention of the genre's 'tough' characters" (169-70), but I would argue that this shift is even more important than this critic suggests. Not only does her recognition of her fear humanize the heroine, making her more accessible to the reader, but more importantly, her insistence upon defying it signals Gorodischer's aim to re-write the traditional narrative of women falling victim or behaving

submissively due to their own worry or trepidation. I will develop this idea further in my subsequent analysis of *Jugo de mango*.

In addition to challenging the notion that women are incapable of overcoming fear, the protagonist deconstructs the idyllic image of feminine youth, characterizing it instead as a time in which apprehension and hesitation would paralyze her. The heroine reflects upon the time she was her daughters' age and compares it to how she is now: " . . . a los veinte años yo calculaba, medía, pesaba y planificaba. Casi cuarenta años después, era capaz de apretarme la nariz y tirarme a la pileta sin haber averiguado antes si había agua o no. Pero con los ojos abiertos. Me gustaba más a mí misma ahora que a los veinte años" (45-46). Although I remain skeptical about some of the protagonist's comments, specifically her relief at the prospect of (supposedly) being beyond the age at which one can fall in love, this quotation strikes me as genuine. She suggests that with time she has allowed herself to give in to her capriciousness, as evidenced by her mission in Mexico. She understands now that she cannot even hope to predict, much less control, the future, and recalls that her youth was a time of insecurity when she felt the need to please others: "¿Veinte años? ¿Un mundo duro, hostil, sin resquicios, incomprensible, en el que no hay lugar para una? ¿La piel herida por los vestidos que otros le endilgan a una y que una tiene que lucir según reglas que una no inventó? ¿Sonrisas rapaces? ¿Manos como puños? ¿Un idioma que una no entiende? ¿Quién quería tener veinte años? No yo" (75). In that sense, Gorodischer's heroine affirms that despite the fact that people (especially women) mourn the loss of their youth (74), having the freedom to do what she wants, as she does now, has made her happier in her middle age.

Despite the narrator's admissions of fear and her old age, which distinguish her from more conventional hard-boiled detectives, there is, as González aptly notes, an intriguing

commonality between Gorodischer's protagonist and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, an iconic hard-boiled detective: neither have much regard for reason (397). This is particularly noteworthy given that detective fiction writers "históricamente . . . se jactan de la supuesta objetividad y celebran la racionalidad de sus protagonistas" (González 393). In the *The Hound of Baskersvilles*, for example, Sherlock Holmes is able to deduce Dr. Mortimer's profession and his fondness for walking from the inscription and the wear on his walking stick respectively. Examples like these abound in the novels and short stories featuring Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes, while Gorodischer's heroine, in contrast, scorns reason, preferring to "guiarse por la intuición o el instinto" (397). Again, when the protagonist is held hostage near the end of the novel, she begins to despair and her thoughts jump rapidly from one thing to the next, first soliciting, and then resolutely rejecting reason's assistance, speaking to it as if it were a live entity: "Ven, Razón . . . sé mi báculo en el arduo sendero de la comprensión, he aquí que tu Sherlock femenino te llama. Causa y consecuencia, deducción, lógica, rigor, teoremicemos, induzcamos, cogitemos" (138). Gorodischer's heroine gives an obvious nod to one of the classic figures of detective fiction, indicating how Holmes would solve the enigma she faces, but then, after a series of disjointed and fleeting thoughts, the heroine changes her mind. She then forcefully insists: "Señora Razón Todopoderosa, por favor no venga, no se me acerque, no me mire ni me toque…váyase, usted no cabe, no entra aquí, dos somos demasiadas, váyase" (141). The protagonist's invocation followed by her abrupt rejection of reason point to a conscious distancing from the classic model of detection. Like her hard-boiled predecessors, Gorodischer's protagonist " . . . replace[s] the subtleties of the deductive method," but instead of substituting it "with a sure knowledge of [the] world and a keen moral sense" (Grella "The Hard-Boiled" 106), she succeeds largely thanks to chance. Again, if we recall Simpson's distinction between the

societies represented by classic and hard-boiled detective novels, we find that the former portrays a relatively stable society whereas the latter depicts our virtually lawless, corrupt contemporaneity. Through her protagonist's rejection of reasoning, Gorodischer's seems to suggest that logic is no longer an effective tool in our modern world, which is not as "coherente y ordenado" (García Pinto 43) as we might think. The heroine therefore humorously concludes: "Razoné. Llegué a una importantísima conclusión: el razonamiento no sirve para nada" (106).[76] Clearly, Gorodischer's protagonist has learned the lesson of Borges's "La muerte y la brújula."[77]

While the typical hard-boiled detective is an independent, loner figure without family ties (Grella, "The Hard-Boiled" 110), one noteworthy trend in female-authored detective fiction featuring female protagonists is the prominent presence of family (González 396). The protagonist's four daughters, ignorant of their mother's motives for her travels,[78] try to dissuade her from going to Mexico, but despite the fact that two of her daughters, Inés and Judith, are pregnant, the heroine embarks upon her mission. As will become especially evident towards the end of the novel, the protagonist's drive to pursue professional opportunities creates a source of tension between her and her daughters. The challenges of being a mother and an international investigator split the focus of the narrative between the mission in Mexico and the protagonist's family life in Argentina. By locating the protagonist's work in an entirely different geographic

[76] This again, reminds the reader of the author's likeness with her protagonist, as Gorodischer has insisted that she is unable to write detective stories that are resolved by logic (Sánchez, "Reportaje" 156).
[77] The reader recalls that in this story, the criminal devises a scheme designed to appeal to detective Lönnrot's tendency to over-rationalize by suggesting that there is a geographical pattern in the locations of the murders. In this way, Scharlach lures Lönnrot to very place Scharlach will murder the detective. Lönnrot's investigative approach leads him to his own death, and thus Borges questions the value of logical reasoning, a method of detection commonly employed by classic detectives like Sherlock Holmes.
[78] When the protagonist tells her daughters why she has suddenly decided to go on this trip she tells herself: "Estaba mintiendo como un cafre, pero qué le iba a hacer" (25). Clearly, keeping this mission a secret from her daughters is part of the excitement for her, but it likely also fosters some of the misunderstanding between the heroine and her daughters. That is, if the daughters knew their mother was going to Mexico for work and not personal reasons, their reproaches of her would probably be more tempered.

locale from her family life, Gorodischer spatially represents the divide between these conflicting roles. Gorodischer insists that women must not allow the duties of motherhood to confine them to the house; women must, in the author's view, pursue their professional ambitions.

Again, the scarcity of details surrounding the mission is striking to the reader but as García Chichester affirms, this is because in lieu of solving a mystery to reestablish social order, the "central problem" in *Floreros* is " . . . the oppositional demands upon the character of her meandering work as an international sleuth and the duties and responsibilities of mother, grandmother, and caregiver that her family and society demand of her" (169). As Mizejewski notes, some feminist detective literature has intentionally avoided this thorny issue by featuring female protagonists who, determined to prove their investigative competence, eschew all family ties and romantic relationships, and cites Sue Grafton and Patricia Cornwell's heroines as examples (23).[79] Like classic hard-boiled detectives, both

> resist family ties in order to pursue the lonely work of investigation. Grafton's detective, orphaned at a very young age, is horrified to discover, halfway through the series, a bevy of long-lost female cousins attempting to claim her into family dynamics she thought she'd avoided. Cornwell's investigator keeps a nagging mother and man-clinging sister out of sight in Florida. (23)

Gorodischer's heroine, on the other hand, struggles to balance work and family,[80] ultimately choosing to abandon her grown daughters in favor of work.

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[79] Mizejewski elaborates: "The Grafton and Cornwell series in some ways exemplify the 1970s tough-chic school of feminism, in which women succeed on male turf without changing the rules of the game. But they might also exemplify the residue of mainstream feminism and its backlash at the end of the twentieth century" (23). Either way, these protagonists are strong, assertive characters who demonstrate they are just as capable as their male counterparts.

[80] This is also a challenge that Gorodischer herself faced, and thus yet again we see a sort of parallel between the protagonist of *Floreros* and the author. As a mother with a full-time job who also made time to write, Gorodischer is intimately aware of the challenges facing working mothers, and like the

Again, the struggle to find a balance between her investigative work and family life comes to a head in the painful confrontation between the protagonist and her daughters. While the so-called "ajuste de cuentas" (167) is undoubtedly devastating for the protagonist, I would argue that this is an important, albeit cruel, moment of rebellion for her daughters. The first person narration allows the reader to see that even while away in Mexico, " . . . la protagonista jamás se olvida de su rol de madre" (Berg 55), thinking of her children often. Despite her obvious devotion to her children, her four daughters, some more pointedly than others, accuse her of having been "ausente, lejana, irónica, inteligente" (167) all of their lives. While the protagonist claims that for her daughters this was "un pequeño incidente en sus vidas, un episodio enojoso y nada más" (174), I insist that this moment is more significant for her daughters than the protagonist indicates. This confrontation, as Berg explains, " . . . consiste en la pérdida de la imagen 'monolítica' de madre y su sustitución por la imagen 'contradictoria' de una persona de carne y hueso," and thus "el 'ajuste de cuentas' corresponde más bien a un 're-ajuste' de la imagen (verdadera) de la madre" (57). In other words, rather than simply seeing her as she relates to them—as their mother—the protagonist's children are finally beginning to perceive her as an individual who fulfills many roles, despite their childish and unreasonable insistence that she be devoted only to them. Significantly, the daughters confront their mother

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protagonist, constantly had to determine how to negotiate the various demands upon her time. She recalls her first years of motherhood in an interview with Selser: "Me sentía culpable con relación a mis hijos, sentía que los abandonaba porque yo no estaba como otras señoras del barrio batiendo y amasando y haciendo comidita rica para ellos. Y también me sentía culpable respecto de la literatura, porque yo sabía, desde los siete años que quería ser escritora. Y claro, no le podía dedicar todo el tiempo a eso" (Gorodischer 2004). I suspect these experiences influenced Gorodischer's writing of this character's struggles with balancing her investigative and familial demands. Indeed, the protagonist of *Floreros* seems to focus more of her energies on her work than her family, something Gorodischer was unwilling or unable to do when raising her young children.

just as two of them are about to become mothers themselves, and thus they too will, presumably, encounter difficulties balancing their family life and the pursuit of their own ambitions.[81]

Critical opinion varies widely regarding the daughters' condemnation of their mother near the end of the novel. Noting that Atala's insults, "siempre ausente, lejana, irónica, inteligente," encapsulate the image of a traditional detective, González proposes an intriguing idea, which is that this "ajuste de cuentas" on behalf of the daughters represents a questioning of the typical detective figure, and by extension the conservative values traditionally espoused by the detective genre. In fact, the mere inclusion of this family conflict in a genre that has traditionally avoided family drama entirely could itself suggest a reevaluation of the fundamental values of the genre (399). Berg, on the other hand, taking the text's obvious nods to the Freudian patricide motif at face value, argues that the "ajuste de cuentas" is an inversion of this theme. The protagonist's own thoughts, for example, suggest a Freudian reading of the confrontation, as she mourns, "Me habían matado" (174), and, even more explicitly, she reflects: "Hay que odiarla, hay que decírselo, hay que matarla. ¿A la madre? ¿No era al padre? Qué me contás Freud" (171). While the protagonist is talking to her cat that she has named after the father of psychoanalysis, this reference obviously makes it seem as though she is speaking with Freud himself. Although the protagonist leaves many allusive textual clues[82] that could point the reader towards such an interpretation, Berg's analysis does not address the underlying feminist concerns, which García Chichester, on the other hand, appropriately identifies in this

[81] The narrator herself implies that her daughters could experience such an "ajuste de cuentas" when they become mothers themselves in the following: "¿Y si mis hijas tenían hijas? ¿Algún día esas hijas les dirían a sus madres, a mis hijas, que las odiaban? Sí, sin duda: odiarla, porque no hay otro camino para no confundirse con ella, para dejar de ser ella" (171).

[82] In a similar vein, the protagonist reiterates: "Mis hijas me odiaban y yo estaba muerta . . . Todo lo que le queda a una hija es hacer lo contrario de lo que hizo su madre, a veces sólo para descubrir con horror que se ha pasado años haciendo lo mismo" (172).

confrontation. The latter's description of the daughters' acrimonious attack points to the juvenility of their outlook: "We witness the mother's shock and hurt as her daughters cruelly heap charges of neglect of family and domestic duties upon her, criticizing her for wanting to have a life away from her role as a mother, for not being there at every step of their upbringing, for being too aloof, and for simply not being a model of maternal commitment" (170). As mentioned previously, the first person narration allows us to see that the narrator thinks of her family constantly while in Mexico, nonetheless, her daughters who, of course, cannot observe this, interpret their mother's trip as an additional sign of her self-centeredness. Like feminists who challenge sexist stereotypes about women using humor, Gorodischer reworks the detective fiction frame to contest the notion that the domestic sphere circumscribes women's lives.

In addition to demonstrating juvenile self-absorption, the daughters' reproaches of their mother reveal their acceptance of conventional gender roles that confine women to the role of caretaker. These conservative values are clearly at odds with the protagonist's aim to have a family and pursue her own professional ambitions. The protagonist deems her daughters' demands as unreasonable and insists that they feel neglected "porque habían tenido una persona al lado y no una leyenda ni un monumento en una plaza. Lo que se quiere es tener eso, una madre de leyenda y mármol. Persona quién, con qué derecho" (*Floreros* 167). García Chichester asserts that the protagonist's bitter reaction to her daughters' criticisms is a "thinly veiled reference to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and to their activities during . . . Argentina's 'Dirty War' (1976-1983)" (171). The Madres, a group of women and grandmothers devoted to finding their loved ones who were disappeared during the "Dirty War," have found unity and political strength in their shared identity as mothers. In creating solidarity around motherhood, however, the Madres paradoxically " . . . reinforced the assumption that childrearing and nurturing were

exclusively the responsibilities of mothers" while simultaneously gaining the political might to "confront the authority of a rogue military *junta*" (171-72). In other words, the protagonist seems to liken what her daughters demand of her to the unyielding devotion of the Madres. Despite her daughters' belief that their mother should be devoted to nurturing their family, Gorodischer's protagonist refuses to be defined solely by her role as caregiver, and here, my view departs from that of García Chichester's. She insists that the novel ends with " . . . a regression to gender-specific values of care giving and family responsibility" (170) because the novel ends with the narrator's acceptance of Brüslen's marriage proposal, what she calls a "calculated and objective decision" (170), and the protagonist becomes a grandmother. García Chichester deems both to be "subver[sions of] her own wishes" (173); nevertheless, as I will argue presently, these two milestones represent not a "surrendering to the demands of society" (172) but rather the protagonist's intent to seek personal fulfillment and continue caring for her four daughters.

As stated previously, the novel ends with the narrator becoming a grandmother when she delivers her own twin granddaughters as her daughter, Inés, goes into labor precipitously. Because of this, and the heroine's acceptance of Brüslen's marriage proposal, which I will address separately, García Chichester claims the protagonist is "driven back to a gender-polarized choice of stereotypical femininity" (173). Nevertheless, I would argue that the childbirth scene with the heroine's daughter, Inés, merits a more nuanced reading. By comforting Inés through labor, the protagonist and at least one of her daughters are able to reconcile, but more significantly, the scene is a glorification of childbirth in which the strength and fearlessness of this feminine act is celebrated. Inés and the protagonist must deliver the babies before medical assistance arrives and in the following passage, the latter looks upon her daughter admiringly,

suddenly realizing the doctor whom she had called for so urgently only moments ago would not only be unnecessary, but also intrusive during this intimate moment:

> pucha qué linda estaba mi hija ahí tirada en un revoltijo de nylon y cama manchada y vestido alzado hasta el cuello y las manos agarradas al colchón, sonriendo. Yo también le sonreí . . . Qué hacía ese imbécil [el médico] que no venía . . . lo vi y supe que yo lo iba a recibir, yo . . . y deseé que no viniera, qué tenía que hacer él ahí entre ella y yo, ese intruso, que no llegara, que se quedara en su consultorio con moquete y aspidistras en maceteros de bronce cobrando honorarios y recetando vitaminas. (180)

In this moment, among others, the protagonist is openly disdainful towards the male "doctorcito," and challenges his expertise by suggesting that he merely peddles vitamin pills, as though he were swindling his female patients by doing so. He arrives moments after the birth and is quickly ushered away, with the implication being, of course, that women have the knowledge and strength to do this on their own.

In another moment, the protagonist, likely functioning as a mouthpiece for Gorodischer, expresses similar admiration of motherhood, affirming its intrinsic strength. She does so by comparing the power in mothers' capacity to give birth to the "invented" strengths of men, suggesting that the former guarantees a sort of permanence for the mother as opposed to the relative transience of the father:

> Eso es un padre, un personaje que pasa y se va, que está un ratito y después ya no está más . . . Un personaje con coturnos, pero provisorio, aleatorio y accesorio. ¿Poder? . . . . Déjame de joder, qué poder tiene el padre. El dinero, la ley, la jefatura de la familia, la patria potestad, el cinturón con hebilla. Me hacés reír:

> poderes chiquitos inventados. Ni siquiera es el dueño de las minas, ni siquiera es el dueño de la madre . . . . ella dio la vida, ella da la vida, ella es la vida, ella tiene el verdadero poder, el abominable, que es el que dobla la realidad, el que consigue para ella una suerte de eternidad, una permanencia adentro de las hijas. (*Floreros* 171-72)

Interestingly, this assertion takes place immediately after the daughters' harsh reproaches of their mother, and thus despite their conflicts, the protagonist is still a central and lasting figure for her daughters. This quotation, in conjunction with the childbirth scene near the end of the novel, reveals that Gorodischer regards childbearing and mothering not as joyless "dut[ies]" (García Chichester 172), but as manifestations of female power.

While I find Dellepiane's explanation of the end of the novel closer to my own interpretation, I maintain that the resolution is not quite as neat as Dellepiane suggests:

> Una vez en su casa, y abuela, se produce la reconciliación con las hijas que, finalmente, comprenden esa aparente frialdad de su madre, y ella se siente libre para aceptar la propuesta matrimonial de Brüslen, afirmando, de esta manera, su derecho a una vida más plena y el triunfo de su individualismo. Esto es, hay un desenlace para el misterio y otro para la vida de la protagonista. ("Dos heroínas improbables" 581)

Dellepiane appropriately identifies the double storyline, one of which follows the protagonist in her investigations, and the other in which the heroine navigates the sometimes-tenuous relationships she has with her daughters. Nevertheless, the heroine's daughters never outwardly forgive their mother for her "aparente frialdad," as Dellepiane claims, but rather move on after expressing displeasure at her ill-timed absence. It is, however, even more crucial to note that the

protagonist accepts Brüslen's marriage proposal due to a change in *her own* attitude, not because of any external circumstance, as Dellepiane seems to suggest. That is, the protagonist finally allows herself to fall in love after trying to convince herself: "una mujer de mi edad no anda soñando con el amor, no es serio. La Bokhara era un sueño nuevo" (107). Here again, the protagonist alludes to the Bokhara rug that she supposedly intends to buy, calling it her new dream that she deems to be more appropriate for a woman her age to pursue. In that sense, the protagonist does not truly desire the Bokhara rug, but rather it represents what she sees as appropriate according to societal norms.[83] Similarly, in the following passage she asserts that she is happier now that she is not preoccupied with love:

> la hora de la pareja había pasado por mi vida para nunca más volver. Cosa que no era una tragedia, al contrario, era una garantía de tranquilidad. No más esperas, no más lágrimas, no más ilusiones, engaños, perdones, sueños, no más terremotos del cuerpo ni del alma . . . Pensar que hay gente que llora por la juventud perdida, mujeres sobre todo. No yo, que estaba en paz; no yo, que gozaba de una magnífica soledad. A mí nadie me reclamaba belleza ni carnes firmes ni párpados lisos ni sex appeal. . . . ¿Quién quería tener veinte años? No yo. (74-75)

Again, in order to convince herself of her relative happiness now that she is alone, she lists all of the unpleasant things that can befall a person in love, but it seems clear that the protagonist's disparaging comments about love reveal her secret longing for it. While García Chichester interprets the protagonist's acceptance of Brüslen's proposal as a submission to patriarchy, I would argue that, on the contrary, it is an affirmation of her independence (Dellepiane, "Dos

[83] This reinforces my previous assertion that the protagonist is not solely motivated by money (or the Bokhara rug that she could buy with the money) to take on this case, but rather she seeks the adventure. In that sense, obtaining a Bokhara rug represents an "appropriate" ambition for a woman of her class and age, but I would argue that in each case it is not what the protagonist truly desires.

heroínas" 576). That is, rather than merely fulfilling her role as a mother, Gorodsicher's protagonist complies with her own wishes in agreeing to marry Brüslen.

Unlike classic or hard-boiled detective novels, humor is a fundamental element throughout *Floreros*. Although hard-boiled protagonists make occasionally comical remarks,[84] Gorodischer's humor is ubiquitous through this novel, offering amusing critiques of gender stereotypes, primarily through incongruity, often the result of gender role reversals. In the following scene, for example, Rolito, one of the con men with whom the protagonist becomes friends, is drinking at a bar and grows emotional after his friend, Fred, goes away with one of his conquests. The narrator herself comments upon the strange inversion of the gender roles:

> Vi cómo le temblaba la boca y antes de que pudiera pensar en algo para pararlo, empezó a llorar. Me daba un poco de lástima pero no mucha y además no podía hacer nada por él . . . llamábamos la atención de la distinguida clientela como no podía ser de otro modo. El cuadro clásico es ése en el que la mina llora y el tipo la mira fríamente incómodo. Que fuera el tipo el que lloraba con la cara entre las manos, los codos en la mesa y el temblor en los hombros, que fuera mina la que lo miraba sin hacer nada, sin decir nada, era casi un escándalo. (90)

Like the protagonist, we find this reversal in gender roles and the heroine's relative lack of sympathy amusing. Despite the fact that women are stereotypically thought to be the more emotional and nurturing gender, the heroine does not try to comfort her male friend; she recognizes her inability to do anything, and merely watches him sob in a crowded bar. By portraying women who refuse to conform to stereotypes and depicting men who act in more

[84] When present, the humor in hard-boiled novels is a wry, sarcastic sort of humor, which, like Gorodischer's often carries an implicit social critique.

"feminine" ways than the female protagonist, Gorodischer "question[s] the stereotypes that have governed [women's] lives" (Merrill 279).

Gorodischer employs the same technique in a scene in which the protagonist, who is adept in car mechanics, lends a hand to an unknown man, who we later discover is Mejía, one of the accomplices to the real villain of the novel:

> Es el cable de la bobina –dije.
>
> Me miró él a mí. Le vi en los ojos, en las orejas y en los pelitos de la nuca la pregunta:
>
> –Pero andá, qué sabe de motores una mujer.
>
> No lo dijo. Tampoco dijo la bronca que tenía, que también se le veía.
>
> –Pierde chispa, por eso no anda –agregué.
>
> Le dio miedo. A un hombre siempre le da miedo que una mujer sepa lo que no debe saber; es decir, lo que él no sabe. Por eso no hay mujeres urólogas. Alargué la mano y sostuve la acodadura del cable.
>
> –Déle. Hágalo arrancar –dije.
>
> –Pero no ve que no arranca. . . . Pero se metió en el auto, dio contacto prrrr hizo el Datsun y arrancó.
>
> … Casi me pongo a bailar la Danza Sioux de la Victoria sobre los Salvajes Bisontes de la Pradera Infinita. (39-40)

As is the case with the protagonist's knowledge of how to break into people's houses and barter for adequate compensation for her work, the heroine learns how to fix cars while working as a spy in her younger years (113). Knowledge of car mechanics is so frequently associated with men that even the heroine later reveals her own incredulity at Mejía's inability to fix his own car:

"Usted me explica cómo es que un hombre sabe tan poco de motores . . . Todos los hombres saben una barbaridad de motores, de fútbol y de política (112). The heroine's comment could be read in a couple of different ways. One could argue that while Gorodischer's heroine clearly enjoys behaving in "unfeminine" ways, rejecting common stereotypes about women, she simultaneously, and unfairly, assumes that men like Mejía will conform to conventional stereotypes of masculinity. I suspect, however, that this remark on behalf of the protagonist is intended to underscore that gender stereotypes about men are equally reductionist and arbitrary as those regarding women. Finally, the scene quoted above is noteworthy not only in and of itself, but as I note in my last chapter, *Backyard/Traspatio* by Carrera and Berman likewise includes a brief scene in which several women huddle underneath the hood of a car to fix a radiator. The fact that two different works included in a project centering on women's detective fiction feature a scene in which women work on or have knowledge of car mechanics is remarkable. It seems as though, for the writers of these respective works, portraying women doing something so "unfeminine" is necessary in order to break with the common stereotypes of gender behavior.

II. *Jugo de mango:* The Unwitting Detective

Like the protagonist of *Floreros*, Delmira, the homodiegetic narrator of Gorodischer's second thriller, *Jugo de mango,* is a mature,[85] woman from a bourgeois family who inadvertently embarks upon a dangerous investigation in a foreign land. Through Delmira's evolution, Gorodischer likewise questions common gender stereotypes and challenges patriarchal dominance. Despite the books' similar structures and critical aims, the protagonists are distinct in

[85] Although Gorodischer does not explicitly state the protagonist's age, I agree with Dellepiane that this protagonist is somewhat younger than the protagonist of *Floreros,* likely in her forties ("La narrativa" 29).

fairly significant ways. Unlike the protagonist of *Floreros,* Delmira Luzuriaga is a single woman without children, who, as the reader learns, is rather isolated from the little family she has. A geography teacher without any experience in detective work whatsoever, Delmira feels the desperate urge to urinate whenever she is faced with a frightening situation, and is what I will call an "unwitting detective" throughout my analysis of this novel. Delmira has no intention of being a detective but rather becomes one by, coincidentally, being at the right place at the right time, and by being inquisitive, persistently asking questions of those around her. Despite her fear, Delmira is ultimately an effective detective, mostly thanks to chance and instincts she never knew she had. More importantly, however, the protagonist's unanticipated trip to and investigation in a Caribbean country forces her to experience the unfamiliar, prompting her to reconsider her own beliefs. The trip leads to a profound transformation on Delmira's behalf as the patriarchal violence that she observes and experiences herself forces her to act assertively and become a politically engaged citizen (García Pinto 44-45).

Jugo de mango begins when terrorists hijack the plane Delmira takes from Buenos Aires to the United States, and she feels, as usual, the desperate urge to urinate. She describes how, in this and other similar situations, her body betrays her, reacting to the stimuli around her before she can control herself: "yo colorada; cada vez que me asusto, que me alegro, que tengo miedo, me emociono, rabio, me desespero; cada vez que siento que las cosas, que este mundo, no es como debiera ser, viene esa puntada finita y casi dulce, y al baño rápido o me hago pis encima" (11). As she is being escorted to the restroom, a fortuitous jolt allows her to gain control of a weapon and miraculously take back the plane. While Delmira's quick thinking prevents the terrorists from carrying out their plot to land the plane in Cuba, the pilot insists that they cannot fly the rest of the way to the United States without seeking immediate medical attention for the wounded

passengers and assessing the damage done to the plane. Thus, Delmira and the other passengers are forced to spend the next several days on an island in the Caribbean until they can be taken to their final destination. As Gimbernat de González points out, Delmira prevents the terrorists' from completing their mission, acting not out of "heroísmo ni . . . valentía, ni . . . agresividad . . . sino los deseos de ir al baño" (135). Ironically, then, Delmira is successful thanks to her body's physiological reaction to fear, which then provides her an opportunity to act. Delmira's subsequent refusals to submit to aggression on the unnamed Caribbean island represent pivotal acts of defiance, and her rebellious actions on the plane launch her inadvertent investigation into a terrorist group and its political affiliates.

Delmira's initial impressions of the country, which seems to her vastly different than Argentina,[86] reveal her prejudicial attitude towards developing nations and their citizens. As mentioned previously, Delmira's comments lay bare her preference for the predictable (García Pinto 43) and make clear that she is accustomed to the comfortable life her socio-economic status affords her. Upon arriving to the airport, for example, she complains:

> Hacía un calor espantoso y ni ómnibus había. Tuvimos que caminar por la pista que irradiaba calor como una estufa gigante, hasta los edificios del aeropuerto que eran de lo más inadecuados. Había un arco de cemento coronado con letras de cemento que decía BI NVEN DOS. Adentro no había aire acondicionado, qué iba a haber: unos ventiladores daban unas vueltas despacito, colgados del techo. Mucho policía. En shorts. En shorts, que barbaridad, mostrando las piernas

[86] At the end of the novel Delmira juxtaposes the political environment in Argentina and the Caribbean republic where she has spent the last several days. Although Delmira denies any commonalities between the two, the repressive techniques of the Aventares regime bear striking resemblance to the practices of the Videla regime in Argentina during the Dirty War (164-66).

> peludas y chuecas, qué respeto podían imponer así, qué autoridad podían tener. Esas cosas no se deberían permitir, y el calor no es ninguna disculpa. (21)

The short, choppy sentences in the middle of the excerpt above underscore the protagonist's absolute shock upon seeing figures of authority dressed, in her view, inappropriately for the job. Aghast at the appearance of the police and wholly unaccustomed to being inconvenienced, the protagonist also humorously rails at what she deems to be an inexcusable paucity of essentials, such as comfortable transportation and air conditioning.

Delmira's impatience in her exchanges with the staff at the Hotel Gran Splendid likewise reveals her inability to cope with discomfort and adapt to relatively minor disruptions in in her routine:

> Levanté el tubo y estuve horas esperando.
>
> —¡Oiga! ¡No hay agua!—le dije a la que por fin atendió.
>
> —Usted perdone?—me dice.
>
> —No me siento inclinada a perdonar nada. Quiero darme una ducha y no sale agua de las canillas. De ninguna canilla. (23)

Delmira, who has miraculously survived an attempted hijacking earlier that day, demands to have every comfort to which she is habituated restored. Her attitude, again, underscores that Delmira takes comfort in the familiar and avoids, if at all possible, variations to her routine. The lack of hot water in her hotel and air conditioning in the airport are the first of many unfamiliar things Delmira encounters in this country, and later she reflects: "Dios mío, quizá Cuba hubiera

sido preferible" (48). Ultimately, being immersed in a country and culture that is, in many ways, unlike her country of origin provokes a meaningful transformation in Delmira.[87]

In addition to being unhabituated to the limited comforts this Caribbean republic provides, Delmira criticizes the country's inhabitants, concluding they are lazy or apathetic after merely observing them. In her words: "[m]uy activos no eran por lo visto los habitantes del lugar: estaban ahí, sin hacer nada, mirando, fumando, con las manos en los bolsillos, moviendo los pies de acá para allá y otra vez para acá" (33). Delmira's assumptions are, in all likelihood, stereotypes propagated and regurgitated by those belonging to her social class, and Delmira's first impressions of the people seem to confirm these beliefs. As we will see, however, Delmira forms a decidedly different opinion of the country's inhabitants by the end of the novel when she witnesses them fearlessly risking their lives and personal injury to protest political repression (125-26).

Despite her harsh words for the country's inhabitants, Delmira marvels at the island's stunning mountainous landscape, dotted with "frutos brillantes como luces de Broadway," likening the view from her balcony to a scene from a postcard (25). In the following excerpt, she compares the scenery to a set from a Goldoni play:

> Acá cerca de lo que había era un decorado de teatro, tan falso y tan emocionante como un decorado de teatro. En cualquier momento iban a aparecer los actores y las actrices, todos terciopelo y espadines, todas pelucas y abanicos, a representar una obra de Goldoni en esas terrazas, en esos balcones, bajo esos árboles, en las callecitas y en los portales, y yo iba a aplaudir entusiasmadísima.

[87] It is worth reiterating Delmira's resemblance to Gorodischer herself, who grew up in a rather sheltered environment with limited contact with people outside of her family (Dellepiane, "La narrativa" 17; Gandolfo 11).

> Claro que las mesitas del bar a las que no les alcanzaba con la vereda casi inexistente y que se extendían por la plaza cargadas de altos vasos llenos de líquidos de colores y de platitos con ingredientes, desentonaban con el siglo dieciocho, no tenían nada que ver con Venecia ni con Padua ni con los Duques de Mantua, pero podía arreglármelas para no verlas, vade retro siglo veinte, y aplaudir lo mismo (25-26).

This passage is noteworthy for several reasons. The protagonist's familiarity with the eighteenth-century Italian playwright, Carlo Goldoni, is yet another indicator of her socioeconomic class and her education. More important, however, are Delmira's remarks towards the end of the above-cited passage. She notes that certain elements of the view before her are incongruous with what one might normally see on a Goldoni set, yet she is able to remove these objects from her sight, presumably by shifting the focus of her eyes or the position of her body. Although these remarks might seem innocuous enough, the fact that Delmira chooses to obscure certain things from her view that are inharmonious with an imagined set of a play—or by extension, her own vision of the world—is characteristic of her behavior throughout the novel. Indeed, Delmira's tendency is to avoid things that challenge her conception of the world as "coherente y ordenado" (García Pinto 43). Furthermore, Delmria's portrayal of herself casts her in the role of spectator rather than actor or participant (Gimbernat de González 140). As we will see, the oppressive violence Delmira faces throughout the novel forces her to abandon this passive role of spectator.

As Delmira sets out to explore the area around the hotel, she finds herself suddenly surrounded by a horde of children begging until a man approaches and yells for them to leave her alone. Afterwards he introduces himself:

> — . . . Me llamo Maximien Bastide.

> Un francés, qué bien, un ser civilizado.
>
> —No soy francés.
>
> —¿Cómo sabe que pensé que era francés?
>
> —Un temblor en la comisura izquierda de sus labios, un casi parpadeo, el meñique y el anular derechos que se curvan apenas, todo eso quiere decir: ¡tiens! Este hombre es francés. Además yo digo mi nombre y mi apellido y el mundo piensa: un francés. Está comprobado. (35)

Since we are granted access to Delmira's thoughts, we are able to see that Maxi humorously and accurately anticipates Delmira's assumption that he is French. Delmira's optimism that he will therefore be "un ser civilizado" suggests her belief that the other people with whom she has interacted on this island are boorish or uncivilized. This is also the first of many times that the people with whom Delmira comes into contact—Maxi, Pepi, and Ángel—defy her expectations of them. Maxi, a native of the island, plays a critical role in Delmira's experience in the Caribbean country, serving first as her guide, orienting her both in her new physical space and the political context. Maxi is also central to Delmira's personal development, encouraging her to embrace the unfamiliar and, towards the end of the novel, he is the first person with whom Delmira experiences sexual pleasure.

Delmira gets a sense of the constant threat of violence that looms over this country and the uncertainty with which its inhabitants must cope when a bomb goes off near the café where she and Maxi sit. As Maxi, and later, Pepi describe the political climate and Delmira begins to experience the violence and repression for herself, it becomes clear that Gorodischer's *Jugo de mango* (1988) alludes to a historical reality in Argentina, the years of the Dirty War (1976-1983). Written shortly after the fall of the Argentine dictatorship, Gorodischer's portrayal of the corrupt,

authoritarian regime in the unnamed Caribbean country closely resembles Videla's regime in Argentina. As someone unaccustomed to such visceral violence, these attacks rattle Delmira, but, more importantly, they spark her curiosity about and spur her involvement in the local politics.[88] Like Agatha Christie's sleuth Miss Marple or Jessica Fletcher of *Murder She Wrote*, Delmira's inquisitiveness leads to her unwitting investigation into Rosa de Otoño and the group's secret affiliation with the regime in power.

As Delmira discovers, both the bombing near the café and the unsuccessful hijacking of the plane have been carried out by a local terrorist organization called Rosa de Otoño. Although she is not nearly as savvy as the protagonist of *Floreros*, Delmira demonstrates a basic understanding of how rebel groups like Rosa de Otoño operate when she asks Maxi about its leader. Her new friend then asks her "¿Cómo sabe que hay un jefe?", to which Delmira responds simply "Siempre hay" (41). Though unsophisticated, Delmira's investigative approach—asking blunt, sometimes awkward, questions of those around her—is effective. Delmira stuns Pepi and Maxi, for example, when she asks with absolute candor: "¿Los de la Rosa de Otoño son comunistas?" (48). Delmira's blunt questions are not dangerous in Pepi and Maxi's company, but her naïveté is risky in the presence of the upper class. She asks probing questions in the presence of the president, which, unbeknownst to her, could jeopardize her life: for example, "¿Son muy poderosos los Rosa de Otoño?" (94). Although she recognizes the awkwardness her question has created, she boldly, and humorously reasons: "Si yo ya había metido la pata una vez, por qué no iba a volver a meterla," and so she broaches the taboo subject of the Rosa de Otoño terrorist organization once again. This time everyone present including the "pálidas mujeres," who normally limit themselves to brief and sporadic utterances (94), begins to talk in

[88] Like Blanca in Carrera and Berman's film *Backyard/Traspatio*, which I study in my fourth chapter, Delmira is an outsider in the Caribbean republic who strives to understand the local politics and the violence that plagues the country.

order to smooth over the awkwardness that the newcomer creates. The fact that Delmira is, as of yet, unaware of the connection between the president and the terrorist organization paradoxically works in her favor, emboldening her to ask such candid questions and, later, to rebel fearlessly against the president's corrupt regime.

After the bombing near the café, Delmira lets Maxi take her on a tour of the area, and he announces that they are going to "el barrio de las putas." Delmira, who generally tries to avoid the unfamiliar as much as possible, is, of course, horrified by the idea. Despite Delmira's unease, Maxi insists: "Oh, vamos, señorita profesora, venga, no le va a pasar nada . . . aquí viene la mejor gente. Cualquier magistrado, por ejemplo, cualquier alto jefe militar, que no frecuentara el barrio, sería muy mal mirado" (44). Maxi's comment points to the irony of the fact that those who force the lower class to live in less desirable areas and denigrate the reputation of these places nevertheless frequent neighborhoods of alleged ill repute themselves. The officials' use the prostitutes not only to fulfill their sexual desires, but also, I would argue, as a debasing way to exert their authority over the lower class women. What is even more striking, however, is Maxi's remark that officials who do not frequent the prostitutes would be "muy mal mirado[s]," presumably because they would be assumed to be homosexuals. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, upper class men might be coerced to perform this repressive act simply to demonstrate their allegiance to the regime by joining in on the ritual. In that sense, the sexual act becomes, paradoxically, compulsory both for the officials and for the prostitutes themselves.

While Delmira is initially reluctant to interact with Pepi because, as she put it, "el pecado es contagioso" (65), little by little Delmira finds that Pepi defies nearly all of her expectations. Again, like *Floreros*, *Jugo de mango* employs first person narration, allowing the reader of both novels to view the protagonists' humorous outlooks. Despite her efforts to avoid going into

Pepi's house, Delmira's laments, for example, "me agarró [Maxi] del brazo y ya estábamos adentro, antes de que yo pudiera decir ay caramba lo siento pero me esperan en el hotel y ya se me ha hecho tardísimo" (46). In addition to revealing the protagonist's amusing viewpoint, and in this case, her desperation to flee the situation, the first person narration also allows the reader to observe the dogmas of Delmira's conservative upbringing crumble, in large part, because of Pepi. Delmira is surprised, for example, when she finds that Pepi's kitchen is "limpísima . . . siempre había creído que las mujeres de la vida eran todas sucias y descuidadas… Su cocina era una maravilla que mi cuñada Beatriz tendría que ver para tomar ejemplo" (46-47). Although this detail may seem minor, Delmira's prejudicial, and in this case, erroneous, assumption that prostitutes have filthy houses is likely one of the many groundless stereotypes that has been ingrained in Delmira throughout her privileged upbringing.

Although Delmira and Pepi's interactions occupy relatively few pages of *Jugo de mango*, again, Delmira's relationship with Pepi is a defining one (Esplugas 97; García Pinto 45), as the two soon develop an almost sisterly bond. The scene that most strongly suggests their sisterhood and the influence Pepi has upon Delmira is one in which the former lends Delmira a dress to wear to the presidential luncheon (71-76), after which Delmira acts with noticeably more confidence, eschewing traditionally "feminine" norms of behavior. Delmira returns to Pepi's house unwittingly, but before she does, she recognizes that she, a geography teacher by profession, is lost and alone in this foreign land:

> Pero, ¿adónde estaba? ¿Para qué lado quedaba la plaza? Veamos, la puerta de la cocina, ¿quedaba a un lado o atrás de la fachada del hotel? No, así no. Más bien, ¿dónde estaba el sol? . . . .
>
> —Disculpe, ¿qué calle es ésta?

> —Pues la General González.
>
> Yo, muda. El nombre de la calle no me decía nada, no era eso lo que debería haber preguntado. (67)

Delmira realizes that in a place so completely unfamiliar, standard points of reference like street names are essentially useless, and thus she tries to orient herself by more rudimentary means, namely the position of the sun. The metaphor Gorodischer uses for Delmira's self-discovery is apparent: she is both disoriented in this new physical space while she simultaneously grapples with her own notion of herself. As we will see, Pepi plays a central role in the latter, prompting Delmira to assert herself and fight back against violent, political repression. It is almost as if Delmira intuits Pepi's guidance as she eventually wanders to her house, recalling: "Yo había estado ahí cuando había tanta gente . . . Ahora la calle estaba desierta . . . silencio, nadie, solamente yo. Pero en esta calle no me perdí, reconocí enseguida la casa de Pepi" (68-69). Later, Gorodischer's protagonist gets lost again while attending the luncheon at the presidential residence, Casa de Mango. In both instances, Delmira's disorientation in her physical surroundings immediately precedes pivotal moments of self-discovery.

Having made her way to the prostitute's house, Delmira, an affluent woman from the bourgeois class, swaps dresses with Pepi so that the former has appropriate attire for the presidential luncheon. Their sisterhood is not merely implied in this act and the way Pepi braids Delmira's hair, but it is also explicitly invoked, as Delmira muses that Pepi is of an age that she could be her little sister (75). The fact that Delmira feels close enough to Pepi to suggest a sisterhood between them and that she borrows one of Pepi's dresses—which is, ironically, more suitable than anything Delmira has with her—signals the collapse of Delmira's baseless assumptions about lower class women like Pepi. As the reader discovers later, Pepi has elegant

dresses thanks to one of the president's cabinet members, the Minister of Labor, who showers Pepi, his prostitute of choice, with expensive gifts (103). By having Delmira wear one of Pepi's dresses to the presidential residence, quite possibly a dress the Minister of Labor has given to Pepi, Gorodischer satirizes the president's corruption and his cabinet members' exploitation of the lower class. Furthermore, Delmira's radical change in physical appearance mirrors a profound transformation in which she acts more assertively and also opens herself to her own sensuality (Demerais 43).

This forging of a close personal bond in *Jugo de mango* is noteworthy, as before Delmira's relationship with Pepi, the former had lived in a detached, nearly orphan-like state. While family is very important to the protagonist in *Floreros* (despite her daughters' harsh accusations to the contrary), the protagonist of *Jugo de mango* is still single, has no children, and, as we will see, has limited contact with her siblings. Unlike hard-boiled detectives who, as Grella puts it, "find the social contract . . . debilitating" (106), Delmira's bond with Pepi, on the contrary, encourages her to persevere even as she faces rape, torture, and death near the end of the novel. In this sense, Gorodischer seems to suggest that far from being a hindrance to investigations, family or close friends can, in fact, be beacons of inspiration.

Although Gorodischer seems to suggest that detectives like Delmira can benefit from close personal connections, she simultaneously emphasizes that pressures to have a family can be oppressive for women. She reveals the predominance of the stereotypical expectation that middle-aged women will raise families through Delmira's nonconformance to this societal convention, which is, at times, a source of awkwardness. Shortly after arriving at the Hotel Gran Splendid, for example, an official asks Delmira:

–¿Usted no va a telefonear?

–¿Telefonear?

–O telegrafiar, lo que quiera, todo lo paga la compañía, a su familiar, para que no se inquieten.

–Ah, sí, claro, después. O mañana, ya veremos.

Un par de hermanos, un par de cuñadas, tres para ser exacta, porque Ernesto se ha casado dos veces, y una recua de sobrinos entre adolescentes y recién nacidos: nadie se iba a inquietar. A menos que saliera en los diarios con grandes titulares.

Lo dudaba. Mañana vería. (29)

Like the official, Maxi also presumes that Delmira will have a family if she does not already, and so when he encourages her to venture into the "barrio de las putas" he tries to coax her by saying:

–Vamos, venga, así va a tener algo interesante que contarles a sus nietos.

–No tengo nietos.

–*Los va a tener, por supuesto que los va a tener*. (44, emphasis mine)

Indeed, women's traditional role as caretaker is so ingrained into the minds of other characters that the protagonist is constantly made aware of her non-conformance, but it also lays bare to the reader the rigid demands society places upon women's personal lives. In that sense, Gorodischer not only defies convention by featuring female detectives, but the women she depicts refuse to be restricted by familial duties. While the protagonist of *Floreros* embarks upon a dangerous mission during two of her daughters' pregnancies, Delmira avoids domestic duties altogether by electing not to have a family.

Unlike her first interactions with Pepi, Delmira's initial exchanges with the president are unremarkable. Dressed entirely in grey with grey features to match, he is, in a word, "olvidable"

(90). Like the president himself, the people who surround him are rather unmemorable, as Gorodischer humorously implies by making a play on the Spanish word "olvidar": "pasamos al comedor en aparente tropel pero yo a la cabeza del brazo del Presidente y detrás de nosotros la mujer del brazo del general Olavide, Olavidi, Olavidez, o algo por el estilo" (90). Although the general presumably holds important political power, the protagonist, again, finds him to be rather unexceptional. The protagonist comments upon the fact that, even in his handshake, the president seems incredibly ordinary: "Era una mano carnosa, ni fría ni caliente, ni fuerte ni débil, ni blandita ni poderosa, la mano de alguien que una saluda al pasar en una fiesta y al que olvida casi inmediatamente . . . No era muy alto y sí bastante ancho; estaba vestido de gris, tenía escaso pelo gris, ojos grises, y la cara sembrada de couperose" (90). Shortly after meeting the president, Delmira describes him, like the "pálidas mujeres," as mindlessly chattering to those around him (31). When Delmira meets Pepi, who, as I have suggested, has a lasting impact upon her, Delmira's reaction could hardly be more different: "El corazón me golpeaba en el pecho, y ya no era un alfiler de oro en mi cintura, era una daga que buscaba su camino apresuradamente y pensé que me iba a hacer una catarata encima" (46). Again, while Pepi makes Delmira uncomfortable at first, ultimately Pepi has a profound and lasting influence on Delmira, prompting her to assert herself fearlessly.

Gorodischer harshly critiques the president and the other members of the upper class in *Jugo de mango*, illustrating how they enjoy economic and material abundance while others barely eke out a living. Delmira is awestruck, for example, by the president's finely decorated mansion, extravagant table settings, numerous servants, and abundant food and drink (91-93, 96). As she did when viewing the island's stunning landscape from her hotel room, Delmira compares the lavish presidential luncheon with a scene from a Goldoni play. This time, however, she does so

with the awareness that the president and his friends and family are able to enjoy such luxuries by exploiting the less fortunate. In the following, Delmira juxtaposes the upper class's penchant for opulence with the lived reality of those less fortunate: "Qué sentido podían tener en Mantua, allí donde Goldoni hacia reverencias y las damas sonreían detrás de los abanicos. Los muertos y los vidrios, el estruendo y la sangre me saltaron a la garganta. Pero ese gordo infecto tampoco tenía derecho a estar ahí cargado de anillos y sobrado de papadas, comiendo cremas y mieles" (94). Again, having learned that the president and the other members of the upper class prosper by oppressing lower class individuals like Pepi, Delmira is no longer able to view such opulence with the detached gaze of a spectator; she has evolved into an informed, engaged citizen.

Unlike the protagonist in *Floreros*, Delmira initially maintains a fairly apathetic attitude towards politics, inherently accepting the status quo by avoiding civic engagement altogether. Nevertheless, the attempted hijacking on the plane followed by subsequent direct and indirect acts of violence against her provokes the most significant transformation in the protagonist—the development of a political consciousness and ultimately her staunch opposition to repression.[89] Gorodischer creates a striking juxtaposition between those of economic means who are generally apolitical with those whom Pepi, a prostitute, represents. Pepi is a woman from the lowest rungs of society and of scant economic resources, but unlike the women of the upper class (and Delmira before her political awakening), she is cognizant of repressive socio-political structures and committed to fighting against them. While Pepi's gender prevents her from occupying a

[89] In an interview with Gwendolyn Díaz, Gorodischer explains why themes of repression are featured so prominently in her work: "My interest in justice stems from the fact that my family was very strict with me, and I felt oppressed. In addition to the social restrictions placed upon me because of our social status, my family was also devoutly Catholic, and in that respect, quite repressive, particularly toward a daughter. I was not allowed to do much because I was reared as a proper Catholic young lady for whom there were many things forbidden. But my nature was that of an active, energetic, and curious child, and I felt smothered and constrained by my overprotective family. This led me to side with the people who are oppressed, as I felt oppressed. My work, then, focuses on those who are marginalized and displays a passion for justice and a desire to learn and understand the world and others" (*Women and Power* 47).

position of real political power under the Aventares regime, she cleverly takes advantage of any and every opportunity to undermine the government's authority. Pepi acquires information from the Minister of Labor, one of her regular clients, and passes it on to revolutionaries, namely those in the terrorist organization, Rosa de Otoño (103).[90] Pepi and other women of the lower classes defy stereotypes of meekness and fragility commonly ascribed to their gender either by taking up arms and physically fighting back like the large, dark-skinned village woman near the end of the novel, wielding a weapon in each hand (133), or, as in Pepi's case, in indirect, yet equally subversive ways.

While Gorodischer applauds the bold actions of women like Pepi and the unnamed village woman, she strongly condemns passivity in women by depicting those who do not challenge patriarchal authority, particularly the female family members and friends of the president, in very unflattering terms. At the presidential luncheon held in Delmira's honor, the women are draped with diamonds that weigh heavily against their anemic bodies and are dressed in grey, beige, or lightly colored dresses that emphasize their lack of vigor. In addition to having a sickly appearance, the women are virtually indistinguishable in their anxious fidgeting; one woman is asthmatic with labored breathing,"respir[a] penosamente contra la vida" (88), while another nervously bites her fingernails. Not only are the women's physical features described in uncomplimentary ways, Gorodischer "also parodies their chitchatting by referring to it as 'cackling,' and using onomatopoeia ('ooh' and 'aah') to describe their vacuous and meaningless

[90] At the end of the novel, we learn that Pepi's brave acts of defiance do little to damage the Aventares regime. On the contrary, since the leader of Rosa de Otoño has partnered with Aventares, their alleged enemy, Pepi's actions merely expose her as a political dissident, endangering her life. In a conversation with Aventares, Ángel reveals that Pepi and another prostitute's subversive actions have little effect: " . . . éstas son dos putas, se acuestan con tus funcionarios, les sacan algunas cosas y nos las pasan, nada que valga la pena" (103).

talk" (Esplugas 95). Again, Gorodischer's portrayal of these upper class women indicates her admonition of their submissive behavior.[91]

By ridiculing the passivity of the upper-class women and applauding the courageous actions of women like Pepi, Gorodischer insists that women must not submit but rather defend themselves when faced with patriarchal violence, and insert themselves in the political process. Delmira's relationship with Maxi and, more importantly, her bond with Pepi open her eyes to the corrupt and oppressive nature of the political regime in power. Emboldened by the defiance of the lower class women, Delmira, too, begins to fight back with stereotypically "masculine" aggressiveness. At the luncheon with the president, the "pálidas mujeres" are awestruck by the protagonist's poise and assertiveness during the failed hijacking and one exclaims:

> —Ay, si a mí me pasa una cosa así, creo que me desmayo.
>
> —Las mujeres son verdaderamente temerarias cuando logran superar el impedimento de su natural timidez –decía el licenciado Algo, bilioso, nervioso y me apostaba cualquier cosa a que vicioso.
>
> —Diría que no –ésa era yo—. Cuando hay una emergencia, algo le marca a una lo que tiene que hacer y todo consiste en obedecer esa orden. Además los facinerosos no eran tantos, apenas cinco. Y además las mujeres no somos tímidas. Exclamaciones. (93)[92]

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[91] In Díaz's interview with Gorodischer, the author notes that her work often contains criticisms of the upper class, as is the case of *Jugo de mango*. The author reveals that this is, in part, a response to her own family's sense of entitlement as she was growing up: "I was reared with a sense of belonging to the upper class; however, I, personally, was not in the least bit interested in my social standing. I felt it was presumptuous. This disdain for elitism is present in my work" (*Women and Power* 46).

[92] Soon after as she has successfully thwarted the terrorist attack, Delmira describes the behavior of all those on board: "Las azafatas ya no estaban verdes y corrían por todas partes, las señoras gemían agarrándose el corazón, los señores ponían caras de personas importantes, yo tenía una ametralladora en las manos y no me había hecho pis. Ni ganas tenía" (16). That is, the actual behavior of the other female passengers on the plane closely resembles the way the upper class women at the luncheon predict they

Rather than reproducing the women's predictable reactions to Delmira's progressive comments, the narrator humorously condenses what they say into the one-word "exclamaciones." Significantly, the man in this conversation seems to chastise Delmira, insinuating that far from heroic, Delmira's actions were, in fact, reckless. Furthermore, his insistence upon women's "natural timidity" appears to be an attempt to repair or reestablish the conventional, gender-specific norms of behavior that Delmira has so brazenly challenged.

Although the reader recalls her panic in the opening scene of the novel, Delmira is now intent upon conquering her fears, and maintains that she had been unafraid during the attempted hijacking. She even humorously boasts: "que era campeona nacional de tiro al blanco y que podía acertarle a una mosca a cien metros con un treinta y ocho corto. No sabía qué era un treinta y ocho corto pero lo había oído decir por ahí alguna vez" (89). Again, as with the protagonist of *Floreros*, the first-person narration allows the reader to see that although Delmira is by no means immune to fear, she struggles to overcome it, refusing to allow it to paralyze her. Indeed, Delmira feels apprehensive upon arriving at the presidential residence, and again feels her body's typical reaction to fear—the sudden, desperate urge to urinate. This time, however, however, Delmira forces herself to resist the urge to give into fear:

> De pronto tuve miedo, aprensión, y una puntada en la cintura, el alfiler de oro que se hundía en la carne, una presión oscura que me pesaba en las ingles, y ahora qué hago, tengo que aguantarme cómo se saluda a un presidente, de qué se habla, qué tengo que hacer, cómo voy a tener que ir al baño, preguntar dónde está, a quién le pregunto. El líquido empezó a manar desde la cintura por los agujeritos que iba

---

would react in such a situation. Delmira's account of the male passengers' demeanor, on the other hand, reveals the way in which they conceal the terror they had felt moments earlier. In that way, both the men and the women closely adhere to traditional gender scripts that dictate behavior. The protagonist is the only one who has, humorously, defied norms of "feminine" behavior and managed to overtake the terrorists.

> dejando el alfiler, líquido amarillo y caliente, miel, agua, olas, lágrimas. Hacer pis es como llorar, me dije mientras mis pasos silencioso seguían yendo y yendo; he estado llorando toda mi vida, pensé, por no saber qué hacer, pensé, por no saber, secándome, sentí, por no haberme puesto jamás un collar granate, llorando. Desaparecieron el alfiler, la presión, la urgencia, el miedo: sabía usar los cubiertos adecuados y las copas adecuadas para cada plato, un presidente era un tipo como cualquier otro y yo no era ningún personaje oficial ni heroína ni nada y podía portarme como se me diera la gana, papelones incluidos. (87-88)

The excerpt above marks a significant turning point for Delmira in which she makes a conscientious effort to quell her mounting anxieties, rather than allowing them to cripple her. Donning Pepi's yellow dress, Delmira acts with uncharacteristic assertiveness, behaving more like the woman whose dress she is wearing.

As mentioned previously, Gorodischer uses Delmira's physical disorientation in this Caribbean country as a metaphor for the protagonist's initially inchoate notion of herself. The second time Delmira gets lost in this novel is immediately prior to discovering the corrupt partnership between Ángel Alatriste and the president, Aventares. Upon leaving the bathroom at the president's expansive residence, the protagonist becomes confused about how to get back, and her guide, a woman named Marga, appears to have vanished:

> Atravesé el gabinete, salí al pasillo. ¿Y ahora? Como a la mañana saliendo del hotel por la cocina, ahora saliendo del gabinete azul no sabía adonde estaba el sol, para dónde agarrar, cómo se llamaba la calle, adónde ir, no se veía a ninguna mujer joven con chicos o sin chicos o no joven, no tenía a quien preguntar, Marga se había ido. Seguro que si me iba para la derecha iba a descubrir que hubiera

> tenido que ir para la izquierda y al revés viceversa. Y entonces, ¿Qué hacía? Cualquier cosa; total, en alguna parte encontraría a alguien. Para la izquierda. Un corredor, otro, una especie de vestíbulo con vidrio en el techo, no, por ahí no habíamos venido, Era para el otro lado. Tenía que ser, siempre sucede. Me volví, muy decidida. Caminé y caminé y no se terminaba nunca. Si, se terminaba. En una especie de cul-de-sac había dos salidas, una galería que daba al patio central, y otra a una escalera. No era la escalera por la que yo había subido con Magda, ¿se llamaba Magda o Marga?, pero no importaba, yo tenía que ir a la planta baja, y salir por la puerta encristalada a la galera me parecía inútil a menos que de allá arriba pidiera socorro a gritos inclinada sobre la balaustrada, cosa que no resultaba correcta. . . . Espantoso dilema, curiosidad también pero no como la del día anterior, ¿un día, solo un día?, picazón nomas, ganas de ver lo que había del otro lado . . . . Detente chica, sé sensata, vuelve por donde viniste, vete al baño azul y espérala a Magda ¿o era Marga? (98-99, emphasis mine)

Delmira compares her confusion from that morning to that of the present, but laments that unlike earlier, there are no passersby whom she can ask for help. While she is still inside the president's expansive home, the phrase "no sabía adónde estaba el sol," underscores, as before, her total disorientation. As Gimbernat de González notes, " . . . el yo narrador que quería ser espectador de una obra de teatro, o el observador sin compromiso de una tarjeta postal" is forced to make a decision and decide for herself what happens next (140). Interestingly, like the protagonist of *Floreros*, Delmira tells herself to be sensible and retrace her steps, but her avid curiosity compels her to push on, leading to a major discovery in her investigation.

Delmira opens the door to what she discovers is the president's library, where she makes the stunning discovery that Ángel Alatriste, the leader of Rosa de Otoño, and President Aventares are not enemies after all, but rather are working in collusion with one another. When Ángel discovers Delmira eavesdropping on his corrupt dealings with the president, he begins to attack her, threatening to rape her. Despite his obvious physical advantage, Delmira, the previously unimposing geography teacher, breaks with the established norms of feminine behavior and bravely defends herself against Ángel's advances (111-12). Indeed, in this moment, like her heroic moment on the plane, Delmira represents the veritable opposite of the president's "pálidas mujeres." Unlike her initial response during the attempted hijacking, Delmira has an entirely different reaction to Ángel patriarchal aggression: "Me dieron ganas de reírme, qué bien me hubiera venido una carcajada, me dieron ganas de, ganas, pero no, ni alfileres de oro ni Goldoni ni líquidas serpientes frías en la boca, no tenía ganas de nada, solamente quería salir de ahí" (110). Again, while Delmira's fear at the beginning of the novel prompts a physiological response over which she has little control, here she remains fairly composed, focused instead upon defending herself rather than giving into fear. Like the protagonist in *Floreros* who feels a sudden moment of panic when breaking into Brüslen's house, Delmira overcomes her fear, now determined to defend herself.

Nevertheless, the balance of power shifts when the president enters the room and quickly exerts his dominance over Ángel, ordering him to take care of other matters while the president assumes the role of aggressor against Delmira. This manifestation of sexual aggression is directly linked to power. The powerful, in this case the president himself, make a display of their sexual domination over the powerless to demonstrate and reinforce their authority. Rather than attempting to physically defend herself, Delmira tries a different approach with the president,

verbally and viciously attacking his sexual prowess. Either unaware or indifferent to the danger she faces for making such a comment, she audaciously suggests: " . . . cuando un tipo habla tanto de lo que le va a hacer a una mujer, fija que no le da el cuero para hacerle nada cuando llega el momento" (115). This, seemingly more than anything else, represents a real affront to the president's authority, and he lashes out even more viciously against her. Once again, Gorodischer supports this refusal to submit to authoritarian powers in her celebratory depiction of her heroine.

Despite Delmira's remarkable political evolution, she stops short of a complete transformation, as she continues to have a fairly Manichean understanding of poltics. Gorodischer emphasizes the importance of rebelling against repressive political regimes, while simultaneously acknowledging the challenges in producing real political change. Much like Carrera and Berman in *Backyard/Traspatio*, a work I examine in my final chapter of this project, Gorodischer reveals that the police and other organizations whose purpose is to protect the people are, in fact, allies of the oppressors (*Jugo de mango* 143). Even Maxi, whom Delmira has grown to trust, admits that he and Ángel, the leader of Rosa de Otoño, were childhood friends. Despite their political differences, the two remain loyal to each other. Their relationship allows Maxi to save Delmira, but it also keeps Maxi from denouncing a violent oppressor, a task he deems impossible in such a thoroughly corrupt political system. When Maxi insists that this type of corruption is not unique to his country of origin, but rather is undoubtedly present in Delmira's own nation, remnants of the protagonist's conservative upbringing resurface. In the following excerpt, for example, we see indications of Delmira's lingering xenophobia and cultural elitism:

> ¿Ves como a nosotros no nos van a pasar esas cosas? No, Maxi, mi país no es un país de desdicha, esas cosas allí no pasan ni van a pasar nunca. . . . No tenemos un gobernante vitalicio ni un general usurpador, tenemos por fin un presidente civil y sabio y así vamos a seguir, estamos decididos, no vamos a tener dictadores sanguinarios que se entiendan en secreto con los terroristas para diezmas a los jóvenes, a los infelices, a los que creen y sufren y sostienen la escalera para que suban los enfermos de poder, de dinero y de sangre. No a nosotros no nos van a quitar la vida a oscuras en pozos que ni para animales, mira . . . . y si alguna vez alguien intenta algo porque no es que seamos santos que no lo somos, estoy segura de que todos saldríamos a la calle a poner el alma y la vida contra esas barbaridades, yo la primera. Pero la muerte no anda por mi país como un monstruo ensangrentado, nosotros no somos un país bananero y mendigos, no, no habría militarotes dueños de nuestras vidas, no habrá generales que nos manden a morir lentamente en secreto mientras ellos se llenan los bolsillos y se dan palmaditas en la espalda con los violentes, los soberbios, los ponedores de bombas, no, nosotros, no. (165-166)

As mentioned previously, this novel was written shortly after the fall of the Videla regime, a period marked by state-endorsed political violence and repression, and thus, the irony in the section quoted above is plain. Delmira obstinately refuses to acknowledge the parallels between the recent political tyranny in her own country and that of the Caribbean nation where she has spent the last several days.

In addition to undergoing a radical political transformation, another important facet of Delmira's evolution is her sexual awakening. As soon as Delmira lands on the remote Caribbean

island towards the beginning of the book, someone asks her for the first of many times if she would like some mango juice, the local drink of choice, but she declines each time, maintaining "[e]sas frutas exóticas, nunca se sabe, mejor no probarlas" (27). The local residents continue to offer Delmira mango juice and she grows increasingly annoyed, until she anticipates the question, refusing the drink before it is even offered to her: "No me ofrezca jugo de mango porque grito" (53). Although she voices curt refusals, Delmira's curiosity is aroused and she secretly considers trying it:

> Podía llamar al bar y pedir un jugo de mango. Levanté el tubo del teléfono:
>
> "Me comunica con el bar, por favor."
>
> "Enseeeguida señoritaaaaa."
>
> "Hola, sí, de la habitación doscientos ocho, ¿podría subir una taza de té bien caliente y sin azúcar?" (83)

While it seems as though Delmira might finally try the local specialty, yet again she opts for tea, a drink to which she is accustomed. As Gimbernat de González argues, "negarse a beber jugo de mango, es alienarse de la diferencia. Preferir una taza de té caliente, en un hotel en el centro del trópico subraya la necesidad de rechazar la otredad en sus posibilidades reflexivas" (137). That is, the mango juice embodies all that is new and unfamiliar about this place and its people, and when Delmira finally tries it, García Pinto aptly calls it a " . . . gesto de triunfo sobre el prejuicio con que [Delmria] se maneja frente a la cultura local" (48).

The mango juice thus denotes the unknown, and for Delmira this not only includes the local culture and geography of the island, but also any sexual experience. Still a virgin at middle age, the mango juice Delmira refuses to try is, in García Pinto's words "un semen tropical" (48) that she refuses entrance into her body. This symbolic significance of the mango juice becomes

clear when Maxi describes, in sensual terms, the sensations one experiences when drinking mango juice: " . . . usted nunca va a saber cómo entra en la boca, como la ocupa, como se desliza, espeso y suave, entre la lengua y el paladar, como invade, como llena las fauces de unas ganas dulces de tragar, como cae por ese tubo rosado, perezosamente, como sube el aroma, como rebota tibio en las sienes, detrás de los ojos, contra los biombos del cráneo" (80). By consuming the juice, Delmira opens her body to the "primer elemento sexual" (García Pinto 48), allowing herself to experience the sensual (Demerais 43; García Pinto 48).

Delmira finally musters the courage to try the local beverage while attending the presidential luncheon, where she wears Pepi's yellow dress. As mentioned previously, Delmira behaves in a radically different way while wearing Pepi's clothes, as though the yellow dress grants Delmira some of Pepi's bold assertiveness. Like Maxi, Delmira describes the mango juice in rather sexual terms:

> Yo levanté mi vaso, rubio, espeso, mortal.
>
> Lo acerqué a mi boca, puse los labios en el borde y pensé que un minuto después iba a estar muerta. Tomé un sorbo. Esa cosa dulce y fría avanzó como una serpiente sobre mi lengua, tocando el paladar, y cayó allá en el fondo por el tubo anillado, despaciosamente, espesamente. El perfume atravesó el techo de la boca y me salió por las narices y aspiré y volvió a entrar y no paró hasta los pulmones. El sabor me invadió el cuello, el pecho, las orejas, la niñez en el altillo, los biombos del cráneo, y se quedó quieto en una terraza una noche. Tomé otro sorbo, tragué y seguí viviendo. (89)

Demerais appropriately likens Delmira's description of drinking the mango juice to the original sin, Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (43). That is, the mango

juice is a metaphorical forbidden fruit (juice) that Delmira heretofore has denied herself. The juice, like a serpent slithering down Delmira's throat, is not only suggestive of the Edenic theme, but also a phallus entering "el tubo anillado," thereby reinforcing the mango juice as a sexual element.[93]

When Maxi learns that Delmira has finally consumed the fruit juice she had so adamantly refused before, he seems as though cast under her spell, unable to take his eyes off of her (154-57). Nevertheless, unlike the protagonist of *Floreros,* who accepts Brüslen's marriage proposal at the end of the novel, Delmira refuses to marry Maxi, avoiding the "happily-ever-after" conceit. She insists that Maxi cannot marry a "recién nacida" (161), somone who has only recently discovered herself and become aware of the world around her. Although Delmira's naïve comments about the political situation in Argentina suggest that her transformation is not yet complete, she has, nevertheless, progressed considerably.

In both of Gorodischer's humorous thrillers, the reader follows mature, female protagonists in their investigations, which, in both cases seem to progress mostly thanks to chance. Delmira's inadvertent investigation—beginning with the thwarted terrorist attack and her unintentional eavesdropping on the president and Ángel—mirrors her own self-discovery and political liberation. Likewise, the protagonist of *Floreros* conducts her investigation, stumbling upon the real villains, as she simultaneously develops personally, becoming a grandmother and allowing herself, contrary to normative behavior of women her age, to be romantically involved. By underscoring the importance of chance, Gorodischer challenges the efficacy of deductive reasoning—the classic means of detection—and she also reworks the detective figure. In both thrillers Gorodischer features a "little old lady" who acts boldly in the face of danger, but unlike

[93] Interestingly, the reader learns that Delmira was named after the Argentine poet, Delmira Agustini, whose poetry deals with erotic themes (160).

authors of classic detective fiction, Gorodischer allows the reader access to her protagonists' most intimate thoughts and fears. In this way, the reader witnesses the protagonists' own evolutions as they develop a political consciousness and/or reject traditional gender roles while advancing in their investigations. Significantly, both novels end with a birth—in *Floreros* it is the actual birth of the protagonist's granddaughter, while in *Jugo de mango* it is the metaphorical re-birth of the protagonist herself. These births seem to signal Gorodischer's optimism for a sort of new beginning for women, one in which societal norms and gender stereotypes do not deny them empowerment and personal fulfillment.

Chapter Three:
"El manto de silencio": Bringing Women's Stories to Light in Claudia Piñeiro's *Elena sabe* and Myriam Laurini's *Morena en rojo*

I. *Elena sabe*: The Disabled Detective

Claudia Piñeiro's novel, *Elena sabe* (2007), is unique in that it is the only work included in this dissertation to feature a disabled detective. The eponymous protagonist is a seventy-three-year-old woman who suffers from Parkinson's disease, which makes many basic motions extraordinarily difficult, movements that many able-bodied individuals perform almost mechanically, without thought. The novel spans the course of one day and is divided into three sections that coincide with Elena's doses of medication, Levodopa, without which she would be unable to move at all. Despite her physical limitations, Elena is determined to conduct an investigation into her daughter's death, unconvinced by the police's conclusion that her forty-four-year-old daughter committed suicide. Unable to keep up with the physical demands of her "investigation,"[94] Elena journeys to find a woman she hopes will help her, named Isabel Mansillas.[95] Along the way, Elena reflects upon her life, which she has lived in strict adherence to societal norms and Catholic doctrines, despite her alleged rejection of the Catholic faith. Using disability theory, I argue that the Parkinson's that now restricts Elena's movements is much like the religious doctrines and societal norms that have confined, indeed disabled, her all of her life. As a woman in a patriarchal society, Elena has been made to feel estranged from her body all of her life, as is illustrated by her vivid memory of nearly having her menstrual blood discovered in public. Throughout the novel, Elena also recalls the turbulent relationship she had with her

[94] As Mazzuca points out, Elena's so-called investigation is, for all intents and purposes, over before it even begins (185). She seeks help from an able-bodied individual, Isabel, who can more easily investigate " . . . porque no hay imputados, ni siquiera sospechosos, ni motivos, ni hipótesis, sólo la muerte" (35). Despite her efforts, this does not change throughout the novel.

[95] Elena hopes that Isabel will offer her " . . . un cuerpo al que ella, Elena, pueda mandar y le obedezca" (67), given that her own body no longer responds to her demands.

daughter, Rita, which grew even more strained with the onset of her illness. Despite the novel's title, Elena's inquiry into Rita's death ironically becomes a reflection upon precisely what Elena does *not* know;[96] rather than discovering her daughter's murderer, Elena unearths the ways in which she played a role in her own daughter's death and also participated in her subjugation.

Like a classic detective fiction story, *Elena sabe* begins with a dead body, Rita's, which is found hanging from the church's bell tower. Although all signs point to suicide,[97] Elena obstinately insists that the police should investigate her daughter's death as a homicide because, she claims, her daughter would have never gone out " . . . en una tarde en que amenazaba lluvia" (21), as she was deathly afraid of lightning (37). Rita's father, Antonio, unwittingly instilled this fear in his daughter when she was a child by telling her that the metal in the cross above the bell tower attracted lightning. When Rita took over her father's position at the parochial school following his death, her fear of being struck by lightning was such that she

> aprendió a inventar excusas de distinto tipo cada vez que un día de lluvia la mandaban a hacer algún trámite a la parroquia. Trabajos impostergables, dolores de estómago o de cabeza, hasta falsos desmayos. Lo que fuera con tal de no acercarse a esa cruz un día de lluvia. Así fue siempre. Y Elena cree, y sabe, que eso no pudo haber cambiado repentinamente ni siquiera el día de su muerte. Aunque nadie la escuche, aunque a nadie le importe. (38-39)

Elena evokes these memories of her daughter's irrational fear of lightning not only to persuade others, but, more importantly, to convince herself that since Rita never willingly went out on rainy days before, there is no reason to believe she would do so in this case, and therefore she

[96] As Flórez puts it, " . . . se hace claro desde el comienzo que lo realmente importante es aquello que no sabe" (44). This is not just limited to the circumstances of Rita's death, but rather extends to many aspects of Elena's life.

[97] Initially the police believe Rita's death to be an accident (64), but later they determine that she committee suicide (65).

must not have committed suicide. The narrator's immediate amplification of "Elena cree" with "y sabe" is significant here, reflecting Elena's tendency to conflate instinct with truth, or as Isabel Mansillas later suggests to Elena near the end of the novel, " . . . uno confunde creer con saber" (153).[98]

Although other people like Padre Juan do not, much to Elena's frustration, seem to recall Rita's fear of lightning and clearly find Elena's explanation suspect (70), Elena never wavers in her belief that Rita was murdered until, of course, the end of the novel. The narrator, voicing Elena's own thoughts, reveals how she doggedly repeats, even in her own mind, that the weather would have kept her daughter from going to the church: " . . . la lluvia, Elena sabe, no es un detalle menor. Aunque todos digan que fue un suicidio. Amigos o no, todos. Pero por más que insistan, o callen, nadie puede rebatirle que Rita no se acercaba a la iglesia cuando amenazaba lluvia" (37). Far from shaking her confidence, the fact that no one else seems to recollect this detail prompts Elena to praise herself for her own sound memory: "Si alguien hubiera prestado atención y además tuviera buena memoria, recordaría que en el silencio de la iglesia sólo se oía la lluvia cayendo sobre el patio de la parroquia. Pero nadie prestó atención a la lluvia de aquella tarde más que Elena. La memoria de los detalles, Elena sabe, es sólo para gente valiente, y ser cobarde o valiente no puede elegirse" (40-41).[99] The final line of this quotation is intriguing

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[98] Nevertheless, the reader observes Elena's ability to differentiate what she knows from what she believes elsewhere. The Parkinson's prevents Elena's body from producing *dopa*mine, which in turn, makes many basic movements very difficult for her. Elena considers the name of her medication, levo*dopa*, and concludes that it is probably related to her dopamine deficiency. In the narrator's words, Elena "Intuye que la dopa de dopamina, y la dopa de levodopa, deben ser la misma cosa, pero solo intuye, no tiene certeza" (16). The way the narrator emphasizes that this is merely Elena's supposition sets this moment apart from the ones in which Elena presumes to know with absolute certainty things about her daughter.

[99] Interestingly, the attention to detail for which Elena praises herself is precisely what makes other investigators in detective fiction and, indeed, other female detectives included in the dissertation successful. In Poletti's short story, "Rojo en la salina," for example, both Mecha's scrutiny of her daughter's painting and her observation of Yessy's behavior eventually help her piece together the fact that her daughter witnessed Guillermo murder Malinosky. In Elena's case, however, her dogged

because though Elena seems to pardon those who do not recall the weather the day Rita died, she does so while simultaneously calling them cowards; presumably, Elena believes they are afraid of discovering the truth behind Rita's premature death. As becomes apparent, this is ironic because the person who is most adverse to the truth and is most afraid of her own culpability in Rita's death is Elena herself.

Despite her failure to convince anyone else of her conjecture, thirty pages later Elena clings just as tightly to her conviction that Rita was murdered.[100] Although no one else seems to recall Rita's lightning phobia, it is only natural, Elena reasons, that she would know more about her daughter's idiosyncrasies as their mother-daughter relationship inherently grants her greater insight into Rita than anyone else. The narrator, echoing Elena's own thoughts asserts, "Nadie puede conocer tanto de su hija como ella, piensa, porque es madre, o porque fue madre. La maternidad, Elena piensa, garantiza ciertos atributos, una madre conoce a su hijo, una madre sabe, una madre quiere. Así dice, así será" (66).[101] Elena's assertion of the profound understanding she has of her daughter strikes the reader as highly suspect, as Elena and her daughter fought frequently, and often viciously: "Discutían. Siempre, todas las tardes. De cualquier cosa. Lo importante no era el asunto sino esa elegida manera de comunicarse a través de la pelea . . . *Discutían como si cada palabra lanzada fuera un látigo, primero pegaba una,*

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insistence upon this climatological detail, whether observed or imagined, blinds her to the other more compelling evidence.

[100] In almost identical language, Elena thinks to herself: "Y que diga suicidio el inspector Avellaneda. Y que lo diga Roberto Almada. Y que lo digan para sí todos los que la miran y callan. Pero llovía, ella es la madre, y llovía. Eso la salva, eso cambia todo" (66-67). Near the end of the novel, Isabel asks her how she knows her daughter did not commit suicide and Elena obstinately repeats the very same reasons, though with, perhaps, slightly less conviction: "Porque llovía, carajo, se enoja Elena, y mi hija le tenía miedo a los pararrayos, tenía miedo de que el rayo cayera sobre ella, jamás se hubiera acercado a una iglesia un día de lluvia" (152).

[101] As I will argue subsequently, being a mother is, for Elena, of the utmost importance, as it confirms her social utility in the propagation of the species (Mazzuca 161). The final line of this quotation is indicative of Elena's anxiety that her "status" as a mother will somehow be stripped from her upon Rita's death since she will no longer have living proof of the role she played. Elena openly expresses this concern in a conversation with Padre Juan in which she asks, " . . . ¿soy una madre, Padre?" (73).

luego la otra" (22-23, emphasis mine).[102] The final line in particular underscores the near physical violence Elena and Rita would inflict upon each other during their arguments. Later, the narrator, as if anticipating the reader's reaction, reiterates the fact that although Elena and Rita's relationship had often been fraught with strife, Elena still cares very deeply for Rita: "Ella quiso y quiere aunque no lo haya dicho, aunque se peleara desde la distancia, aunque discutiera como si lanzara latigazos, y no acariciara ni besara, una madre quiere" (66). Again, despite their conflicts, Elena unconvincingly argues that their bond automatically affords her an intimate knowledge to which the investigators and Rita's friends are not privy.

Although the police officially close Rita's case, concluding that the cause of death was suicide, the police chief orders Benito Avellaneda to meet with Elena "por estrictas cuestiones humanitarias" (86), suggesting, " . . . si es necesario ofrézcale asistencia psicológica" (85). As the reader learns, Avellaneda has not even achieved the rank of police inspector, but his boss urges Avellaneda to have Elena refer to him as such, " . . . así la mujer siente que estamos en el tema, que le damos importancia" (86). His task is, as the narrator puts it, "[un] castigo, una especie de *probation* clandestina," as Avellaneda had been caught engaged in sexual activity on the job (85). Avellaneda is, according to Elena, "Demasiado impuntual para ser policía" (86). His sloppy appearance is also suggestive of his lack of professionalism: " . . . le sobraban kilos o se la había encogido el saco, porque aunque hubiera querido jamás podría haberse abrochado el blazer azul con escudo de la Policía de la Provincia que llevaba puesto. Los cuellos de todas su camisas estaban gastados" (86).

[102] Rita and Elena's arguments allow them both an outlet in which they can air their frustration over Elena's disease; this is, it seems, the alternative they choose instead of mourning Elena's unfortunate condition. Even prior to Elena's diagnosis, however, she and her daughter obviously were never very close.

Elena soon realizes that despite his goodwill, she and Avellaneda are acting out a farce, and that "no podía haber avances porque ni siquiera había investigación" (88). She nevertheless attempts to spur progress by providing Avellaneda with a list of possible suspects,[103] thus performing a common investigative practice. She also begrudgingly eliminates certain suspects, like Roberto, because "no por lo que dice . . . sino porque un contrahecho como él no habría podido con Rita" (35).[104] As much as she dislikes Roberto's mother, Mimi, Elena does not bother adding her to the "inútil lista," as Elena was with Mimi in her beauty shop at the time of Rita's death (117). Again, although Elena seems to recognize the fact that the case is going nowhere, her meetings with Avellaneda allow her to cling to a shred of hope that the police will look into the case further. In one of their many conversations, for instance, Elena reflects upon the fights that she and Rita had and Avellaneda jokes: " . . . la agrego a la lista a usted, entonces" but Elena, in all seriousness, responds: "por qué no, inspector . . . usted tiene que investigarnos a todos, me daría una alegría si lo hiciera, aunque empezara por mí" (100).

Again, the police chief argues that Avellaneda should meet with Elena because, in his words, " . . . la viejita me da pena" (86). Nevertheless, these meetings only prolong Elena's self-deception, as they allow her to indulge in the fantasy that the police might eventually continue their investigation into Rita's death. Elena's struggle to persuade the police to investigate her daughter's death merely postpones the inevitable mourning process, as one conversation between Elena and Padre Juan reveals. When Padre Juan asks her "¿Cómo va llevando el duelo?," Elena

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[103] Eventually, Avellaneda can no longer receive Elena during office hours, as his boss tells him to stop meeting with Elena (64), so he must invent excuses to meet her elsewhere: "me están pintando la oficina, ya va a ver cómo me la dejan, Elena. Y Elena no le creyó, pero igual fue a la plaza, y habló con él como si le creyera" (99). Avellaneda, who is fully aware of Elena's desire to find a culprit for Rita's death, obviously finds it difficult to tell Elena the truth once he begins the farcical meetings with Elena.

[104] Despite the fact that she now suffers from Parkinson's and thus experiences disability herself, Elena clearly does not feel any sort of solidarity with Roberto, but, on the contrary, continues to deride his condition.

answers " . . . no lo llevo todavía" (70), precisely because she has been given the false hope that her daughter's death might not be the result of suicide. I do not mean to suggest that Elena has not played a role in her own delusion—she clearly has—but the police chief's inability to tell her frankly that the case is closed allows Elena to entertain the idea that her daughter was murdered.

Elena understands that her daughter's case is going nowhere, and thus she assumes the quixotic task of investigating her daughter's death herself. When someone approaches Elena to extend his or her sympathies, Elena, again, rejects the interpretation that her daughter committed suicide. The fellow mourner offers:

> Qué barbaridad lo qué [*sic*] pasó, Elena, le dijo alguien después de decir mi más sentido pésame, ¿y qué paso?, pregunta ella. Entonces quien habló se calla porque cree que Elena no quiere saber, o está perdida por la medicación o por el duelo. Pero Elena no se pierde. Elena sabe. Espera. Con la cabeza gacha y arrastrando los pies, sin ver el camino ni lo que éste trae por delante. No se pierde, aunque se confunda. (50)[105]

Elena's remark, "¿y qué pasó?," underscores the fact that she is unconvinced by the official findings, but her interlocutor presumes she is merely confused or suffering from dementia brought on by her illness. Parkinson's disease is a degenerative disorder that robs people of physical mobility, but it often leaves, perhaps even more cruelly, its victims' mental faculties intact.[106] This is, of course, one of the most frustrating aspects of the disease. Like Mazzuca, I do

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[105] According to the narrator, Elena's interlocutor " . . . cree que Elena no quiere saber" (50). In this respect, the person offering Elena his or her condolences might be right. Elena wants to know what happened to her daughter as long as it confirms her belief that Rita was murdered. What she does not want to discover, but ultimately does, is that what the police have said all along—that Rita committed suicide.

[106] Dementia, can, in fact, occur in Parkinson's patients, though those with "more severe and advanced parkinsonism have a higher risk for dementia than those with less advanced PD" (Aarsland 9). Although

not question Elena's *ability* to reason (146); nevertheless, her self-delusion and inability to accept her daughter's suicide lead to a doomed investigation.

Although Mazzuca initially confirms Elena's mental lucidity, later she seems to contradict herself, questioning Elena's mental health and arguing that her investigation is a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive behavior. She claims that Elena suffers from "personalidad parkinsoniana," as evidenced by her alleged depression and anxiety, which only worsen after Rita's death. Although depression and anxiety are fairly common side effects of Parkinson's,[107] it is impossible to confirm if these conditions exist in Elena. I would argue that the simplest explanation is the most compelling: Elena is unable to accept the fact that her daughter committed suicide, and her subsequent investigation into her daughter's death is driven by grief and denial. Although it may initially strike the reader as odd that Elena would prefer that her daughter's death be the result of a murder rather than a suicide, the latter leaves open the possibility of Elena's culpability, whereas the former does not. Elena, who claims to have special insight into Rita's thoughts and feelings (66), was clearly unaware of her daughter's profound unhappiness, which stemmed primarily from Elena's diagnosis. Rather than accept that she did not know her daughter as well as she had thought, Elena insists that there must be some other explanation for her death. If she could find a culprit behind her daughter's death, Elena's "investigation" would give her a target for the anger and frustration she feels now that her daughter is dead and she faces Parkinson's alone. Moreover, by attributing to someone else the loss of her daughter, Elena could deny her own culpability in her daughter's death.

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the reader does not know precisely how long Elena has suffered from the disease, I would argue that her mental lucidity remains intact.

[107] See "Management of Anxiety and Depression in Parkinson's Disease" by B.S. Singhal et al. Duvoisin and Sage also address the topic in *Parkinson's Disease: A Guide for Patient and Family*, p. 46.

Even the most casual reader of detective fiction is undoubtedly accustomed to an emphasis upon the victim's body, as it often offers valuable clues as to how he or she has perished. In Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," for example, the victims' bodies are described in detail, first in the newspaper, the "Gazette des Tribunaux" (246-47), and then Dupin carefully inspects them himself looking for details the reporters might have overlooked (253). The extreme mutilation and the incredible force with which the body is lodged up the chimney, head-down, helps lead Dupin to the assassin.

In *Elena sabe*, rather than centering upon Rita who has indeed committed suicide—despite Elena's inability to accept it—Piñeiro shifts the focus to the other female characters' bodies, in effect revealing their scars of life-long victimization. As the protagonist of the novel, Elena's progressively deteriorating body is most prominently featured throughout Piñeiro's novel. As described previously, Parkinson's forces her to grapple with a loss of physical control over her body, but through the course of her so-called investigation " . . . descubre que otros se han apropiado de su cuerpo antes de que la enfermedad apareciera" (Mazzuca 162-63). Despite her rejection of the Catholic faith (71-72; 95), Elena realizes that the church's doctrines and societal norms have nevertheless dictated her behavior throughout her life.[108] With the exception of Roberto, Rita's hunchbacked boyfriend, the narrator makes no mention of male bodies. As Iris Young argues, " . . . social institutions and hegemonic discourses give to male bodies and masculine styles of behavior and comportment a normative status" (110), and thus male bodies are unremarkable, unworthy of comment, except, of course, in Roberto's case. As a man with a physical abnormality, he diverges from the physical standard, and thus, his body is highlighted prominently in *Elena sabe.*

[108] Although Elena seems to grasp the fact that outside institutions have influenced her behavior (111-12), it is, interestingly, much less clear if she understands the way in which society has outlined a set of standards to which she ascribes.

Throughout Piñeiro's detective novel, the reader's attention is most frequently drawn to Elena's body, which day by day is becoming ravaged by Parkinson's disease. The third-person omniscient narration allows the reader to perceive Elena's frustration with the confining sense of paralysis that the disease has caused. From the opening lines of the novel, the reader grasps the difficulty with which Elena is only occasionally able to perform simple tasks like walking: "Se trata de levantar el pie derecho, apenas unos centímetros del suelo, moverlo en el aire hacia adelante, tanto como para que sobrepase al pie izquierdo, y a esa distancia, la que sea, mucha o poca, hacerlo bajar. No se mueve, no se eleva, no avanza en el aire no vuelve a bajar. Eso apenas. Pero no lo hace. Entonces Elena se sienta y espera" (13). As before, the reader observes Elena's painstaking execution of these typically mechanical, second-nature activities, but in this case, as often happens, Elena must simply wait for the medicine to take effect. Elena suffers similar debilitation when the effects of her medication subside and she must wait for the time when she can take another dose of levodopa. In the taxi on the way to Isabel's house, she experiences one such moment of helpless immobility: "Por pudor intenta hacer un esfuerzo por levantar la cabeza y mirarlo [su pelo]. Pero su tiempo, el tiempo de Elena, se detuvo. Ya no hay resto de levodopa que la ayude a moverla. Nada, Elena sabe. Sabe que viene la espera, unos minutos hasta que le toque la próxima pastilla y luego el tiempo necesario para que la droga se disuelva y recorra su cuerpo" (98). Elena's days are therefore structured around her medication regimen, but even with her regular doses of levodopa Elena knows she has only small windows of time, "el tiempo de Elena," in which her body will be able to perform tasks that she used to take for granted. Piñeiro's protagonist clearly offers a stark contrast to Gorodischer's detective in *Floreros de alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara*. Physically the two could scarcely differ more: while the soon-to-be-grandmother featured in the latter works out and quits smoking in order to

prepare herself for her investigative mission in Mexico, for Elena, imposing such physical demands on her body would be unthinkable. As I will argue in this chapter, the Parkinson's disease that afflicts Elena is a metaphor for the subjugation to which she has allowed herself to be submitted all of her life; Gorodischer's protagonist, on the other hand, has boldly defied restrictive gender roles and patriarchal domination since her youth.

Elena's dogged determination to find her daughter's murderer—someone to blame for her daughter's death—invariably calls to mind her tendency to personify her disease, calling it "Ella." Doing so, again, allows Elena to place the blame, this time for her degenerative disease, on an outside entity (Mazzuca 146-47). In the following excerpt, for example, Elena recalls the first indication that something was wrong when she discovered she could no longer put one of her arms into her coat sleeve:

> Como normal es ponerse una campera sin ayuda. Ésa fue la primera señal, que un día Elena ya no pudo ponerse más la manga izquierda de su campera. Quién iba a sospechar que no poder calzarse una manga era tan importante, piensa. Hoy sabe cuánto importa. La derecha sí. Pero la izquierda, por más que su cerebro le ordenara que elevara su brazo en el aire por sobre su hombro, que apuntara con el codo hacia delante, que extendiera el brazo hacia atrás con la palma hacia el techo en el agujero de la manga y una vez dentro de su campera se deslizara siguiendo el hueco de la tela para regresar con ella a su posición habitual, el cuerpo no obedecía. . . . Porque Ella, la puta, había decidido que ese brazo nunca más se metería en una manga. (61-62)

Elena likens her disease to a cruel, despotic person, Ella, who has divested her of the ability to do basic tasks like dressing herself or walking. The quotation above also illustrates the way in which

Elena considers every single motion that she would have to make in order to be able to put her arm through the sleeve, underscoring the methodical, laborious nature of everyday tasks while in the grips of Parkinson's.

As we will see, Elena views the interactions between people as being based upon favors and debts that must be repaid. Having personified her disease, this is also the way Elena views her relationship between herself and her disease-ridden body. As she makes her way to the train station, Elena realizes she will have to walk by the bank on a day in which people are collecting their pension checks, a coincidence that prompts her to consider taking a less direct route to the train station, despite the increased physical challenge that would entail:

> Si sigue derecho sólo le faltarán tres cuadras hasta llegar a la ventanilla donde deberá decir uno ida y vuelta a Plaza, pero ese camino la llevaría a pasar frente a la puerta del banco donde están pagando las jubilaciones, entonces sería probable que se encontraría con alguien, que ese alguien quisiera darle el pésame, que eso la retuviera más de la cuenta, y entonces perdiera definitivamente el tren de las diez. Si diera la vuelta a la manzana tendría que sumar tres cuadras más a su recorrido, y eso sería pedirle demasiado a su enfermedad. A Elena no le gusta deberle favores a Ella. Ni deudas ni favores. Ella se lo haría sentir, Elena sabe, porque la conoce casi tanto como conocía a su hija. Puta enfermedad puta. (31-32)

Again, we see the way Elena must now carefully calculate her steps, taking only as many as her disease, "Ella," will permit her. She finally opts for the shortest route because, again, she refuses to become indebted to her disease. Elena ironically insists that she knows her disease almost as

well as her daughter (Flórez 46); as Elena recognizes by the end of the novel, she had not known her daughter as well as she had thought.

As Elena makes her way to the train that will take her to Isabel's house, Elena crosses paths with Roberto Almada, "aquel a quien Rita insistía en llamar mi novio" (33). Elena recalls how she used to call Roberto "[e]l atrofiado . . . delante de su hija para provocarla" before she was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Elena was by no means the only one to ridicule Roberto, as the neighborhood boys would also taunt him, nicknaming him "el jorobadito" (33). Susan Wendell underscores the paradoxical tendency of able-bodied individuals, like Elena before she was diagnosed with Parkinson's, to ostracize those who are disabled, even though these very same individuals will likely become disabled at some point in their lives ("Toward a Feminist Theory" 104). As Wendell states plainly: "Aging is disabling. Recognizing this helps us to see that disabled people are not 'other,' that they are really 'us.' Unless we die suddenly, we are all disabled eventually" (108).[109] Elena learns this lesson, ironically, in a very cruel way by developing Parkinson's, and now "Elena ya no puede verle [a Roberto] la joroba, apenas si llega al pecho con mucho esfuerzo" (33). Despite the fact that almost everyone inevitably develops some disability or another, Halpbern argues: "Empathy for the disabled is unavailable to most able-bodied persons. Sympathy, yes, empathy, no, for every attempt to project oneself into that condition, to feel what it is like not to be ambulatory, for instance, is mediated by an ability to walk" (Halpern 3). Before she becomes incapacitated by disease, Elena is clearly unable to imagine herself in Roberto's position, and her derisive comments about Roberto clearly

[109] Castelnuovo and Guthrie likewise affirm this idea, noting, "Persons with disabilities call able-bodies people TABs, an acronym for temporarily able-bodied. The acronym reflects the fact that the able-bodied condition is a transitory one and that if we live long enough, we all develop a disability or disabilities of one type or another (132).

contribute to the tension in her relationship with Rita. Nevertheless, her disease suddenly makes her even more disabled than he.

Wendell, among others, has explored the causes behind this tendency to deride those who have non-normative bodies[110] or are somehow incapacitated, arguing that it stems from a socially constructed norm of the "idealized body." We are made to believe that we can and should control our bodies such that we never show any signs of weakness, and thus we ridicule those who are handicapped as they "symbolize [a] failure of control and the threat of pain, limitation, dependency, and death" ("Toward a Feminist Theory" 104). Similarly, Castelnuovo and Guthrie argue that disabled bodies are seen as "unnatural," and that the handicapped represent "vulnerability, dependence and an inability to control the body, all of which are deeply embedded concerns among able-bodied people (116).[111] Again, while frailties and handicaps become increasingly common as we age, societal norms dictate that we avoid this natural disintegration of the body and adhere to the standards the strong, healthy "idealized body." As we will see, this concept of the "idealized body" plays an important role in Rita's management of Elena's aging body.

The reader, like Elena, is constantly made aware of the way her disease governs every aspect of her life; from the movements she attempts and is sometimes able of make, to her interactions with others, Elena's disease is inescapable. Part of Elena's journey to Isabel's house is done via train, and rather than trying to travel alongside those who rush to get to work in the mornings, Elena goes on one of the later trains when she is more likely to find a seat. She sits near a young woman and her daughter, aware, though unable to lift her head to confirm that the

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[110] Here, I am following Castelnuovo and Guthrie's terminology, as they refer to "normative" bodies on p. 116 of *Feminism and the Female Body*.

[111] As I will discuss later, the ability to control one's body is an especially important concept as it relates to regulating women's comportment and their bodies.

little girl is observing her: "La nena no llega con los pies al suelo, Elena los ve agitarse en el aire. Sabe que la niña la mira. Sabe que se acerca a la madre y le susurra algo al oído, después te digo, le contesta la madre, y la niña vuelve a agitar sus piernas más rápido que antes" (46). Although disability is a natural part of the aging process (Wendell, "Towards a Feminist Theory" 108), Piñeiro's depiction of the mother and young girl on the train illustrates how society perpetuates the myth of the "idealized body" and sequesters those who do not or cannot conform. While we would not expect the mother to explain Elena's disability to her daughter in Elena's presence, the experience is, nevertheless, alienating for Elena. In this way, Elena ironically becomes the target of the ostracism she inflicted upon Roberto years ago.

Not only does Elena's body now isolate her from others, the narrator illustrates the many ways in which Parkinson's makes Elena feel like a stranger to her own body, as she feels, like many disabled people, a sudden powerlessness over her body. When planning the arrangements for Rita's burial with an employee at the funeral home, for instance, Elena unexpectedly breaks down:

> Habló y mientras hablaba lloraba casi sin intención. Elena siempre fue de llorar poco, casi nada, pero desde que su cuerpo es de Ella, de esa puta enfermedad puta, ya ni siquiera es dueña de sus lágrimas. Aunque quiera no llorar, no puede, y llora, las lágrimas salen de su lagrimal y ruedan por su cara rígida como si tuvieran que regar un campo yermo. Sin que nadie les pida, sin que las llamen. (49)

As before, Elena curses the degenerative disease that prevents her from being able to control her tears, and describes her face as a barren wasteland devastated by this disease. Nevertheless, the reader simultaneously perceives a regenerative quality of Elena's unwanted tears, which water,

and therefore rejuvenate, her face. Susan Wendell, who likewise was an able-bodied individual who became disabled, speaks to the "profound alienation"[112] she experienced, recalling: "I could barely identify my body as my own. I felt that 'it' was torturing 'me,' trapping me in exhaustion, pain and inability to do many of the simplest things I did when I was healthy" ("Toward a Feminist Theory" 112). By offsetting "it" and "me," Wendell underscores the paradox inherent in individuals' conceiving of their bodies as divorced from themselves, as though "it" and "me" were not one and the same.

Having developed Parkinson's disease, Elena can no longer control many of her own movements and relies upon Rita for help in performing even basic bodily functions until, of course, her daughter's untimely death (118). Within the corpus of detective fiction there are very few works centering upon detective figures disabled to this degree.[113] Although she does not experience the involuntary shaking that often accompanies the disease (62), Elena suffers from severe rigidity in her neck that prevents her from being able to look up for long periods of time. Throughout the course of her exhausting odyssey to Isabel's house, Elena is repeatedly reminded of her body's new limitations. Small tasks such as finding a seat on the train (48) or even getting her body inside of a taxi when the effects of her medication have worn off (98) pose enormous

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[112] Wendell admits, "Like most feminists I know, I was aware of some alienation from [my body], and I worked at liking my body better. Nevertheless, I knew in my heart that too much of my liking still depended on being 'close enough'" ("Toward a Feminist Theory" 112). Wendell's comments reveal the way in which women are indoctrinated into striving toward socially defined ideals of feminine beauty. Even Elena, who struggles to walk and dress herself, feels that she must keep up with certain standards of personal hygiene (98). Evidently, Rita had been ashamed of her mother's appearance (118), insisting that she go to Mimi's beauty shop since she could no longer maintain basic hygiene.

[113] There have, of course, been other disabled detectives, including a blind sleuth named Mike Longstreet who was featured on an ABC crime drama, *Longstreet,* which aired in the early seventies. An NBC television series called *Ironside* centered upon a paraplegic detective by the same name, who became disabled from a gunshot wound. One especially intriguing depiction of a disabled detective is *The Bone Collector* (1999), directed by Phillip Noyce. Denzel Washington portrays an African American detective, Lincoln Rhyme, who becomes a paraplegic after suffering an accident while investigating a case. Unable to gather evidence on his own any longer, he guides Amelia Donaghy (Angelina Jolie), a young, novice police officer, and together the two solve a serial murder case.

challenges to her, but she refuses to be deterred, determinedly pushing through her journey. Susan Wendell, a female critic who suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome and has written extensively on disability argues that the problem is that

> [m]uch of the world is . . . structured as though everyone is [*sic*] physically strong, as though all bodies are 'ideally shaped,' as though everyone can walk, hear and see well, as though everyone can work and play at a pace that is not compatible with any kind of illness or pain, as though no one is ever dizzy or incontinent or simply needs to sit or lie down. . . . Not only the architecture, but the entire physical and social organization of life, assumes that we are either strong and healthy and able to do what the average able-bodied person can do, or that we are completely disabled, unable to participate in life. (Wendell, "Toward a Feminist Theory" 111)

This dichotomy clearly leaves disabled people like Elena in a sort of vague, undefined territory, as she is obviously not strong and healthy, yet she refuses to give in to her disease and rely entirely upon others for help, even after Rita's devastating death (18). As we will see, Elena develops a number of strategies that allow her to complete the trip to Isabel's house independently, namely memorizing important information such a street names and coordinating her movements with the intervals in which her body best responds to her medication.

Throughout *Elena sabe*, we note Elena's peculiar insistence upon learning or committing to memory the names of such disparate things as the muscles in her body that restrict once-simple movements[114] to the streets she must travel to get from the train station to Isabel's house.

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[114] In her journey to Isabel's house, Elena approaches the train station when someone says hello to her, but the rigidity in her neck, caused by Parkinson's disease, prevents her from being able to see who it is: "Su cuello rígido que la obliga a caminar mirando el piso no le deja ver quién es. Esterno cleido mastoideo se llama el músculo que la obliga. El que tira de su cabeza para abajo. Esterno cleido

These acts of identification are all linked to her primary objective, which is, of course, to find the person who took her daughter's life. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator observes the way Elena recites the names of the streets between the train station and Isabel's house: "Constitución, 9 de Julio, Libertador, Figueroa Alcorta, Planetario, Monumento a los Españoles, Libertador, Olleros, una puerta de madera, herrajes de bronce, una puerta, Olleros, Libertador, 9 de Julio, Constitución. De atrás para adelante, de adelante para atrás" (19). Elena's recitation of the street names allows her to visualize her journey in several smaller segments, making the trip seem more manageable. It also helps her stay oriented in her physical space without having to lift her head to read the street signs, a task that for her is oftentimes impossible. Like the previously quoted passage in which Elena lists the steps required to walk (13), Elena's listing of the streets she must cross reveals the way she thinks about all of her tasks in progressive steps. Determined to accomplish this task on her own, Elena repeats the street names so many times that the list becomes mechanical, as though Elena were uttering a prayer committed to memory long ago (53).

Again, by memorizing and chanting the street names like a prayer, Elena is able to realize a significant act of independence despite the exhausting toll this trip has on her body. Although the taxi company offers to take her at a reduced price, she refuses, as she is determined to go to Isabel's house on her own. Wendell affirms the importance of such acts of independence for disabled individuals,[115] explaining: "Many disabled people . . . value their independence above everything. Dependence on the help of others is humiliating in a society which prizes

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masteoideo, le dijo el doctor Benegas, y Elena le pidió que se lo escribiera . . . para nunca olvidarse, para saber el nombre del verdugo aunque lleve capucha e incluirlo en el rezo de su espera. (30) Again, we see Elena's insistence upon being able to identify people, or in this case, a muscle, she can blame for her disability, equating the muscle in her neck with an executioner.

[115] Barbara Hillyer has also written insightfully on issues of independence and dependence in disability. See *Feminism and Disability* pp. 16-18 and 193-217.

independence ("Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability" 118) Castelnuovo and Guthrie agree, affirming, "In a society that prizes autonomy and physical fitness as visible signs of moral goodness, dependence and lack of control, both of which are associated with disability, are viewed with disdain" (126). In Elena's case, going to Isabel's house on her own is a particularly important act of independence, as she now lives alone and must take care of herself; her journey to Isabel's house, then, seems to provide a means of proving to herself that she is capable of living alone.[116]

Again, Elena declines the taxi company's offer to take her to Isabel's house at a reduced rate partly because this voyage represents an act of independence, but also because, in her words, "no me gustan las deudas" (18). As mentioned previously, in Elena's mind, the world is based upon favors and debts that should be repaid, and she refuses to be indebted to someone else. Elena indicates that in going to Isabel's house she plans to "saldar una deuda" (145) by asking her for help with the investigation into Rita's death. Twenty years ago, Elena, with the help of her daughter, had prevented Isabel from having an abortion, a deed Elena considers a favor that has yet to be repaid. Since then, Elena and Rita have received Christmas cards every year with a picture of Isabel, her husband, and her daughter, Julieta, ostensibly a happy family. Nevertheless, as the reader learns at the end of the novel, this could not be further from the truth (148). Isabel's husband, a homosexual man, marries and rapes Isabel, impregnating her so he can prove that the marriage has been consummated (154), and in this way, conceals his homosexuality. Isabel is, quite literally, a "fetal incubator" (Bordo 72). The fact that Isabel's husband goes to such great lengths to conceal his sexuality points to the stigma surrounding homosexuality and the consequences for being outed as a queer. Rita and Elena, unaware of the circumstances of

[116] Although she shares little else with him, like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Elena is a loner who acts alone in what she believes to be the pursuit of justice.

Isabel's marriage and pregnancy, prevent Isabel from getting an abortion, and like her husband, force Isabel into motherhood. Thus, Rita imposes upon Isabel a role she eschews herself while Elena, on the other hand, cannot fathom a woman who would not want to "cumplir la posta para la que vino al mundo" (79), contributing to the propagation of the species. When Elena returns to Isabel's house twenty years later on the grounds that Isabel owes Elena a favor, Isabel feels, on the contrary, that others are indebted to her. In Isabel's words, "usted . . . no vino a saldar una deuda sino a cometer el mismo delito, veinte años después. La mira y repite, usted vino a usar mi cuerpo" (151).

One of the most striking illustrations of Elena's strict adherence to social norms is seen in her efforts to hide evidence of her menstruation. When female bodies and behavior diverge from the normative, male standard, as in menstruation or pregnancy, women often try to conceal these aberrations (Young 110).[117] Just as disability is seen as a lack of control over, or a deviation from, the "idealized body," so too is a woman's inability to contain her menstrual blood. As Elena makes her way to Isabel's house, she recalls with horror one moment in which she was nearly "outed" as a menstruator:

> . . . manchó la butaca del cine donde había ido una tarde cuando Rita tenía diez o doce años, levantate, hija, y salí rápido, levantate ya mismo, pero Rita se tomó su tiempo, tenía que juntar sus golosinas, ponerse los zapatos, dije que te apures y salgas, volvió a decir Elena, esperá mamá, ¿qué apuro hay?, este apuro, le contestó, y le dio vuelta la cara para que mirara la mancha sobre la butaca de pana marrón, entonces Rita se apuró, salió casi corriendo de ese cine, llorando, pero sin

[117] Much of Young's argument here comes from Christine Battersby's *The Phenomenal Woman* (1998) in which she maintains that the female body is construed as "anomalous" and "monstrous."

> dejar de mirar hacia atrás para saber si alguien más veía la mancha de su madre. (78-79)

Upon discovering that Elena has allowed evidence of her biological functions to be visible to the public, Elena and prepubescent Rita panic. While their reaction may strike the reader as exaggerated, Martin explains that "strong social pressures and our own internalized sense of decency tell us that we must vigilantly guard against revelation of our bleeding" (107). Young even compares the stigma surrounding menstruators and homosexual individuals, insisting, "in this normatively masculine, supposedly gender-egalitarian society . . . the menstruating woman is queer. As with other queers, the price of a woman's acceptance as normal is that she stay in the closet as a menstruator" (107). The terror Elena feels upon allowing her menstruation to be detectable to others, therefore, calls to mind women's sense of estrangement from their own bodies and the shame that stems from bodily processes. Thus, while Elena's development of Parkinson's disease undoubtedly intensifies the "profound alienation" (Wendell 112) she feels with respect to her body, Elena has suffered analogous divisions between herself and her body throughout the course of her life well before the onset of her disease.

Although "[w]oman, like man, *is* her body" (Beauvoir 29, emphasis in original), women's bodies in particular have been subjected to strict societal controls such that women must hide their own natural processes, causing them to feel estranged from themselves (Bordo 4-5).[118] Not surprisingly, then, "[b]ellicose metaphors about the body . . . are common in popular culture" (Chrisler 204), as women are encouraged to wage a war against fat, evidence of age and menstruation. As with disabled individuals, women who expose their "leaks, lumps and lines"

[118] I would argue that society places more exacting demands upon women's appearances and behavior, but I do not mean to suggest that men are not also subject to restrictive rules.

(Chrisler) represent a lack of control and are stigmatized.[119] Chrisler indicates that one of the many mechanisms of control revolves around women's menstrual cycles, and in her article, published in 2011, she affirms: "most people believe that it is at least good manners, if not absolutely necessary, to hide evidence of menstruation, not only from public view but in private as well" (203). In their study of nine adolescent girls, Burrows and Johnson conducted conversations about menarche and menstruation, and discovered that young women tend to speak of these natural processes "as embarrassing, shameful and something to be hidden . . . menstruation [is] also constructed as illness" (235).[120] Chrisler points to current advertisements, noting that even today "[a]dvertisements "emphasize women's worry about shameful leaks and their fear that they will be 'outed' as menstruating—because discovery means stigma" (203). Other critics have likewise found that both young adolescents and older women view their own menstrual cycles with disgust and shame (Hammond and Jablow 6-7; Lee 619-620; Young 101). Chrisler therefore flatly rejects the claim that "there is no need for menstrual activism because menstruation is no longer a taboo topic," offering as additional evidence of the secrecy surrounding menstruation the example of how comedian Joan Rivers was censored for saying the word "period" on the Wendy Williams's television show in 2010 (202).

Despite Elena's horror upon realizing that she might have exposed evidence of her menstruation to others, she nevertheless, in a seemingly paradoxical way, privately boasts of her own heavy periods. Elena contrasts her menstrual cycles with those of daughter:

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[119] See Erving Goffman's foundational study, *Stigma* (1963).

[120] In her article "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability," Wendell draws an explicit link between female biological processes and disabilities: "Careful study of the lives of disabled people will reveal how artificial the line is that we draw between the biological and the social. Feminists have already challenged this line in part by showing how processes such as childbirth, menstruation and menopause, which may be represented, treated and therefore experienced as illness or disabilities, are socially-constructed from biological reality" (110).

> Rita nunca manchó una sábana, nunca un dolor que le impidiera hacer la vida de todos los días. Como si su menstruación . . . . fuera un simulacro . . . En cambio Elena sí, ella siempre tuvo reglas abundantes, generosas, de esas que no dejan dudas de que todo, ahí dentro, funciona . . . Que su vientre funcionaba estaba claro, pero del de su hija siempre tuvo dudas. Si Rita no era capaz de manchar como ella, Elena no podía estar segura. (78)

Clearly, Elena is ashamed not by menstruation in and of itself, but rather by the possibility of being "outed." Her seemingly incongruous stance is largely based on a belief that her heavy periods are a sign of her fertility—a myth with no scientific evidence.[121] Buckley and Gottlieb describe the compelling symbolism behind such a belief: "in flowing from the reproductive organs of women such blood, rather than signaling a threat to life, is recognized by most peoples as signaling its very possibility" (Buckley and Gottlieb 26). Living in a society that views the non-normative, feminine body with disdain, Elena lacks a basic understanding of her bodily processes.[122]

As indicated previously, menstruation is considered something shameful because as Burrows and Johnson, Hammond and Jablow, and Lee, among others explain, menstrual blood has been construed as a pollutant that requires sanitation (236; 6-7; 616 respectively). Buckley and Gottlieb, following Mary Douglas, further explain that menstrual blood, like dirt, is seen as "'matter out of place'" (26). This analogy, they argue, is particularly apt with respect to menstrual blood as it "breach[es] the natural bounds of the body that normally contains it" (26). In *Elena sabe*, we see evidence of the general tendency to view menstrual fluid as waste in Rita's

[121] Being a mother is of the utmost importance to Elena, as it provides her a way of defining herself within society, giving her a social function.

[122] As recently as 2008 Stubbs indicates that girls lack a fundamental understanding of menstruation (60-61). In Elena's case, the stigma surrounding menstruation has led to a life-long ignorance about her own biological functions.

comments to her mother and Elena's thoughts. Elena recalls a conversation she had with her daughter many years ago, and the reader sees that Rita think of her periods strictly in terms of hygiene: "reglas amarretas tenés vos, Rita, mejor, mama, menos tiempo sucia" (78). For Rita, who has no interest in being a mother herself, her periods are an inconvenience. Interestingly, even Elena, who gloats about her heavy periods, refers to her menstrual cycles in terms of sanitation. In the section quoted above, she proudly states of herself: "Rita no era capaz de manchar como ella" (78). Unlike the "manchas" left on the seat at the movie theater, the stains left on her sheets at home are a source of pride, because, again, she believes they signal opportunity for new life. Yet it is striking that even when boasting about her periods that she would still refers to them as "manchas," revealing that she—much like her daughter—still views them as pollutants that necessitate sanitation. This is, to my knowledge, the only detective novel that has grappled with issues of menstruation.

Concealing evidence of her menstrual cycles from the public eye is, as we discover, one of the many societal norms to which Elena conforms, but later she details other ways in which conservative values have governed her life, regulating her behavior. As she completes the final leg of her journey to Isabel's house, Elena's taxi driver openly declares his fondness for drinking, prompting Elena to reflect the following:

> . . . no sabe si le gusta, pero que nunca toma. . . . Debería haberse emborrachado alguna vez en la vida, y aprendido a manejar, y usado biquini, piensa. Un amante, también tendría que haber tenido un amante, porque el único sexo que conoce es el que tuvo con Antonio, y eso era un orgullo, haber sido sólo de un hombre, pero hoy, vieja y doblada, caída sobre su brazo, sabiendo que nunca más habrá sexo para ella, Elena no siente orgullo, siente otra cosa, tampoco pena, ni bronca, siente

> un sentimiento que no sabe qué nombre tiene, eso que un siente cuando se descubre tonto. Haber guardado la virginidad para quién, haber sido fiel por qué, haberse mantenido casta después de viuda con qué motivo, con qué esperanza, creyendo qué. Ni virginidad ni fidelidad ni castidad significan nada para ella hoy lo mismo, tirada en el asiento de ese taxi. Ni sexo. Se pregunta si podría tener sexo con alguien si quisiera. Se pregunta por qué no quiere, si por el Parkinson, por la viudez o por la edad. O por la falta de costumbre después de tanto tiempo sin siquiera pensar en eso. Se pregunta si una mujer con Parkinson que quisiera tener sexo podría. . . . ¿podrá un hombre con Parkinson hacer el amor?, ¿podrá penetrar a una mujer? Para un hombre debe ser más difícil, piensa, porque no se trata sólo de dejar hacer" (111-12).

Elena lays bare her regret that she did not take advantage of all that she could have in life, and for having allowed her comportment to be governed by ideals that seem meaningless now. Her remarks about sex are revealing not only of the way she views women's role in sexual intercourse, but they also encapsulate how Elena has lived her life. Indeed, she has allowed everyone else—her husband, the church, society, and now her disease—to control her life and impose restrictions upon her.

Before Rita's premature death, Elena and Rita had discovered that Elena has Parkinson Plus Syndrome, a neurological disorder that develops rapidly in which the patient exhibits symptoms similar to those with Parkinson's. Although Elena already depends upon Rita for help with simple tasks and basic hygiene, all of which Rita angrily enumerates to the doctor (161-62), they discover that Elena will, in fact, degenerate further and very quickly. Doctor Benegas likens the caretaking role Rita will be forced to assume to that of a mother and a newborn: "ella la

necesita como usted necesitó a su madre hace años atrás, va a ser la madre de su madre, Rita, porque la Elena que conocimos va a ser un bebé" (164). These are, no doubt, horrifying words to Rita, who has eschewed motherhood throughout her adult life despite the fact that "[a] Elena le hubiera gustado ser abuela" (78, 81). Upon Elena's insistence, Rita had been forced to undergo an invasive exam allowing doctor Benegas to verify that Rita has a uterus (79-81), a procedure that Mazzuca appropriately compares to rape (170). One potential explanation for Rita's suicide, then, is that it is the only way for her to avoid the so-called motherhood that Elena's disease would have required her to endure. Rita's behavior strikes the reader as hypocritical: while she dissuades Isabel from having an abortion based upon her own religious convictions, Rita commits suicide, a deed equally forbidden by the church. I do not find convincing Flórez's assertion that "Rita . . . se suicidó por el temor a heredar la misma enfermedad de su madre (49). Perhaps the explanation Isabel offers to Elena is closest to the truth: " . . . no podía tolerar que usted la tuviera . . . a veces es más fácil gritar que llorar" (173).

Whatever her daughter's motivation had been, Rita's death puts into question Elena's role in society, leaving her in an undefined social milieu she finds distressing. Although Murphy argues that disability can disrupt or overshadow one's role(s) in society, making it such that disability oftentimes defines handicapped individuals (135), Elena argues, on the contrary, that she has not been divested of her title as Rita's mother because of her disease. Rita's suicide, on the other hand, makes her uncertain:

> Seguirá siendo madre ahora que no tiene hija?, se pregunta. Si la muerta fuera ella, Rita sería huérfana. ¿Qué nombre tiene ella sin su hija? ¿La muerte de Rita puede haber barrido con lo que ella fue? Su enfermedad no pudo, ser madre Elena sabe, no lo cambia ninguna enfermedad que impida ponerse una campera, ni que

> detenga la marcha con pies inmóviles, ni que someta a vivir con la cabeza gacha, ¿pero puede la muerte haberse llevado no sólo el cuerpo de Rita sino también la palabra que la nombre a ella? (66)

For Elena, her role as a mother is of the utmost importance because it establishes her social utility; her daughter's death, however, destabilizes this function. In the following excerpt, Elena initially seeks affirmation from the church, asking Padre Juan:

> ¿soy una madre, Padre?, ¿por qué lo duda?, ¿qué nombre tienen las mujeres a las que se les murió un hijo?, no soy viuda, no soy huérfana, ¿qué soy? Elena lo espera un silencio, frente a él pero de espaldas, y antes de que responda dice, mejor no me ponga un nombre, Padre, tal vez si usted o su iglesia encuentra una palabra para nombrarme, después se arroguen el derecho de decirme cómo tengo que ser, cómo tengo que vivir. O morir. (73)

Although Elena initially looks for classification from the church, she changes her mind abruptly, determining that, in fact, she no longer wishes to be defined by a church in whose doctrines she does not believe. Elena has, as she makes plain, spent her whole life pretending to be Catholic for her husband and her daughter's benefit (95), but she realizes there is no longer any need to continue with this charade. At the end of the novel, when Elena decides that although she is doomed to suffer from Parkinson's alone for the rest of her life, she still desires to live. She worries, however, that people will call her arrogant for this, and Isabel tells her "no le crea a la gente que nos pone nombre, Elena" (173). In other words, Isabel argues that Elena should cease to look for others to define her, but should be in command of herself and make her own decisions.

Elena's "investigation" into the death of her daughter, does, indeed, lead her to her daughter's murderer—Rita herself—but unlike most sleuths in detective fiction, she is the very last to know. Her daylong trip to Isabel's house to ask for assistance soon evolves into a journey of self-discovery and a reflection upon her troubled relationship with Rita. Elena is physically no longer in control of her body, a reality that makes her voyage to Isabel's house extremely arduous, but as she discovers, her body and its comportment have always been in someone else's control. Elena has not only submitted to various societal norms and standards of behavior dictated by the Catholic Church, she too has reproduced society's repressive control over women's behavior in her relationships with Rita and Isabel. By forcing Isabel into motherhood and trying to do the same with her own daughter—nearly succeeding when she develops Parkinson's disease—Elena effectively takes part in the subjugation of others. By the end of the novel, and after she finally lays bare her rejection of the church's teachings, Elena is clearly determined to take charge of her own life, rejecting the controls and limitations others might try to impose upon her.

II. *Morena en rojo*: Journalistic Testimonial and the Detective Narrative

> El silencio es cómplice . . . Y yo no podía ser cómplice de semejante perversidad.
> *La Morena, Morena en rojo*

Morena en rojo (1994) by the Argen-Mex[123] writer Myriam Laurini features an anonymous narrator and reporter for the *nota roja*[124] who calls herself La Morena. Spurred

[123] The argen-mex generation, including Myriam Laurini, Rolo Díez, Mempo Giardinelli, among others, is a group of writers that fled Argentina during the Dirty War (1976-1983) to take up residence in Mexico. Ramírez-Pimienta and Villalobos argue that the marginalization of the characters in the novel is paralleled extratexually in Myriam Laurini's status as an exiled writer (381).

[124] According to Klahr and Barata, the term *nota roja* refers to " . . . un conjunto de acontecimientos sociales que vulneran las normas penales, así como los que dan cuenta de desgracias sociales. Se recurre a

primarily by her desire to write a book about a young woman named María Crucita,[125] whom the reader meets in the first chapter, the narrator of *Morena en rojo* travels across Mexico, intercalating her horrific investigations into kidnapping, prostitution and organ trafficking with her own personal and love life. A mulatta woman who likewise suffers from discrimination and marginalization due to her race and gender,[126] La Morena is moved by the women's stories, and in her investigative work she unveils the systems of oppression that exploit young women and adolescents, often preying upon those with the greatest economic disadvantage. Like Piñeiro's *Elena sabe*, then, Laurini's novel depicts systemic repression and widespread exploitation. The Mexican police force's complicity in the wrongdoings has prompted reporters, like the fictional La Morena, to undertake criminal investigations traditionally reserved for the police. While La Morena attempts to uncover this underworld of crime in the papers, her superiors censor her stories, as they risk exposing their own role in the crimes. The novel, then, is comprised of the censored stories that La Morena had never been able to publish, and in that way, the novel "gives voice to the voiceless,"[127] recounting the stories of marginalized women from across Mexico and beyond.

Morena en rojo begins with a "noticia" that functions as a framing device in which La Morena indicates that while the narrative that follows is based upon her own experiences and

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dicha etiqueta tanto para consignar un atraco (hecho delictivo) como para informar sobre un incidente vial (accidente), o los estragos de una inundación (tragedia 'natural') (53). A close approximation of the term in English would be a police blotter.

[125] Interestingly, in Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da,* which I analyze in my final chapter, there is also a *nota roja* reporter who aspires to write a book. She tells Cristina Rivera Garza's alter ego, la Informante, that this book is "[p]ara mí . . . no para el periódico" (51).

[126] Here again, the reader sees a parallel with Elena from Piñeiro's *Elena sabe*. While La Morena is marginalized due to her race and her occupation, which lacks prestige, Elena is ostracized largely due to her development of Parkinson's disease and her age. Furthermore, I would argue that her dogged determination that her daughter was murdered, when all evidence points to suicide, likewise alienates her from others.

[127] This phrase comes from Gerog Gugelberger and Michael Kearny's article by the same name that addresses Latin American testimonial literature.

encounters with physically and psychologically abused Mexican women, the compiler of these stories, the "author," is a woman named Miriam Laurini. As in Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da*, which I discuss in depth in my fourth chapter, the author employs an alter ego of herself. La Morena gives license to the fictional author, Laurini, to publish a book based upon her memories as long as "sólo lo esencial de cada anécdota fuera real, y que cambiara nombres, fechas y lugares, para 'proteger a los justos de la justicia'" (7). In an interview I conducted with Myriam Laurini in the fall of 2013, the author affirmed that *Morena en rojo* is "un trabajo más vinculado a la realidad," as the narratives are based upon stories she uncovered while working as a reporter. Like her alter ego in the novel, Laurini compiled and adapted these stories, weaving testimonial accounts into the detective tapestry.

Laurini's use of the frame structure not only mimics the author's actual creative process, it also fascinatingly reveals the difficulty with which these stories are finally brought to light, underscoring the "manto de silencio, de ocultamiento" surrounding the widespread abuse of impoverished Mexican women (Laurini "Personal Interview"). The stories La Morena relates "adquieren una función desmitificadora" (Fernández 134), as they illustrate individuals' stories of abuse; they also account for a broader group of people than those portrayed, as they represent the collective experience of other oppressed, "invisible" people. Gustavo V. García describes the function of this strand of testimonial literature, arguing: " . . . corrige el canon cultural y sus versiones del sujeto subalterno afirmando una identidad alternativa a la dominante (trans)formando la experiencia personal de un testigo, por lo general analfabeto y marginalizado, en una historia colectiva de resistencia y proyección ideológica" (12).[128] Indeed, many of the victims depicted in the novel have very little education or are completely illiterate, and thus

[128] Again, while *Morena en rojo* is, indeed, based upon the real stories of victimized women, it should be noted that testimonial literature is nonetheless a fictionalized form.

would be incapable of documenting the abuses they have endured. Furthermore, because they have little, if any, access to means of literary dissemination, often an intermediary, like La Morena and Laurini, must gather and transcribe these stories for the general public.[129] In that sense, these testimonies are two steps removed from lived experience: the women themselves recount their stories to La Morena, who then relates them to Laurini's alter ego, who subsequently transcribes these stories, presumably changing only what is necessary to protect those involved. Although the reader might not otherwise discover these stories, each intermediary obviously diminishes the reader's proximity to the women's accounts and allows for the introduction of incongruities in these narratives.

Like *Elena sabe*, and countless other works of detective fiction, *Morena en rojo* begins with a corpse, here that of comandante Videla, the former police chief.[130] As is typical in murder investigations, the police examine the victim's body, searching for clues about the killer's identity.[131] In the following exchange, the narrator—a reporter—discovers that the police have already drawn some conclusions about the murderer based upon the stab wounds present in the victim's body:

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[129] Choi appropriately compares Laurini's novel with Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969). Poniatowksa's novel is based upon her interviews with Josefina Bórquez/Jesusa Palancares (160), who, like María Crucita, is a poverty-stricken, marginalized Mexican woman.

[130] Salvador C. Fernández points out that the comandante shares the same last name as the Argentine dictator, Jorge Rafael Videla (135), under whose regime human rights groups argue that up to 30,000 people were killed, kidnapped, and disappeared (Popper). While Laurini, her husband, Rolo Díez, and two of their children fled in 1976, one of their sons stayed in Argentina and was subsequently disappeared (Zee 116). When I asked Laurini if the likeness in name signaled a kind of revenge, she immediately affirmed: "Sí, así es, fue con premeditación . . . como se dice en la jerga policiaca. Absolutamente le puse Videla para vengarme de Videla."

[131] Joy Palmer argues that in recent crime novels such as those by Patricia Cornwell, Jeffrey Deaver, and Kathy Reichs, the body has become increasingly fragmented, as investigators are now able to analyze smaller and smaller traces of evidence such as strands of hair or drops of blood. In Palmer's words: "While the body has always played a central role in the narratives of crime fiction, in recent years we have witness an explosion in the popularity of the medical mystery or forensic detective novel, forms of the genre that more explicitly focus upon the ability of the forensic detective or pathologist to read and interpret the material traces of the body" (54).

—Qué saben del asesino?

— . . . Sabemos que es un hombre joven y fuerte.

—¿Por qué lo saben?

—Pues, verá señorita, sólo un hombre joven y muy fuerte puede enterrar nueve veces profundamente un cuchillo, que por cierto, aún no hemos encontrado. (135)

Although the victim's body can provide valuable clues, in this case, gender-based assumptions of strength lead the police to mistakenly believe the assassin is a man.

Despite the police force's confidence in their flawed conclusions about the murderer, La Morena soon discovers that María Crucita, an impoverished, victimized woman, has killed Videla for having taken advantage of her and robbing her both of her innocence and money. Like Elena in Piñeiro's novel, the police try to brush La Morena aside (129), but she determinedly continues to probe the details of the case. La Morena's close attention to detail, which allows her to perceive important clues that the police overlook, recalls Poletti's female detectives.[132] She argues, for example, that Videla's facial expression suggests that he knew the assassin, but the new police chief quickly discards the novice's theory, insisting: "Mi estimada, todos los cadáveres son iguales, no se deje engañar por ojos más o menos abiertos" (136). Whereas Elena's determination prolongs her self-deception, La Morena's persistence is fruitful, as she learns the identity of the culprit. Laurini underscores the police's lack of perspicacity, as La Morena, a reporter with virtually no investigative experience, is the only one to uncover the killer's identity. La Morena revels in her discovery, fantasizing about how this will boost her career: "Soy Miss Marple, o la Detective del Crimen, yo descubrí a la asesina, no ellos. Esta nota me dispara al DF. Soy la superredactora de nota roja" (139). As a reporter for the *nota roja*, La

[132] Careful attention to detail is, of course, a feature Elena ironically claims to have. Her inability to interpret her daughter's behavior and intuit her daughter's suicidal thoughts, however, belies this affirmation.

Morena would normally rush to publish this story in the hopes that it would advance her career, but she feels ethically and morally compelled to protect María, who, as we later learn, is the real victim in this case. La Morena and María's shared sense of solidarity (Ramírez-Pimienta and Villalobos 383) recalls the relationship between female characters in Poletti's short stories, namely between the grandmother and the narrator in "Estampa antigua," and in "Rojo en la salina" between Mecha and her daughter, Yessy. Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's film, *Backyard/Traspatio*, likewise portrays two women, Blanca and Sara, who work together to put an end to the crimes against women in Juárez.

Having discovered the killer's identity, La Morena, like the narrator in Poletti's "Estampa antigua," views the aggressor's behavior as justifiable, and thus abandons her role as reporter/detective to help protect María Crucita. She chides María for having told the police anything at all, but María reveals that the police extracted information from her under torture: "Dije lo que dije porque me metieron muchas veces la cabeza en el agua y sentí que me moría y sentía que no quería morir" (138). While La Morena is genuinely interested in piecing together the evidence to find the perpetrator, the police appear to employ whatever means necessary to locate a plausible culprit upon whom to pin the murder of Videla. The new police chief openly acknowledges using torture to ensure that the witness provides an "accurate" account of details of Videla's murder in a conversation with La Morena:

> ¿—Y será verdad que el asesino dijo eso?
>
> —Por supuesto, le apretamos un poco la tuercas para no equivocarnos, para estar seguros, ¿me entiende?
>
> —Sí, comandante. Esos métodos que ustedes utilizan para llegar a la verdad son infalibles. (137)

As is widely known, confession under torture is, in fact, unreliable,[133] and La Morena's ironic response expresses her skepticism regarding the efficacy not only of torture, but also the police's other investigative procedures. The corruption and the cruel mechanisms with which the police extract information in *Morena en rojo* are, as Laurini explained during my interview with her, allusions to police malfeasance during the Dirty War in Mexico (1965-1982) or, as some call it, *La guerra de baja intensidad* in which the Mexican government disappeared its own citizens, tortured political dissidents, and massacred student demonstrators (Herrera Calderón and Cedillo 6-9).[134] Like the police in Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's *Backyard/Traspatio*, the corrupt police appear to have license to do almost anything, as they force witnesses to testify and are in absolute control of what is published in the papers.[135] I will comment upon La Morena's determined efforts to reveal the widespread abuses of oppressed, marginalized individuals later in this chapter.

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[133] In recent years, the CIA has used torture to elicit information from individuals believed to be Al-Qaeda leaders, in the hopes of preventing terrorist attacks, but as Finn and Warrick report, this has led to false disclosures of information. Similarly, a recent article in *The New Yorker* reveals how the "Reid Technique," a method of questioning that evidently has been employed by the military, the F.B.I., the Secret Service, and the C.I.A., produces a high number of false confessions (Starr).

[134] Ulloa Bornemann explains that while other Latin American countries like Argentina adopted measures to seek justice for the victims of state violence: "Mexico has not yet established an official 'truth commission' . . . [and thus] many aspects of the government's dirty war of the 1970s remain shrouded in secrecy . . . During these years Amnesty International reported on government human rights violations in Mexico, but the full extent of these abuses remains to be clarified. The National Human Rights Commission, established by the Mexican government in 1990, documented 350 cases of persons 'disappeared' at government hands between 1974 and 1978, but many human rights organizations consider the number to be higher. Officials killed at least 143 captives on military bases and arranged to have their bodies jettisoned into the sea from government helicopters" (10). The veil of secrecy covering past events contributes to a continued distrust in the Mexican authorities.

[135] In a recent article in *NPR*, Jason Beaubien reveals that the freedom of the press is, indeed, in a state of crisis right now in Mexico. In Tamaulipas, one of the most feared drug cartels, the Zetas, determine what the media can and cannot report. According to an editor with whom Beaubien spoke on the grounds of anonymity, "the Zetas essentially are the editors of the press in the state. 'They have a connection with the reporters who cover the police beat. And through them the Zetas send word on what they want and don't want to be published" (Beaubien). Like the corrupt police in *Morena en rojo*, then, the Zetas wield absolute power over the press in Tamaulipas.

The new chief of police threatens La Morena, reminding her that they, not she, dictate what appears in the *nota roja* (136). The reader discovers that La Morena's boss and the new police chief are friends, and that " . . . el jefe quería echarle una mano y el comanche . . . [n]ecesitaba crear imagen, tenía que ponerse a la altura del muerto" (135). Evidently, this official plans to use the media to boost his popularity just as Videla had done. Although La Morena detests Videla, she admits that she, too, is guilty of glorifying his image. She privately refers to him as "Videla, el hijo de la chingada, eso nadie se atrevería a decirlo, ni yo" (129). The local papers continue to idolize the former police chief, even after death, exalting the so-called victim by praising his virtuous deeds, extoling him as a morally upright individual and a family man with a handsome physique. La Morena, who is present at the scene of the crime, on the other hand, proposes a more apt description: "Videla apestaba a sangre seca y mierda fresca" (130). By juxtaposing these opposing portrayals of Videla, the narrator rebukes the press for their compliance with the police's demands. As Fernández's suggests, "la descripción grotesca del cadaver . . . es un símbolo que representa el sistema putrefacto de seguridad y autoridad que la escritora critica en *Morena en rojo*" (Fernández 136).

Although the press continue to glorify Videla, underscoring the tragedy of his death, the narrator privileges María Crucita's life story instead, reserving more space for the real victim's account (Ramírez-Pimienta and Villalobos 382). Like Jesusa of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) by Elena Poniatowska*,* María Crucita endures countless hardships, taking on a number of jobs in an effort to support herself (Choi 160). Fernández compares María's "education" with that of picaresque protagonists like Lazarillo de Tormes, affirming, "María Crucita pasa por diferentes etapas, dominadas por amas que la van cambiando socialmente y personalmente" (139). Her first master, for example, forces María into prostitution, and the narrator describes her physical

transformation, as señora Rosalinda, her master, alters María's appearance, presenting her in a sexualized, "feminine" manner: " . . . el primer día le cortó las trenzas, le quitó la falda y las enaguas y los huaraches. Le regaló un vestido y unos zapatos verdes de tacón muy alto, con los que no podía caminar" (133).[136] After ten years of abuse, María takes revenge upon Videla for having lied to her and forced her into a life of prostitution. María bares her numerous psychological and physical scars to La Morena, who comes to see María as the real victim in this case. María Crucita thus becomes emblematic of the many marginalized women who struggle against patriarchal systems of oppression in an effort to make a better life for themselves.

After protecting María and helping her escape, La Morena determines that she wants to recount María's life story in a novel and resolves to find her once again. With this objective, La Morena travels throughout Mexico, and she discovers many analogous stories of other Mexican women who are victimized and abused. Another such story begins in Mérida, where La Morena has fallen in love with an American, whom she calls Clint Eastwood due to his resemblance to the actor.[137] A young girl named Nati and occasionally her little sister clean Clint's house until Nati, generally a responsible young girl, misses two days of work, telling La Morena that her little sister has gone missing. Although Clint is untroubled by the girl's disappearance,[138] La Morena senses that something truly horrible has happened to Nati's little sister. Spurred by a

[136] We see an analogous transformation in Juana from *Backyard/Traspatio.* Juana's cousin, Marga, vows to " . . . quitar[le] lo indio," cutting her bangs in the style of the Tejano pop star, Selena. Initially, Juana is pictured wearing neutral-colored clothing, but upon moving to Juárez she dresses in bright clothing, jewelry and makeup, which underscore her femininity.

[137] Later, when her American lover leaves her, La Morena refers to him as Harry el Sucio, a reference to the 1971 crime thriller featuring Clint Eastwood.

[138] Clint is generally portrayed as a callous, self-absorbed individual. When La Morena relates the news of the young girl's disappearance, the narrator mocks his response in the following affirmations: "ÉL no se metía con vulgaridades. ÉL, los mayas, los genuinos, los auténticos. ÉL ya había escrito cincuenta cuartillas sobre la tragedia de la princesa Acná. ÉL no se iba a distraer con mestizos corrientes" (154). Clint represents those who feel removed from and apathetic to the misery of others, which is, in some respects, what allows the kidnapping and prostitution of minors to continue. Similarly, Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman highlight the apathy surrounding the rape and murder of young women in Juárez in *Backyard/Traspatio*.

nightmare about the girl, La Morena decides to investigate further, demonstrating confidence in her instincts, like Gorodischer and Poletti's protagonists. As the police discover, a woman who claims to protect abused or mistreated children (156), has adopted Nati's little sister, using them as child prostitutes in a brothel she runs in Cancun. Nati's little sister now calls the owner of the brothel " . . . su nueva mamá, no como la otra que siempre la pegaba, la hacía trabajar y que […] Se ponía de acuerdo con el papá… Para que la violara" (156-57). The brothel owner evidently has manipulated the girl into denouncing her parents so she will testify to their alleged abuse in front of a judge. Based upon her statement, the judge rules that the girl's adoptive mother, the brothel owner, has rights over Nati's little sister. In that sense, the law inverts the protective, nurturing role of the family, ironically placing the girl in the hands of a dangerous criminal instead. As Choi argues, we see similar breakdowns of familial structures throughout *Morena en rojo* (163).[139]

In her efforts to find Nati's little sister, La Morena meets a policeman named Güicho and his wife Rosi, with whom she forms a clandestine group called "Súper Agente 86," an homage to the humorous American television series, *Get Smart*, featuring Maxwell Smart, the bumbling, but surprisingly successful detective. Like Maxwell Smart, La Morena, Güicho and Rosi seem ill prepared to take down a prostitution ring that is, in all likelihood, also involved in drug trafficking. In La Morena's words, "teníamos mucha fe y casi nula capacidad de acción, pero no lo sabíamos" (166). The three develop a coded language, for example, in case their communications are intercepted during La Morena's travels, yet La Morena humorously struggles to interpret Rosi and Güicho's messages:

[139] Later, we see a similar breakdown in comandante Montiel's family. Montiel's daughter, Jessica, committed suicide after being raped by Menéndez, an officer who had worked for the family for years, and whom Montiel trusted. The grief over her daughter's death drives Montiel's wife to blame her husband, and file for a divorce.

> ¡Qué rechingaos quería decir! ¡Sabrá Dios y su puta madre. . . . *Comimos caca,* comimos mierda, nos fue mal, nos va mal. Porque se come mierda es uno le va mal, o no tienen qué comer. ¿Qué pasó? *El perro es perro* ¿Quién no será el perro? Habrán localizado al capo, nunca le llamamos perro, ¡Maldito Güicho! *Soy chilan*. ¿Serán chilango? ¿O maya? ¡Qué carajo querrá decir! Y para rematar me manda a comer mierda" (235-36, italics in original).[140]

Despite their earnest "investigation,"[141] La Morena, Güicho, and Rosi have little to show for their efforts. In La Morena's words: "los tres sabíamos que no llegábamos ni al Súper Agente 86 de la tele, éramos como integrantes de la Armada Brancaleone" (170). Here, La Morena references the humorous Italian film *For Love and Gold* (1966) that centers upon a ragtag assembly of bungling individuals who journey to the town of Aurocastro. Indeed, as we discover at the end of the novel, one of those involved in drug and human trafficking is La Morena's own lover, Lázaro.

Again, despite her initial success in determining the culprit behind Videla's murder, La Morena is unable to identify Lázaro as one of the "peces gordos" involved in criminal behavior (158),[142] and has very limited success in her clandestine group, Súper Agente 86. Frustrated by her lack of success following the Videla case, La Morena denies being a detective: " . . . no era detective ni me gustaba serlo, que una cosa era escribir y otra andar de metiche" (278). Although she distinguishes her profession from that of a "real" investigator, Ramírez-Pimienta and

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[140] On p. 167, La Morena is, again, unable to remember their secret code.

[141] La Morena lists their respective contributions to the "investigation": "[Rosi] iría averiguando en el barrio, en la fonda, parando la oreja en alerta roja, registraría toda la información posible. El Güicho haría lo suyo entre los judiciales y yo aprovecharía mi credencial para preguntar discretamente en todas partes" (166).

[142] Although La Morena does not suspect Lázaro of being involved in human trafficking, she begins to believe he smuggles goods between the United States and Mexico to be sold on the black market (324). She comments, for example, upon his expensive, imported car (250), and his numerous trips to San Diego (282).

Villalobos appropriately note that the difference between detective and reporter has become increasingly arbitrary in recent years in Mexico (381). Given the rampant corruption in many Mexican police forces today, reporters have taken on work that traditionally had been reserved for investigators:

> En el caso de los periodistas norteños, tanto de la ficción como de la vida real, no sólo son los encargados de informar acerca de los crímenes (la labor reporteril por excelencia) sino muchas veces de hacer ellos mismos la labor "policíaca", la pesquisa, poniendo así su vida en peligro. Es bien sabido que, en la vida norteña, el periodismo de denuncia ha sido una sentencia de muerte para numerosos reporteros. (378)

Indeed, journalists who report on drug trafficking and corruption in the government and the Mexican police force have faced harsh consequences[143] including kidnapping, torture, and even death.[144] One article published in October of 2012 indicates that fifty-six Mexican journalists have been killed since 2006 (Vulliamy).

Contemporary Latin American detective fiction has, in turn, shifted to reflect this new reality;[145] Laurini is one of the many Latin American writers to feature a journalist as the detective figure.[146] Like many Mexican journalists today, La Morena plays a vital role in

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[143] In a recent article published in *The New Yorker*, William Finnegan underscores the tremendous risk bloggers and journalists like Victor Hugo Ornelas run to print their stories. Ornelas, who now walks with a cane due to a severe fracture in his left leg, believes he was purposefully injured during a soccer game in February of 2012 because of his *notas* exposing corruption in the municipal police force.

[144] See "Gunmen in Mexico Kill Crime Journalist López Velasco," "Mexican Editor Killed by Gunmen," "Mexico: Missing Journalist Yolanda Ordaz Found Killed," "Mexico Violence: Two Journalists Killed in Veracruz," "Missing Mexican Journalist Gregorio Jiménez Found Dead," all by *BBC News* for some of the most recent cases.

[145] Ramírez-Pimienta and Villalobos argue, "La imagen del periodista norteño como una especie de detective 'duro' se hace aún más tangible en el imaginario social si consideramos que inclusive algunas autoridades han comenzado a recomendar que porten armas para su protección personal" (378).

[146] Other works of Latin American detective fiction that feature reporters as detectives include María Elvira Bermudez's *Diferentes razones tiene la muerte* (1987) and Mempo Giardinelli's *Que solos se*

unveiling and denouncing the rampant crime around her. Throughout the novel, La Morena seems to have plenty of material for scathing and eye-opening *notas rojas,* but she is only occasionally able to publish the truth due to censorship. When La Morena attempts to raise a furor over the sexual exploitation of minors, for example, her "Nota roja suculenta" charged with " . . . mil ciento quince palabras amargas. . . . quedaron reducidas a una columnita de diez líneas, perdida entre las noticias del béisbol y el fútbol americano" (160). Although her stories are often blocked by censorship, she still strives to "trabajar con honestidad y decir todas las verdades que me dejan publicar" (8). Ramírez-Pimienta and Villalobos affirm the value of making public the crime and corruption in Mexico as La Morena attempts to do: "con frecuencia, es a lo único que los periodistas pueden aspirar, aun cuando esto implique arriesgarlo todo" (377). Indeed, La Morena learns in a very visceral way the consequences of publishing stories that are not to the liking of the authorities when she is tortured by comandante Montiel's assistant, Albornoz, for having included a graphic description of a young girl who had been raped and murdered (289-92).

La Morena pauses her investigative work when she travels to Mexico City and visits her friend, Mercedes, or Meche, who is in an abusive relationship with another woman named Catalina. Meche acknowledges that Catalina has submitted her to physical and psychological abuse, telling La Morena of the most recent cruelties she has suffered in the following conversation:

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quedan los muertos (1985). Ramírez-Pimienta and Villalobos highlight *La frontera huele a sangre* (2002) by Ricardo Guzmán Wolffer and *No me da miedo morir* (2003) by Guillermo Munro as two more contemporary novels that center upon journalists who conduct their own investigations due to the inefficacy, be it intentional or not, of the police (378).

> —Antes de irse me golpeó, mira esto —no había reparado en su ojo morado y maquillado—, y estos arañazos, y hasta en la espalda tengo marcas. Me vi obligada a mentirle a mis conocidos, imagínate, decir que quisieron asaltarme.
>
> —Estás pendeja, Meche, cómo se lo permitiste.
>
> —¿Cómo?, ¿cómo? Es más fuerte que yo y se puso furiosa porque la descubrí. Sabías que anda con Carmelina Urquijo.
>
> —Ni idea, y a esa Carmelina de qué estercolero la sacaron.
>
> —Déjate de agresiones que estoy hecha polvo. La amo demasiado y mira cómo corresponde, siempre con una y con otra, y a mí que ni no se me ocurra [*sic*] voltear a mirar a una cuata o comentar lo bonita que está esa fulana o lo bien vestida o lo que sea, porque se viene el madrazo.
>
> —¡Puta madre! ¡Que tipa! Siempre te dije que Catalina es un macho mexicano, un compadre con espuelas, un charro sindical empistolado. ¡Es peor que tu papá! (191-92)

Not only does Catalina brutally beat Meche, she also subjects Meche to emotional abuse in her infidelity. While Catalina takes on other lovers, she evidently forbids Meche from even commenting upon another woman's appearance. In my interview with Laurini, she stated that Mercedes is, in fact, based upon a close friend who had suffered years of abuse in a relationship with her partner. Laurini indicated that she wanted to illustrate that, as in abusive heterosexual relationships, homosexual partners will deny abuse, thereby protecting the aggressor. Like Francesca in "Mala suerte," Meche endures Catalina's violent outbursts rather than leaving this abusive relationship. Thus, both Poletti and Laurini lament women's inability to confront tyrannical dominance in their partners, and offer a model of women who manage to overcome.

While detective fiction has often portrayed male aggressors victimizing females, this is, as far as I am aware, the only detective novel that has featured woman-to-woman violence in a homosexual relationship. La Morena's final comment in the conversation quoted above reveals that Meche's father had also abused her, implying that Meche has long played the role of victim. In fact, psychological studies have shown that those who suffer from abuse during childhood often struggle in their relationships later in life, like Meche.[147]

In her groundbreaking essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich argues that the normalization of heterosexuality is one of the means through which patriarchy has successfully maintained its domination over women. While society has vilified homosexuality, treating it as an aberration or denying its existence altogether, heterosexual relationships have been granted a "normal" or "natural" status, thereby ensuring women's accessibility to men. Instead, Rich proposes the possibility of what she terms a "lesbian existence,"[148] which

> . . . comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has of course included role playing, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain . . . (Rich 649)

[147] "Youths with histories of maltreatment are especially at risk for relationship-based difficulties and have more than a 3.5 times greater risk of involvement in adult domestic violence. The risk stems from developmental processes affected by maltreatment that interfere with or alter their ability to form healthy relationships with others" (Wolfe et al. 406). While some victims of abuse later become aggressors in their adolescent or adult relationships, in Meche's case, she has assumed the role of victim yet again.
[148] Rich rejects the term "lesbianism" because, she argues, it has a "clinical and limiting ring" (648).

While lesbianism may sometimes be seen to represent the rejection of patriarchy (Choi 161), Rich prudently cautions against glorifying homosexuality since, as Catalina and Meche's relationship demonstrates, patriarchal systems of oppression can be reproduced even among female homosexual partners. Like Poletti in her depiction of Rosita and Wanda, then, Laurini affirms that women, too, are capable of tyrannical domination.

One noteworthy characteristic that sets La Morena apart from other detectives highlighted in this dissertation is her race. La Morena is a mulatta who, like the women whose lives she relates, suffers from discrimination. During her stay in Mexico City, for instance, a motorist who crosses against a traffic light yells a racial slur at her (198). These experiences with racism draw her particularly close to Zindzi, a mulatta woman she encounters in Vera Cruz. Zindzi had fallen in love with Samy, a Senegalese man, while also attracting the attention of a rich white man, who had confessed his love to her and proposed marriage. Upon her refusal, Zindzi's admirer had killed her beloved Samy, and the police, laying bare their racial prejudice, immediately assumed Zindzi to be the culprit, imprisoning her. As the reader discovers, the white man not only had killed Samy, but he had also attempted to strangle Zindzi in prison. Just as La Morena intuits that something horrible had happened to Nati's little sister, Clint Eastwood's domestic help, Zindzi has a dream that tells her who killed Samy, and the blond man is finally incarcerated.

Despite the fact that she has never read a book herself, Zindzi recognizes the power of her story, and the importance of having it recounted, insisting that La Morena must promise to write a novel about it: "Solo te la voy a contar si después la vas a escribir, si no, ¡niguas!" (182). We learn that Zindzi's master had a large collection of novels until she decided to burn them all, telling Zindzi: " . . . déjalos, dicen puras mentiras, enseñan mal" (182). While Zindzi seems to

have venerated her master, as evidenced by her sorrow upon her master's death (184), she remains uninfluenced by her master's change in opinion and continues to hold books in high esteem. Zindzi appreciates the value of narratives that *seem* like fabrications because, as La Morena realizes of Zindzi's story, "Quién iba a creer que una mulata pobre no quiso casarse con un blanco rico" (186). Fernández points to the irony in La Morena's initial suggestion to adapt Zindzi's story into a script for a *telenovela*, since

> esta historia es una inversión de las fábulas típicas de las telenovelas, donde una pobre se enamora de un hombre rico . . . . De la misma forma que los primeros episodios de la novela, donde la escritora critica la manipulación de la prensa desmitificando las personalidades e imágenes de los criminales y sus víctimas, aquí Laurini ilustra la verdadera realidad que estos personajes poscoloniales enfrentan, una realidad opuesta totalmente a las representaciones populares de los programas de las telenovelas. (143)

In both cases, then, Laurini reveals how the narratives the press and *telenovelas* tell about marginalized women miss the mark. As Zindzi's account reveals, *telenovelas* relate simplistic stories that often have little to do with lived reality. Similarly, the press distorts the story of María Crucita and Videla, inverting the roles of victim and criminal.

Although the majority of La Morena's stories focus on minority women who are some of the most marginalized in society, La Morena recounts yet another vignette that reveals the racism in Mexican society. This story centers upon the secret relationship between one of La Morena's colleagues at the newspaper in Mérida, Margarita Covarrubias, and her boyfriend, Paulino Cach Chi. Margarita despairs that she and Paulino will never marry, as her intolerant family refuses to allow her to adopt a Mayan last name "porque para las resonancias coloniales del apellido

Covarrubias ubicarse detrás de un Cach Chi era un oprobio. Él estaba orgulloso de ser maya y no aceptaba hablar de cambiarse el apellido" (145). Not surprisingly, given her own race, La Morena applauds Paulino's steadfast resolve to keep his Mayan name. Margarita's family, on the other hand, fears that Marga and Paulino's children would suffer from discrimination, or as Margarita's claims, " . . . [los] hijos estarán condenados a la marca del mestizo, serán de segunda" (145). This relationship vividly portrays the lingering effects of colonization; Margarita, likely a descendent of Spanish colonizers finds that her family's intolerance of Paulino impedes her happiness. While Margarita blames her family for being unable to accept Paulino, her inability to act against her family's wishes reveals that she too is unwilling to raise mestizo children.

Interestingly, Zindzi is not the only woman who asks La Morena to write an account of her life. When La Morena laments that she has nothing to write about, Violeta, one of her colleagues, offers to share a particularly interesting story with her, but La Morena remains skeptical:

> —Violeta, a la gente no le gusta saber de las vidas tranquilas, apacibles, quieren drama, acción sangre, morbo.
>
> . . . .
>
> —Te la cuento con una condición, que escribas una radio novela. Me agradaría tanto escuchar mis aventurillas. Aunque… Las vas a tener que recortar, porque te las van a censurar.
>
> Una novela, una radionovela, un cuento. ¿Por qué estas mujeres consideran que su historia es tan transcendente como para pasar a la posteridad en el anaquel de una biblioteca, en la cinta de un *cassette*? ¿Son acaso Lady Macbeth, Judith, Dulcinea,

> Madame Bovary, Helena, Ana Karerina [*sic*] Constanza, Úrsula Iguarán y todas las de su familia, Honorata de Wan Guld, Lady Marian, la sublime Margarita…? Qué puede tener de atractivo escribir sobre la rutina de una secretaria que se la pasa redactando cartas comerciales y escuchando radio con un audífono en la oreja . . . (225-27)

La Morena remarks upon Zindzi and Violeta's shared interest in having La Morena relate their respective stories, and compares the women she meets to remarkable women of world literature, doubtful that the accounts of the former will compare to those of the latter. Nevertheless, as is the case with Violeta, La Morena discovers that sometimes even the most ordinary-seeming people have remarkable stories.[149] Indeed, the women whose accounts La Morena relates are worthy of recuperation, as Zindzi and Violeta both recognize of their own stories; the narratives chronicled in *Morena en rojo* offer portraits of marginalized individuals, revealing the systematic oppression of women and other minorities.

As we have seen, La Morena offers a rather stark contrast to Piñeiro's detective in *Elena sabe;* apart from their shared determination and attention to detail, La Morena and Elena seem to have little in common. Unlike Elena, who never appears to doubt her own interpretation of events, La Morena feels insecure constantly. She worries, for example, that she is a mediocre reporter (225), fears that her lover, Lázaro, might be living with another woman (224), and that she has done nothing with her life: "'¡Chingaos!', pensaba, 'lo único bien en toda mi vida fue ayudar a María Crucita.'" (224). Again, unlike Elena, La Morena possesses stereotypically "masculine" characteristics, most notably in her use of coarse language,[150] her fondness for

[149] Violeta tells La Morena about how she had fallen in love with a man who refused to work and so she prostituted herself to support the two of them.

[150] Choi draws an apt parallel between La Morena and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's female detective, Petra Delicado, who likewise uses vulgar language to express herself (175).

drinking[151] and her sexual behavior. In fact, she does everything that Elena regretfully wishes she had done before she became sick with Parkinson's. While La Morena has a physique better suited for the rigors of detective work, she nonetheless has only limited success in her investigations. For La Morena, the greatest challenge lies not in her own bodily limitations, but in the ubiquity of the corruption that stifles her investigative reporting.

While *Elena sabe* and *Morena en rojo* seem, in a sense like two detective novels that could not be more diametrically opposed, I would argue that Elena and La Morena's respective journeys prompt similar personal development. Both protagonists are rather insular people at the outset of their journeys, but their investigations destabilize their assumptions about the world around them. Towards the beginning of *Morena en rojo*, for example, La Morena admits: "No sé nada, veo la vida a través del cristal de mi ventana. Siempre protegida, sin involucrarme en la tragedia, todo lo que sé es porque me lo contaron, porque leí lo que otros escribieron, porque lo vi encaramada desde una barda" (160). Nevertheless, her journey throughout Mexico puts her in contact with many different women, whose accounts of physical and psychological abuse reveal society's systematic exploitation of marginalized women and the corruption of the police and governmental officials. Elena, on the other hand, discovers how patriarchal society and the Catholic Church have dictated and constrained her behavior. Furthermore, she learns of the role she has played in perpetuating this repressive control over others, particularly Isabel and her daughter, Rita. Unlike traditional detective fiction, then, both *Elena sabe* and *Morena en rojo* center upon crime(s) committed not by a single individual, but rather by repressive and exploitative institutions.

[151] This characteristic reminds the reader of hard-boiled detectives like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Nick Charles of Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man*.

Chapter Four:
The Doomed Dames of Detection: The Unsuccessful Sleuths in Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's *Backyard/Traspatio* and Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da*

I. Webs of Complicity: Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's Portrayal of Femicide in Juárez in *Backyard/Traspatio*.

Carlos Carrera's *Backyard/Traspatio* (2009),[152] with the screenplay written by Sabina Berman, deals with the femicide[153] that has plagued Juárez, Mexico since 1993. The film centers upon a newly appointed police captain, Blanca Bravo, who discovers how foreign-operated *maquiladoras*,[154] widespread police corruption, and general complacency among the Mexican population perpetuate this violence against women. *Maquiladoras* attract young, rural women to border towns, providing them with higher salaries than many impoverished areas of Mexico (Amnesty International 23) and lure them with the promise of financial independence. Nevertheless, this purported independence comes at a high cost given the often hazardous and dehumanizing conditions in the *maquiladoras,* not to mention the increased risk of falling victim to femicide.[155] As Carrera's film illustrates, the femicide in Juárez is mired in a web of cultural, economic, and political issues that have made this crisis very difficult to manage. Blanca, the central detective figure in this text, investigates the murders of multiple young women whose bodies are discarded and left to decompose in the Juárez desert. Blanca finds herself on a police

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[152] Emily Hind explains the origin of the title, *Backyard:* "se deriva de un escándalo que terminó en la renuncia del embajador mexicano a los Estados Unidos. En el año 2003 Adolfo Zinser quedó sin empleo por haber dicho que Estados Unidos siempre ha tratado México como su traspatio" (28).

[153] Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell define femicide as " . . . the misogynist killing of women by men" (xi).

[154] *Maquiladoras* are " . . . foreign-owned assembly plants in Mexico [that] import machinery and materials duty free and export finished products around the world" (CorpWatch 1999). Among the sources I have consulted the terms "maquiladora" and "maquila" are used interchangeably, and thus I do the same throughout this chapter.

[155] In her chapter in *Making a Killing*, Elvia R. Arriola affirms that *maquiladora* workers comprise about a third of the victims of femicide (26).

force that, like the women's bodies, is disfigured or broken by widespread corruption (Meléndez 35). Faced with *machista* colleagues who are more interested in advancing in the ranks than solving crimes, Blanca is forced to seek partners elsewhere and conduct her investigative work through unconventional channels. Reporters play an essential role in monitoring the femicide in *Backyard/Traspatio*, but Berman's detective suggests other means of fighting femicide: women's solidarity and sometimes taking justice into one's own hands.

In order to focus the viewer's attention upon the corruption that facilitates brutality against women and ensures that any potential leads will go cold, Carrera deliberately avoids detailing the specifics of Blanca's background. By sketching her character in generic terms, Carrera suggests that what ultimately happens to Blanca—her limited success followed by her dismissal from the force—would happen to anyone. DJ Peralta, the disc jockey who is highly critical of the Mexican police and government, declares that this is the fate of those who dare to "desordena[r] nuestro muy bien organizado crimen organizado" (Backyard/Traspatio). Thus, the viewer learns virtually nothing about Blanca's personal life. Indeed, even the way she dresses leaves most of her physical self entirely concealed. The main character in *Backyard/Traspatio* dresses in a nearly androgynous way—jeans, a jacket, and a collared shirt buttoned up to her neck with her hair pulled back in a simple ponytail.[156] The viewer is unable to see anything more than Blanca's face, and in that way Carrera disrupts the male gaze. As a woman in an almost exclusively male police force, Blanca may choose to dress like her male colleagues to deemphasize the physiological differences she has with them and perhaps ease her transition to the force. Nevertheless, Blanca is depicted as a sort of loner, ostracized partly due to her gender,

[156] As Hind notes, actress Ana de la Reguera was the one who was responsible for conceiving the way Blanca appears on screen ("Estado" 36). In de la Reguera's words: "Me imaginé cómo sería una mujer que no se preocupaba mucho por su arreglo, que estaba en el desierto, práctica, que no dormía, tenía la piel seca y manchada por tantas horas bajo el sol, tomaba mucho café y estaba muy alterada" (Hernández).

but principally because she threatens the established system of corruption. Unlike loner male detectives such as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe of hard-boiled novels, Blanca is destined to fail in her investigation of femicide because she can only pursue criminals under the constraints her primarily male supervisors impose. In that sense, her role as a female detective is paradoxical; while Blanca is ostensibly in a position of power, it is under the tight control of corrupt officials with real authority.

The film begins when Blanca and her assistant, Lieutenant Fierro, discover the corpse of a young woman in the desert. The brief exchange that follows succinctly introduces several of the important issues explored in this film. Despite the atrocious nature of the crimes, Fierro,[157] maintains his characteristically nonchalant tone, which is then tinged with resentment, as he briefs her on the details of the femicide in recent years:

> **Fierro:** "Hace tres años apareció la primera muerta violada."
>
> **Blanca:** "O la primera que se documentó, ¿ah sí?"
>
> **Fierro:** "Según nuestra cuenta van sesenta y cinco. Según los periodistas ochenta y tres."
>
> **Blanca:** "¿Y el número de mujeres desaparecidas?"
>
> **Fierro:** "Otra vez, la danza de las cifras. Según una cuenta van cien. Según otra, tres cientos cincuenta. Pero para poner orden te mandaron, ¿no? Para poner el orden *y cuando asciendan al comandante hacerte cargo*" (emphasis mine).

This conversation is striking for several reasons, one of them being the way in which it points to the latent tension between Blanca and Fierro. Fierro obviously feels threatened by Blanca in that she could be promoted to a more powerful position, that of Comandante, before him. He seems

[157] Lieutenant Fierro's name in the original screenplay published in *Gestos* (2005) is Franco, a name not without significance.

uncomfortable with the idea of having a woman and an outsider like Blanca, as his superior and his cynical tone upon uttering the last two sentences reveals his skepticism that she can change anything. In addition to introducing one of many conflicts Blanca has with her male colleagues, this conversation also implies that the police do not keep careful records of the crimes, an actuality Amnesty International has demonstrated amply.[158] Given the mismanagement of the evidence and case files, the estimates Fierro puts forth are almost certainly skewed and Blanca's suggestion that the first reported case was not likely the first case of femicide seems appropriate. Furthermore, violence against women, particularly violence of a sexual nature, is often underreported. In Juárez this has only been exacerbated by the fact that the authorities have "repeatedly blamed the women themselves for their own abduction or murder" (*Amnesty International* 9).[159] In fact, before organizations like Casa Amiga[160] helped to create a separate department for handling domestic violence and sexual assaults, state police would also habitually humiliate women, discouraging them from reporting such crimes (Rodríguez 164). Finally, the discrepancy Fierro cites between the numbers of victims documented by the police and by

[158] An Amnesty International report from 2003 points to the real case of a missing teenager, Lilia Alejandra, that exemplifies the carelessness with which many investigations are carried out. The first page in the police dossier on Alejandra is dated the 21st of February 2001—six days after her mother reported her missing (36). Amnesty International reports that Mexican police have not only been careless with the information in the files, they have also been reckless with the evidence and the physical files themselves: "In March 2003 the state authorities told Amnesty International delegates that when they came to power in 1998, they received over 20 bags of unidentified remains from the previous administration and that the case dossiers had been seriously damaged when the archive where they were kept was flooded" (42).

[159] Former State Prosecutor Arturo González Rascón's appallingly callous comment in February 1999 clearly exemplifies this tendency: "Las mujeres que tienen vida nocturna, salen a altas horas de la noche y entran en contacto con bebedores, están en riesgo. Es difícil salir a la calle y no mojarse." (*Amnesty International 9*).

[160] The organization aims to promote: "una cultura sin violencia basada en la equidad y el respeto a la integridad física, emocional y sexual de las mujeres, niñas y niños de nuestra comunidad" (Casa Amiga). In addition to advocating for a more careful handling of domestic abuse and sexual assault cases, Casa Amiga also provides legal and psychological counseling to victims.

journalists implies that the latter actually monitor the femicide in Juárez more carefully than the police,[161] a point to which I will return later in this chapter.

While Lieutenant Fierro hints at his discomfort in working with Blanca, Blanca's boss openly reveals his misogynist attitude towards women in exchanges with her and through the role he plays in aiding perpetrators of femicide. One particularly shocking moment comes after the afternoon in which Blanca surveys the desert with her binoculars and witnesses a woman being raped in the back of a car as another man looks on. Blanca pursues the attackers, and as they speed away, they push the woman's body out of the car. Rather than following them, Blanca stops to care for the woman who has been so brutally assaulted, her nipple bitten off in the attack. In the next scene, Blanca interviews the victim when the Comandante suddenly pulls her out of the interrogation room. Blanca asks him:

> **Blanca:** ¿Qué pasa Comandante?
>
> **Comandante:** Eso mismo me pregunto, Blanca. Por atender a la víctima, dejaste escapar a los que la violaban.
>
> **Blanca:** Bueno, la mujer estaba sangrando . . .
>
> **Comandante:** Ah, no iba a sangrar por el pezón, ¿o sí?
>
> **Blanca:** Espere, yo pensé que . . .
>
> **Comandante:** No, no pensaste, sentiste Blanca. ¡Sentiste! Por eso las mujeres son buenas enfermeras, malas policías. Aquí estarían estos cabrones declarando y ella estaría en el hospital si hubieras ido por los cabrones en lugar de por la víctima.
>
> **Blanca:** Está bien, me equivoqué.

[161] In his chilling article entitled "While You Were Sleeping," Charles Bowden indicates that journalists were already policing the Chihuahuan police in 1996. In his article, "The Kingpins: The Fight for Guadalajara," published in 2012, William Finnegan confirms that this trend continues to the present day as journalists now also pursue police involved in drugs trafficking.

The Comandante's tirade against women police officers like Blanca is clearly based upon the western stereotype that women are not logical, but act with regards to their emotions. He suggests that this compassion, supposedly inherent in women, is what has clouded Blanca's judgment and caused her to make a serious mistake. The Comandante's sexist attitude, however, is more than just male chauvinism; he intentionally underscores the way in which Blanca fails to fit in with the rest of the force, using her gender as one point of contention. He does so in order to use her as a scapegoat, making her take the fall for the collective failings of the Juárez police department.

Ironically, Abdalah Haddad,[162] otherwise known as el Sultán, accuses Blanca of making a "chivo expiatorio" out of him, but the real scapegoat in this film is Blanca herself. Considering this situation in the context of René Girard's theory on the scapegoat sheds considerable light on the sequence of events that leads to Blanca's persecution and her eventual dismissal from the police force. Girard explains that "collective persecutions" are provoked by internal and external crises and in an attempt to regain control, we tend to cast blame upon an individual "to protect the entire community from *its own* violence" (*The Scapegoat* 14; *Violence and the Sacred* 12). If we think of the police force under the governor and the Comandante's direction as a "community" in crisis (due to publicly-voiced allegations of torture and fabricated evidence), Blanca, ironically, "becomes the repository of all the community's ills" (*Violence and the Sacred* 77). Contrary to what the viewer might expect, the crisis does not stem directly from the fabrication of evidence or the torture of suspects.[163] In reality, it is the attention that Blanca and

[162] This character is based upon the real-life Abdul Latif Sharif, who died in 2006 while serving a 60-year sentence after being convicted of multiple murders. As in the movie, however, the murders continued even after his incarceration.

[163] Amnesty International affirms that there have been several cases in which suspects were detained and tortured by the police in order to force a confession, as in the case of Miguel David Neyra, accused of murdering his cousin (4). Another case in which suspects claim they were tortured for a confession is the

Sara place upon the femicide cases that highlights the force's deficiencies and puts their community at risk of collapse.

Girard indicates that those who deviate from the standard, whatever it may be, are most likely to be chosen as scapegoats (*The Scapegoat* 18). Blanca's gender, her status as an outsider in Juárez, and her unusually aggressive approach to femicide mark her as "abnormal." Additionally, unlike Lieutenant Fierro, the Comandante, and the governor, who remain indifferent towards the victims, Blanca empathizes with them, particularly Hilda, the victim she saved. When Hilda describes the torture her attackers inflicted upon her and other girls, Blanca begins to cry as well. Even seemingly superficial resemblances between Blanca and Hilda—their gender and their shared emotional response to Hilda's torture—are damaging for Blanca because as Girard affirms, " . . . the more signs of a victim an individual bears, the more likely [s]he is to attract disaster" (26). That is, even Blanca's empathy for a victim of femicide sets her apart from others on the force, thereby making her vulnerable.

Throughout the film, various characters refer to Blanca as, in DJ Peralta's words, "una figura peculiar" (*Backyard/Traspatio*). While her gender constitutes one obvious difference she has with her colleagues, the fact that she is an outsider in Juárez is mentioned frequently. Girard describes the archetypal scapegoat as someone "from elsewhere, a well-known stranger," and thus the references to Blanca's "foreignness" are not innocuous, but rather contribute to building a case against her (*The Scapegoat* 32). When the bodies of eight young women are found shortly after incarcerating el Sultán, for example, Blanca tells Fierro that one of the women's faces looks familiar to her. Fierro responds skeptically, nearly mockingly: "Uh-huh. ¿Cómo . . . cómo la habrías conocido?" The implication is, of course, that Blanca is so new to town she could not

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one involving members of the gang, *Los Rebeldes*. This is the case highlighted in *Backyard/Traspatio* in which el Sultán allegedly paid gang members to rape and kill women so that it would seem like he was not involved (30). See pp. 50-54 for detailed accounts of police torture.

possibly know these women, but also Fierro again doubts that an outsider in Juárez could solve these crimes. Similarly, the Comandante uses Blanca's status as an outsider to reaffirm his authority when she suggests how they should deal with el Sultán: "Te digo qué Blanca. Yo no me gradué de la academia de policía de la Ciudad de México, *pero acá en Juárez* soy tan ducho que parezco mago. Los metes detrás de las rejas y en cuatro horas los saca pa' vuela [sic] su superabogada" (emphasis mine). The Comandante forcefully reminds Blanca that he knows how to handle criminals like el Sultán and Blanca is the one who is out of her territory, not him. Blanca later sees the Comandante's "magical" abilities in the way he gets her to take the fall for the police force's sins and strips her of her badge.

Although there is some initial tension between Blanca and Lieutenant Fierro, the latter seems, at times, moved by Blanca's determination, and together the two prevent Mickey Santos from assaulting his last victim. Nevertheless, the Comandante, who has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, uses his authority to turn Fierro decisively against Blanca to ensure a "collective polarization in opposition" to her (*The Scapegoat* 39). In the following conversation, the Comandante manipulates Fierro, cultivating Fierro's loyalty to him while effectively driving a wedge between him and Blanca:

> **Comandante:** Creo que tú vas a ser mi revelo en la comandancia . . . Depende de mí mayormente quién se queda, ¿sabes?
>
> **Fierro:** ¿Y Blanca qué?
>
> **Comandante:** Perdón . . . si te preocupa mucho el futuro de Blanca ni hablar, olvídate la propuesta.

From this moment through the rest of the film the Comandante indicates that if Fierro wants to advance in his career, he must disassociate completely with Blanca. In a scene following Juana's

murder, the Comandante overtly shuns Blanca by locking his car door to prevent her from getting in, thereby maintaining even *physical* distance from her. When he concludes his conversation with Blanca, the Comandante urges Fierro to get in the car, bolstering the latter's ego while simultaneously making clear that if Fierro wishes to enjoy the privileges of power, he must also distance himself from Blanca.

Once the Comandante secures Fierro's loyalty, there are very few obstacles to prevent him from sacrificing Blanca for the sins of the Juárez police department. Her frustration with working in an environment where apathy reigns and guilty parties always seem to get away compels Blanca to employ aggressive, and in some cases, unlawful tactics to put criminals behind bars. Thus, Carrera and Berman propose an intriguing, if not ultimately successful, way to deal with the femicide, which is to "step[s] outside of [the law] to enforce a greater, moral justice" (Namaste 495). DJ Peralta, who in many ways seems to voice Carrera and Berman's thinking, is initially critical of this approach, but later suggests that perhaps it is appropriate given the circumstances. He describes Blanca as: "Una policía que ha usado métodos sin duda ilegales para perseguir la legítima meta de terminar con los asesinatos de mujeres en Juárez . . . pero en un contexto imposible de corrupción e ineficiencia" (*Backyard/Traspatio*). After public allegations of torture and police misconduct, the governor grandiosely affirms that he will "poner el orden y traer la paz," which DJ Peralta astutely interprets: "Lo que quiere decir es que viene a cortar la cabeza de la policía Blanca Bravo por el pecado de andar desordenando nuestro muy bien organizado crimen organizado" (*Backyard/Traspatio*). Indeed, following the Comandante's accusations, the governor dismisses her from the force and takes away her badge. While Blanca is guilty of certain offenses, she is not guilty of the most serious charge against her—torturing suspects for a confession—, nor is she the only officer to have breached the law. But as Girard

explains, this is typical in the persecution of a scapegoat: "A process of bad reciprocity is its own initiator; it gains nourishment from itself and has no need of external causes in order to continue" (*The Scapegoat* 43).

Not without irony, the Comandante and the governor dismiss Blanca for her misconduct, but the viewer is well aware that the rampant corruption on the Juárez police force will continue. The Comandante handpicks Fierro as his successor, informing him of the specifics of the bribery deals so that they may continue under Fierro's supervision. Nevertheless, Carrera and Berman make abundantly clear that the corruption in Juárez is not the result of just a handful of crooked cops, but rather stems from *maquiladora* owners and the high-ranking government officials. When investigators discover that the victim seen at the beginning of the film worked for the *maquiladora* Kikai, for example, their management insists that the governor keep the company's name from leaking to the papers. *Maquiladoras* like Kikai wield too much power for the governor to deny their demands because, as Senator Adams states plainly, "85% of the jobs in Juárez are in the maquiladoras" (*Backyard/Traspatio*). Thus, the governor is forced to protect those who bring employment to Juárez, not the vulnerable *maquiladora* workers (Namaste 490). During this conversation the governor is seen seated at his desk with pictures of his family, including his two young daughters, in the background. The irony is, of course, that girls just a few years older fall victim[164] to these crimes their father helps perpetuate. While the governor's deal makes him seem as though he is purely interested in fomenting economic prosperity, or at least creating the *illusion* of it,[165] Carrera and Berman illustrate that, to a certain extent, even the

[164] According to Amnesty International, "More than half of the victims are women and girls aged between 13 and 22 although at least one case involved an 11-year-old girl" (27).

[165] In her article written in 2004, Livingston argues that the emergence of *maquiladoras* along the border has actually coincided with a sluggish Mexican economy (65). Part of the problem, she explains, is that "Living on the border next to the United States makes costs higher while wages remain low" (65). For

governor's hands are tied. Since there is no economic incentive to do so, *maquiladora* owners can simply refuse to invest in protecting their own employees (Arriola 37; Namaste 490).

As the governor hangs up the phone, the viewer sees a close-up of a statuette of Lady Justice that sits atop the governor's desk. The shot begins with Lady Justice on the left side of the frame in focus and in the foreground with the governor slightly out of focus to the right. The camera then pans to the right and Lady Justice is slowly displaced by the governor's face, which comes into focus as the figurine disappears from the frame. The ironic juxtaposition between the symbolic significance of Lady Justice and the crooked deal that has just taken place implies that the scales Lady Justice holds are no longer those of truth and fairness, but of profit and power. When the governor's face replaces the image of the statuette in the shot, the implication is, of course, that these fraudulent dealings the governor makes with those even more powerful than himself have replaced Lady Justice's guiding principles. The figurine of Lady Justice on the governor's desk is the first of two moments in which the camera focuses upon her in this film. Following this first distortion of her significance, the subsequent shot of Lady Justice paradoxically signals another breach of justice.

Lady Justice reappears two scenes later in the form of a prominent statue in the Dirección General de Salud Pública ("Estado" 35-6). Upon discovering that she knew the most recent victim whose partially decomposed body police find in the desert, Sara goes to identify the body and provide the police with details about her. As the camera focuses on the scales Lady Justice holds high in her left hand, sirens wail in the background, suggesting the discovery of perhaps yet another body. The camera pans diagonally down to the sword she grasps in her right,

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more on the problematic consequences of NAFTA and the maquiladora industry, see Fernando Romero's excellent study, *Hyperborder: The Contemporary U.S.-Mexico Border and its Future*.

which then visually leads the viewer to the door through which Sara marches.[166] Again, because Lady Justice's previous appearance ironically coincided with corrupt concessions, the second iteration of her image, which almost immediately precedes Sara's interaction with the police, marks another apparatus of the state that has trampled the ideals embodied by Lady Justice. As the image of Lady Justice prefigures, throughout the film the viewer is made aware of the shocking abuses of power and lawless behavior in which the police engage, particularly Mickey Santos's bribing of the Comandante.[167]

Carrera and Berman juxtapose the often-intentional inefficacy of the police and the thorough investigations carried out by journalists. New to the force, Blanca learns of this ironic situation from Sara, a former public accountant dedicated to helping women affected by domestic violence. Like most of the characters in this film, Sara is based upon a real person, Esther Chávez Cano, the founder of Casa Amiga (Namaste 488; Wilkinson). After positively identifying an acquaintance as the most recent victim, Sara impresses upon Blanca the urgency of the situation; according to her records, an astounding 680 women have been killed or gone missing, nearly twice the number Fierro cited before. Sara covers the long table with pictures bearing the names and dates of their disappearances and/or deaths until the desk's surface is no longer visible, and Blanca asks:

Blanca: ¿Dónde consiguió todo esto?

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[166] In her article, "Estado de excepción y femicidio," Emily Hind notes the juxtaposition between this statue of a woman, whose right nipple is intact and exposed, with the victims of femicide, whose corpses are often found with the left nipple missing: "Ese seno es el derecho y por coincidencia niega la violencia de los cadáveres encontrados sin el pezón izquierdo" (36).

[167] Charles Bowden confirms that this sort of arrangement is typical: "In Mexico nobody gets paid enough to feed their family off of being a cop. Here it is the assumption that you're going to take bites" (*On the Edge*).

> **Sara:** De los periódicos. Si ustedes los policías no fueran analfabetos, tendrían la misma información que yo.[168]

The fact that Sara and a couple of her assistants, who simply compile news articles on the violence, have more complete records than the police, suggests that the police force Blanca recently joined does not have any real interest in finding the culprits at all. This scene, among many others, underscores the vital role that reporters play in educating the public and unveiling police corruption at the border.

Instead of updating their files or pushing for meticulous documentation, the police and government officials habitually lash out against the media when they report on the femicide. At the beginning of the film, for example, when a reporter (Hernández) implies that the police are making little progress, rather than acknowledging any shortcomings, Lieutenant Fierro simply ridicules the reporter:

> **Hernández:** ¿Qué número de muerta es?
>
> **Fierro:** La veinte nueve en lo que va del año.
>
> **Hernández:** ¿Y de los últimos diez años?
>
> **Fierro:** No seas mamón, Hernández.

Similarly, when the media points to the fact that very little of substance has been done to ameliorate this situation, the police and government officials shift blame to the journalists themselves. The scene immediately following Juana's gruesome rape, for example, shows the governor evading journalists' questions about the murders. He alleges that publishing stories on the femicide will be detrimental to Juárez's economy: "Quiero expresarle que el énfasis que pone la prensa en relación a los desgraciados casos de las muertas está arruinando el turismo en la

[168] Interestingly, la Detective in Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da,* which I examine subsequently, repeatedly refers to herself as "analfabeta" (277, 281, 282, 294). In doing so, La Detective expresses her own frustration with being unable to decipher the murderer's enigmatic clues.

ciudad Juárez," to which a reporter retorts, "No hay turismo. ¿Cuál turismo?" Clearly, the governor's hope is that people will turn a blind eye to the rising number of deaths of young Mexican women and focus their attention elsewhere.

In addition to keeping records when the police fail to do so, Carrera and Berman demonstrate that the press, especially the international press, can likewise trigger meaningful action when they expose inaction on the part of the Mexican police and officials.[169] Sara ignites a fury of effective, although short-lived police work when she urges a journalist friend to run a story on the apathy surrounding the femicide. Rather than printing it in a Juárez-based newspaper as Sara requests, which would mean the story would be relegated to a small column hidden in the last pages, Sara's friend leaks the story to the *New York Times*. Only then, with the international community's eyes on the governor, does he demand results from the police, establish new safety measures, and launch self-defense programs for women. The viewer understands, however, that as soon as the international spotlight moves away from Juárez, business as usual, including the killings, will resume again.

While widespread police corruption certainly thwarts investigations like Blanca's, Carrera and Berman posit that the other barrier, perhaps even more harmful than the first, is the general apathy surrounding the femicide. In his well-known collection of essays, *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz describes the essential characteristics that comprise Mexican identity. In "Máscaras mexicanas," Paz argues that Mexican men are, in fact, defined by their stoicism and defensive character. In his words:

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[169] Again, Amnesty International indicates that authorities in Juárez have responded to both "national and international pressure" because " . . . they know that if they do not respond to the abductions and murders . . . it will have a political cost" (31). Nevertheless, this has not necessarily resulted in more scrupulous police work. Instead, as in *La muerte me da*, the authorities rush to charge a culprit and close the case before carefully reviewing all of the evidence.

> La hombría se mide por la invulnerabilidad ante las armas enemigas o ante los impactos del mundo exterior. El estoicismo es la más alta de nuestras virtudes guerreras y políticas. Nuestra historia está llena de frases y episodios que revelan la indiferencia de nuestros héroes ante el dolor o el peligro . . . Y si no todos somos estoicos e impasibles . . . al menos procuramos ser resignados, pacientes y sufridos. La resignación es una de nuestras virtudes populares. (48)

In other words, one of the major obstacles in ending femicide is a cultural one. Carrera strongly condemns this shocking lack of concern surrounding the femicide with the repeated juxtaposition of horrific violence and other's indifference. The night before Juana is raped and killed, for example, one of her attackers reasons: "¿En qué ciudad no hay muertos y muertas?" as if to justify the heinous crime he will commit the next day. Cutberto, formerly Juana's boyfriend, spends the evening with some "friends" who insist that a certain amount of violence is only natural in a city,[170] a claim that is echoed throughout the film by police and Mexican officials alike (*Backyard/Traspatio).* Similarly, when Sara goes to the police station to offer details on Karen Rocha, for example, instead of seeing police officers carefully combing through evidence, she finds Lieutenant Fierro leaning back in his chair with his feet resting on his desk as he thumbs through a newspaper. Lieutenant Fierro's body language clearly indicates that he, like so many in Juárez, is no longer alarmed when he finds victims' bodies in the desert, but rather he all but expects to do so. Lieutenant Fierro's behavior also suggests how many of those on the force regard the femicide in Juárez as a problem about which they can do very little.

[170] The violence in Juárez, however is notable as an article published in 2011 in the BBC affirms that it is " . . . the most violent city in Mexico with more than 3,100 people killed in 2010 out of a population of more than a million" (BBC).

Like Fierro, his superiors seem resigned to the fact that the murders in Juárez will continue, and, indeed, some actively ensure that they do. Even the governor seems to think that getting involved with the femicide cases would be political suicide: "Esto de las muertas es un avíspero, Ramírez. Entre menos lo meneamos, mejor" (*Backyard/Traspatio*). Similarly, when Blanca urges the Comandante to implement a more aggressive approach, pushing for a raid to arrest the men suspected of working with El Sultán, her boss scoffs: "Estamos en Juárez mujer. Aquí las palabras básicas son: 'No hay, no se puede y no se pudo.'" The stubborn apathy that this motto expresses nearly guarantees criminals impunity, which as we know, has unfortunately been a reality in the last few decades in Juárez (Amnesty International 29-31). The viewer later discovers that the Comandante receives bribes in exchange for promulgating this policy of indifference and for turning a blind eye to certain criminal acts.

Another factor that contributes to the normalizing of violence, specifically in Juárez, is the fact that the city is rife with drugs trafficking because it sits upon the U.S.-Mexico border (Amnesty International 22). In fact, "since 1993," the same year the femicide began, "there was a dramatic growth in the presence of drugs trafficking and other aspects of organized crime, thus generating a climate of insecurity and corruption in Ciudad Juárez" (25). Organized crimes' effect upon the femicide then is twofold: police corruption, though indubitably present before has only worsened since 1993, and now there is often the perception that murder cases, whether true or not, are somehow linked to drug violence. The latter is problematic because it gives the impression that victims of violent crime might have deserved their fate, an opinion clearly shared by the fictional governor as evidenced in a conversation with his assistant and the Comandante near the end of the film. The scene takes place on the governor's balcony as cars pass by below, all honking their horns to protest Blanca's dismissal. The governor's assistant explains:

Ramírez: Este Peralta el locutor está incitando a la gente por la radio a que venga aquí a protestar.

Gobernador: ¿A protestar? ¿A protestar de qué?

Ramírez: Dice que vas a encerrar a esa mujer.

Gobernador: ¿Cuántas gentes serán? ¿Cien? ¿Trescientas? ¿Cuánta gente estará este sábado tranquilamente en sus casas platicando viendo la tele? ¿Usted sabe Comandante?

Comandante: La mayoría.

Gobernador: Esa gente tranquila que confíe en que nosotros haremos todo lo necesario para preservar su paz, ésa es la que importa. Los otros, a los que les gusta la calle, que hagan ruido y que se sigan matando entre sí.

The governor indicates that, like the Comandante, he depends upon the public's apathy in order to maintain the status quo. Rather than justifying his decision to fire Blanca, the governor callously asserts that the protestors, symbolically positioned below where he stands in the shot, are unimportant and with any luck might kill each other off in their protests. According to the governor, the people who matter are those who (blindly) put their faith in elected officials and calmly accept whatever outcome their policies may bring. As director, Carrera, however, implies that far from being innocent bystanders of tragedy, these people act as accomplices in allowing this massacre to continue. By forcing the viewer to endure grisly scenes of brutality, particularly Juana's gruesome gang rape and asphyxiation, Carrera reiterates that Mexicans must not allow themselves to grow accustomed to violence like this.

Over the course of the movie we see the parallel evolution of both the eventual victim, Juana and Blanca, the investigator. Blanca begins work on the force as an idealistic, energetic

detective who pushes for the force to conduct raids and generally urges her coworkers to take a more aggressive stance on the femicide. When Blanca finds only sexist, apathetic coworkers she uses violence and seeks alliances elsewhere, relying upon friends in the media, like DJ Peralta, who can publicize the stagnant investigations, and other women like Sara who are committed to ending the violence. Like Syria Poletti and Myriam Laurini, then, Carrera and Berman posit the strength of female solidarity. The final scene of the movie, for example, shows a large group of women whose family members have fallen victim to femicide gathered around the most recent site where investigators have found victims' bodies. They shout loudly and in unison "¡Ni una más!,"[171] protesting the seemingly endless violence. This image recalls the activism of women's organizations like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina who still seek answers regarding family members who were murdered or disappeared during the Dirty War.

The scene that most powerfully presents the potential strength of women united is the one in which Blanca, Sara, Hilda, and two other female survivors drive to the middle of the Juárez desert to investigate the industrial-size, underground freezer where assailants have stored victims' bodies. The five women go unaccompanied, but together in Sara's car they present a unified and resilient defiance of women's victimization. The scene begins when Blanca meets Sara and the other women, and before the former joins the other in Sara's car, Sara opens the hood to pour water into the radiator overflow explaining: "Es mi método de refrigeración" (*Backyard/Traspatio*). Although very brief, this shot with Blanca, Sara, and another woman peering under the hood of a car portrays women adept in car mechanics, an area of expertise traditionally dominated by men. As in Gorodischer's novel, *Floreros de alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara*, Carrera and Berman portray women fixing, or in this case regulating the temperature of

[171] Poet and activist Susana Chávez popularized this chant in Juárez. She was mutilated and murdered in 2011.

a car, as a metaphor to suggest that women are likewise capable of heading investigations, another task conventionally performed by men. Indeed, Berman has indicated that she cast a female detective as the protagonist because she believes that women have the potential to "effect fundamental change . . . in Mexico's stagnant, patriarchal society" (Wilkinson n. pag.).

Blanca and Sara, the powerful female characters associated with masculinity, are juxtaposed with Juana and other highly sexualized and feminized maquiladora workers. The latter fall victim to a series of abuses, including femicide in the worst cases. Blanca and Sara achieve a desexualized stereotypically masculine appearance by wearing clothes that conceal their feminine features and by avoiding makeup. Hind affirms that the deliberate "de-feminization" process is especially apparent when comparing characters from the movie that are based upon real-life figures:

> las mexicanas no-ficticias, que están involucradas tanto del lado activista como del lado gubernamental en el problema histórico de los feminicidios, llevan mucho más maquillaje femenino que las actrices. Basta comparar la diferencia entre la fiscalía Suly Ponce o la activista Ésther Chávez Cano con las actrices de *Backyard* para ver el proceso de des-feminización o des-sexualización que sucede para la pantalla. (37)

By portraying powerful females, particularly Blanca and Sara, in this masculinized way, there is a symbolic implication that their security and power derives from their success in obfuscating their femininity and female sexuality, signs of weakness and vulnerability in Juárez. As Hind puts it:

> La apariencia algo fea, algo fuera de modo, algo 'neutra' en cuanto a la sexualidad, sugiere que para que Blanca y Sara parezcan personajes fuertes . . .

> deben lucir menos femeninos y más machos, un mensaje que tal vez termina fortaleciendo el problema detrás de los feminicidios que registra lo femenino como apto para la victimización. (Hind, "Estado" 36)[172]

This idea is reinforced by the fact that the victim, Juana, whose grisly murder the viewer witnesses near the end of the film, has an appearance that is very nearly the opposite of Blanca and Sara's. When she arrives in Juárez, Juana is wearing neutral-colored clothing and long braids, but her cousin, promising to "quitar[le] lo indio," gives her Selena-like bangs,[173] makeup, and jeans. Unlike Blanca and Sara, Juana's relatively feminized look marks her as vulnerable to the violent, sexual crime to which she falls victim ("Estado" 37). Thus, the juxtaposition between the obvious sexuality and femininity of the victims and the seemingly asexual powerful female characters suggests that there is an inherent danger in the former, which, unfortunately, Carrera and Berman seem to perpetuate.[174]

In addition to portraying the two powerful women in the film as masculinized and asexual, neither ever mentions anything about their personal lives, nor do they make reference to having a partner. The viewer assumes that Blanca is unmarried, perhaps refusing to submit to a system of patriarchy even in marriage. Of all the detectives examined in this dissertation, Blanca

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[172] Interestingly, the only other woman who dresses in an almost asexual way like Blanca and Sara is Hilda, the victim Blanca saved from an attack. Following her attack, she " . . . never fully recovers her female identity, made visually apparent in her mode of dress" (Namaste 493). Dressing is a way of expressing female identity, but in Hilda's case the way she dresses functions to hide or protect her body from further sexual abuse.

[173] As both Hind and Namaste point out, the reference to Selena, who was likewise murdered by an acquaintance, is significant ("Estado" 37; Namaste 492)

[174] Hind argues that Blanca and Sara are not the only powerful female figures whom Carrera and Berman "de-sexualize." Earlier in the film we see the statue and figurine of Lady Justice, who stands with her right nipple exposed, bearing a sword while holding scales aloft in her hand. Instead of using Lady Justice to suggest strength in female sexuality, Carrera and Berman strip her image of any sexual meaning, using the symbol merely to denote an ironic reversal of her principles. In Hind's words: "Fiel a las limitantes de lo femenino en la Ciudad Juárez real, la respetable 'dama de la justicia' en la película carece de connotación sexual, tal como la ojerosa detective Blanca Bravo. Parece que *Backyard* tampoco se atreve a imaginar una detective que, igual que sus enemigos hombres y colegas machos, ejercita su sexualidad" (36).

most closely resembles the male loner figure depicted in hard-boiled detective mysteries. In fact, Blanca assumes numerous stereotypically male characteristics, such that Octavio Paz's essay, *El laberinto de la soledad,* proves useful in explaining why she does not divulge personal details: "el ideal de la 'hombría' consiste en no 'rajarse' nunca . . . abrirse es una debilidad o una traición" (46). For Blanca especially, following this dictum around her male colleagues is important to avoid being perceived as weak or emotional.[175] Here again, Blanca and Sara differ considerably from Juana. Juana and Mickey Santos, victimized and victimizer respectively, are, or become, sexually active, and both have family lives. Juana, for example, often talks with Márgara and the *maquiladora* workers about the father she left back at home in Tabasco, and her relationship with Cutberto is a focal point of the film. Because Blanca and Sara are the powerful female characters in the film, their renunciation of family life " . . . implica que la seguridad para la mujer existe en trabajar, a deshoras y sin mención de pareja ni familia" (Hind, "Estado" 36). As Hind implies, Carrera and Berman propose a rather unsettling solution to how women might achieve autonomy in Juárez in their characterizations of Blanca and Sara. Only after concealing their femininity and their sexuality, denying themselves any semblance of a family life, and through great personal sacrifice, do Blanca and Sara achieve a level of authority and power.

As mentioned previously, both Juana and Blanca interestingly undergo an evolution in their outlooks, with Juana growing increasingly defiant and Blanca becoming more and more resigned to her own, and the police department's failure. Working at Kikai (the same *maquiladora* where Karen, the first victim in the movie was employed) produces the most

[175] Petra Delicado from Spanish novelist Alicia Giménez Bartlett's detective series is also careful about what she divulges to her male colleagues: "Nadie en mi trabajo sabía nada de mi vida privada. Me parecía una condición indispensable para no perder el respeto general . . . existía aún un largo camino de formas por recorrer. Nunca había descubierto a ningún inspector macho llamando a su casa preocupado por la gastronomía infantil. Y las cosas no habían llegado al punto neutro en el que se puede mostrar sin consecuencias cierta debilidad" (14).

dramatic change in Juana. Although she is not yet sexually active, the doctor employed by the *maquiladora* explains in a matter-of-fact way that from now on she must take birth control pills because: "Si estás embarazada Juana, pierdes tu trabajo" (*Backyard/Traspatio*). Norma Iglesias Prieto, among other scholars, have documented that *maquiladoras* simultaneously encourage women to openly reveal their sexuality,[176] while prohibiting pregnancies, which invariably lead to lower productivity. In addition to managing her reproductive health, Juana's every movement is supervised when she is at work, with only one short break for lunch, and one ten-minute bathroom break. Thus the viewer is struck by the irony of the situation when Juana repeats a line from a public service announcement on television, "mi cuerpo es mi cuerpo," to brush off Cutberto after their brief relationship. Not only do the *maquiladoras* regulate Juana's body during nearly all of her waking hours, the government also shapes her interactions with others. As Hind affirms, " . . . la materialización del deseo por rebelarse ante el cuerpo público que el gobierno maneja es extraída de los anuncios de ese mismo gobierno" ("Estado" 34).

Developing simultaneously, although in an opposite direction, Blanca becomes less defiant and more disenchanted with impunity of criminals and the corrupt justice system as the film progresses. Despite her initial idealism, Blanca synthesizes her disillusionment in a conversation with DJ Peralta:

> **Blanca:** En Juárez, matas a una mujer la tiras al desierto y es como si tuvieras tu licencia impunita. El asesinato se va a perder en la lista de crímenes, la policía no va a investigar, o investigar muy poco. No se va a levantar un cargo bien hecho. Y seguramente ningún juez va a dictar sentencia.

[176] After visiting and speaking with several workers from a *maquiladora* in the Piedras Negras area Nora Iglesias Prieto reports: "Women are urged to present themselves as sexual objects in order to preserve their employment and their position within the labor hierarchy. As various bosses have put it, 'Girls, utilize your sexuality.' Hence, struggling to be liked by the boss, to become his pet, becomes an obligatory habit and daily purpose if one wants to survive in the workplace" (76).

After working within such a defective system, Blanca finally takes justice into her own hands, firing round after round into Mickey Santos's body upon apprehending him with what would have been his next young, female victim. Blanca's excessive use of force seems to suggest that she is punishing him not only for his own crimes, but also for those of so many other perpetrators the police have not been able to catch. The viewer almost expects that this might be the moment for transparency in which the Juárez police could finally claim a success and demonstrate to fellow citizens that progress is being made. Nevertheless, the next day DJ Peralta remarks upon the peculiarity of Mickey Santos' allegedly drug-related death given that he had never been involved with narcotrafficking before. The police force yet again eschews the possibility of plainly revealing the facts, thereby denying Juárez residents any sense of progress. This, along with Blanca's dismissal and DJ Peralta's affirmation that Fierro looks more and more like "el viejo Comandante" indicates how difficult it is to break away from this vicious cycle of corruption and crime. The end of the movie makes clear that this story, albeit with a different detective and a different victim, will happen again.

II. "Desentrañando la historia": Cristina Rivera Garza's metafictional detective novel, *La muerte me da*

> Hay los que creen que la novela tiene una función informativa y una vocación pedagógica. Nada más lejos de la verdad. La novela no está para darle orden al caos. La novela no está para darle orden a un carajo. La novela no nació para satisfacer a los amantes del orden. Está para solazarse con el vértigo, para crear el desmadre, para gozarlo, para revolverlo. La novela, como la realidad real, como las historias que todos sabemos y las historias que siempre nos suceden, está llena de paréntesis, agujeros, elipsis que bailan saltando de un lado a otro sin quererse concretar, sin voluntad de explicarse.
>
> Paco Ignacio Taibo II

Like *Backyard/Traspatio*, Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da* (2007) centers upon the investigation of a series of violent, sexual crimes, but instead of discarding the victims'

bodies in the Juárez desert, the killer carefully displays the castrated bodies of the young, male victims in the city streets.[177] *La muerte me da* begins like many detective novels with the discovery of a corpse in the very first pages.[178] Despite its seemingly traditional opening, the reader soon discovers that this novel by no means follows the typical trajectory of the detective story, but rather subverts many of the generic conventions including the characterization of the detective and the development, or the lack thereof, of the investigation itself. Rivera Garza uses the detective fiction frame merely as a point of departure for a very different sort of novel, one in which the narration is constantly disrupted by new points of view, contradictory and enigmatic assertions, and intertextual references. Rivera Garza's metafictional work, unlike more traditional hard-boiled detective novels, denies the reader a neat and conclusive ending. Rather than prompting a scrupulous investigation, the crime—castration of all four victims, one of whom is also dismembered—serves more as an allegory for the subversive nature and limitations of language. In addition to experimenting with generic constructions and language, Rivera Garza repeatedly obfuscates the clear distinctions between fiction and reality, forcing the reader to reconsider them not as dichotomous, but perhaps more similar than they might initially seem. In short, this novel pushes the boundaries of detective fiction in ways that none of the other texts included in this project do.

In order to examine Rivera Garza's complex and innovative novel, it is useful to establish a working definition of metafictional literature. Most critics seem to agree that "metafiction" is a

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[177] In an interview I conducted with the author, she indicated that she wrote the novel partly as a response to the femicide in Juárez and thus, she explained, "Tenía primero una preocupación de mi presente como ciudadana, como escritora, y por otra parte, pero sin ninguna separación por medio, el reto estético de cómo crear un libro sobre esta violencia sin que se vuelva cómplice de esta violencia." Rather than perpetuating the constant violence against women, Rivera Garza reverses the stereotypical gender roles: "Me interesaba ver qué pasara si la inscripción de esa violencia se hace sobre el cuerpo masculino" (Rivera Garza, Personal Interview).

[178] This novel won the author the second of two Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz prizes she has won. She is the only author to have won this award twice.

term that was coined by the American writer and critic, William H. Gass in the 1970s (Currie 1; Waugh 2). Although the term "metafiction" was coined rather recently, Waugh asserts that metafiction is not limited to contemporary times, as is evidenced by works such as Cervantes' *Don Quijote* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Metafiction is not the product of a particular school of writers; rather, it is a frequent mode of writing across all genres of literature (Waugh 5). Linda Hutcheon defines metafiction, or in her words "narcissistic narratives,"[179] as works that constantly refer back to themselves and the process of writing fiction. Writers of metafiction often expose and alter genre conventions in such a way that the reader is forced to recognize that the traditions to which he or she has grown accustomed are literary constructs (Waugh 6). Additionally, the author of metafiction often does away with traditional authorial distance, addressing the reader directly, and inviting the reader to become a co-creator of meaning (Hutcheon 7). Waugh postulates that by exposing the seams of its own fictionality, metafiction "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact, posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2).

Insofar as both defy conventions, demonstrate a degree of self-consciousness, and require the readers' participation, metafictional novels are related to Modernist experimental novels, but are divergent in significant ways (McCaffery 182; Waugh 6-7, 137). Although a Modernist novel like, for example, Cortázar's *Rayuela* "may draw attention to the aesthetic construction of the text, [it] does not systematically flaunt its own condition of artifice in the manner of contemporary metafiction" (Waugh 21). In other words, while Cortázar invites us to read his work in an unusual order, we are not persistently reminded of the fictionality of what we are reading. Like modernist novels, even though metafictional novels experiment with form, Waugh

[179] In her work, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), Hutcheon clarifies that her choice of the adjective "narcissistic" is not to be understood in the pejorative sense of the word, but rather is used to denote "self-awareness."

insists that they do not completely eschew mimesis or the "conventions of realism." Instead she argues that: " . . . realistic conventions supply the 'control' in metafictional texts" which "allow for a stable level of readerly familiarity, without which the ensuing dislocations might be . . . totally meaningless" (18). Hutcheon, following the formalists, identifies this as "defamiliarization," which in her words is the "laying bare of literary devices . . . bring[ing] to the reader's attention those formal elements of which, through over-familiarization, he has become unaware. Through his recognition of the backgrounded material, new demands for attention and active involvement are brought to bear on the act of reading" (24).

In the case of *La muerte me da,* then, our familiarity with detective fiction allows us to recognize the formulaic elements of the genre to which we have grown accustomed through their conspicuous *absence* in Rivera Garza's novel. Mónica Flórez reminds us that "uno de los componentes distintivos de la narrativa policiaca es su estructura formulaica," but unlike classic detective fiction, in *La muerte me da* "la solución del crimen pasa a un segundo plano ante la polifonía de voces y focos narrativos, la fragmentación lingüística y temporal, la experimentación intertextual, [y] los comentarios metaliterarios" (108). Rivera Garza chooses the detective fiction frame precisely because it is so easily recognizable and predictable, and thus her manipulation of its formal elements is cunningly subversive. Like the killer in the novel who dismembers his or her victims, Rivera Garza "mutilates" the typical structure, violently refiguring the detective story (Samuelson, "Líneas" 245). Furthermore, the limited development of the actual detective storyline itself and the many cryptic chapters prevent the reader from being able to assume the role of detective and "solve" the mystery along with the detective in the novel ("Líneas" 271). The author anticipates and then repeatedly frustrates the reader's expectations with striking, even jarring results. For some, such as Manuel Mejía, Rivera Garza's

experimental novel is overwrought, lacking any cohesion. In a scathing review of the novel, Mejía claims: "*La muerte me da* acaba siendo una obra pretenciosa, que quiere abarcar mucho, en forma desordenada y casual y sin ningún hilo conductor y donde sólo se detalla el esmero por buscar frases perfectas, dejando sueltas pequeñas intervenciones, pensamientos, o versos que resultan agradables o de interés especial" (49). Carlos Abreu Mendoza, on the other hand, rightly insists: "Lo importante es que todos estos juegos intertextuales y metaficticios no son ajenos a una verdad esencial, que no es otra que su dificultad" (310). Indeed, as Cheyla Samuelson has suggested, "the uncomfortable reactions of many readers to the text speak to the success of Rivera Garza's transgressive project" ("Líneas" 244). If we understand the author's own view of reading, we expect that her work would "abocar a la frustración por su preferencia por un arte elíptico y sugerente" (Abreu Mendoza 310). In an interview I conducted with Cristina Rivera Garza, she explained that she views the reader's function as being

> . . . siempre . . . a punto de irse, y la función del escritor es encontrar los motivos para que el lector se quede. Es decir, finalmente el acto de la escritura tiene que ser compartir —si no, no tiene ningún sentido— y poder crear algo dentro del terreno legible, porque desde ahí vamos a descubrir territorios y enunciar cosas que no necesariamente están en el texto. Es estar entre alejarse lo suficiente del terreno conocido, pero no tanto que el lector no te pueda seguir porque te quedas jugando solo; pero tampoco quedarte en lo conocido simplemente porque no quieres que el lector se vaya —eso es el *bestseller*.

It is not surprising to find some who are resistant to the level of experimentation we find in *La muerte me da* given the author's aim to "despertar la capacidad crítica del lector" (Rivera Garza, Personal Interview).

La muerte me da begins with the protagonist's—the author's alter ego—discovery of the first castrated corpse while jogging through the city. Not only does this character have the same profession, professor of literature, but also the same name as the author herself. Since she is the first to find the body, she becomes the primary informant to "la Detective."[180] Again, while the beginning of the book tempts the reader into surmising that Rivera Garza will follow the typical detective storyline, the author quickly deviates from the predictable formula. One of the many conventions of detective fiction that Rivera Garza "defamiliarizes" in *La muerte me da* is her characterization of the detective figure. A common trope in "whodunits" is to juxtapose the meticulous, yet ultimately useless police force with the creative and perceptive private detective, which serves to further emphasize the detective's perspicacity.[181] In Rivera Garza's novel, however, la Detective more closely resembles the traditional police figure, and thus the detective who succeeds despite the danger he or she faces is noticeably absent in *La muerte me da*. La Detective and her assistant, Valerio, are tasked with the case of the castrated men, but she is, in Valerio's words: "alguien destinado al fracaso" (255). Contrary to what her name suggests, la Detective appears to be more gifted at writing interesting investigative reports than solving crimes, as the following lines indicate: "La Detective no se había caracterizado por solucionar sus casos ni con rapidez ni sin ella, pero escribía largos informes repletos de preguntas y detalles

[180] The vast majority of characters in *La muerte me da* do not have first names. Instead, most characters, with the exception of Cristina and Valerio, are identified by their most salient features. Thus we find names such as "el Hombre-Que-Era El-A-Veces," "la Detective," "la Periodista de la Nota Roja," "la Mujer de la Gran Sonrisa Iluminada," "la Mujer Llorosa," "la Madre" and so on. In this way, rather than describing their physical attributes or their personalities, Rivera Garza simply underscores the protagonists' functions in the detective story or how Cristina (often humorously) views these characters. Alejandra Pizarnik, whose poetry plays a central role in this novel, also uses these types of descriptive names in "Fragmentos para dominar el silencio" (Abreu Mendoza 300).

[181] Whodunits provide clues so that the reader may try to solve the crime in question along with the detective. The use of the unimaginative police figure likewise seems to be an element that encourages the reader's participation as he or she considers the possible scenarios alongside the detective, not hindered by official police procedures.

que agradaban el sentido estético del jefe del Departamento de Investigación de Homicidios" (214). In fact, later, when the narration shifts towards Valerio's perspective, we see that he thinks of her as "la escritora," not la Detective (243). The reader gets the sense that the entire department to which la Detective belongs is its own microcosm consisting of nondescript people who mechanically carry out fruitless investigations until another case presents itself. La Detective's office is significantly located in "un sótano. . . . adonde no parecía llegar otra luz más que la artificial" and the only sound one hears is "el ruido de voces desiguales y la velocidad blanca de papeles que van de mano en mano" (24). The lack of natural light suggests a stale, hermetic environment filled with detectives who lack true investigative insight; instead, they all push paper around to give the appearance of scrupulous detective work.

Like Sherlock Holmes, la Detective has an assistant, Valerio, who also works on the case of the castrated men. Unlike Watson, however, one of Valerio's primary functions is to highlight his boss's *incompetence*, not her genius. For example, in the following conversation between the two, Valerio tries to explain what the first victim was doing immediately prior to his murder, and it becomes clear that no matter how much information la Detective gathers (or, in this case, is given), even the most obvious details elude her:

> Ya entrevisté al mesero del bar donde pasó su última noche el primer hombre – hace una pausa esperando la pregunta de la Detective y, al no llegar, continúa sin agravio aparente-. Salió solo. Había estado allí un par de horas. Viendo sobre todo.
>
> -¿Viendo qué?
>
> –Sexo, por supuesto –dice incrédulo y molesto a la vez-. Vulva. Ano. Culo. Labios.

La Detective lo observa.

–¿Estás seguro?

–¿De qué? –le pregunta, ya abiertamente exasperado. (114)

It seems as though one of la Detective's most debilitating handicaps is being unable to understand the actions of others if they do not coincide with what she herself might do. Given how stubbornly resistant she is in accepting this information from Valerio, the reader understands she will likewise be unable to draw any useful conclusions from the evidence she finds. Interestingly, both Rivera Garza's Valerio and Fierro of *Backyard/Traspatio,* the assistants to la Detective and Blanca respectively*,* are skeptical about the prospects of making progress in their cases. While Valerio believes they will fail in their investigation because "[a] la Detective . . . le gustaba perder" (214), Fierro's pessimism about catching the perpetrator(s) of femicide are based upon his experience with the subversive machinations of the Juárez police department and elusive criminals. Both of the female investigators featured in these works do indeed fail, but for different reasons. Despite her diligence, La Detective is often unable to connect details that are crucial in discovering the perpetrator of a "literary" series of murders; Blanca, on the other hand, is quite competent, but she faces systemic corruption that prevents her from being successful.

Although he seems to realize the infeasibility of doing so, Valerio, unlike la Detective, conveys a genuine desire to follow the clues and track down the murderer, and often expresses his frustration with their inability to do so. In the following exchange, for example, Valerio tries to impress upon la Detective the necessity of finding concrete evidence:

—Seguimos sin dar con el arma –refiere, ceremonioso, como si no estuviera dando una mala noticia—. Tampoco hemos encontrado los penes. Tenemos el

> reporte del forense: nada sorpresivo. Y tenemos esto—dice al momento que coloca una pila de periódicos sobre su escritorio—además.
>
> La Detective dirige la mirada a los encabezados y, con los labios fruncidos, se vuelve a verlo.
>
> —Pensé que se trataba de algo importante –los dedos de ambas manos en el teclado, presionando letras. (112-13)

On the one hand, this scene illustrates la Detective's attempts to deny her professional blunders, which the newspapers announce in their headlines. Furthermore, this interaction demonstrates that from prompting la Detective to take action, she sees Valerio's comments merely as unwelcome interruptions to her work. Any hope the reader still has of la Detective eventually solving the case dissolves with this exchange.

Like Borges's detective Lönnrot, la Detective attempts to solve the case by reasoning through each and every clue in vain.[182] Of the many enigmatic clues, la Detective finds verses of Alejandra Pizarnik written in pink lipstick or nail polish alongside the victims' bodies and a note made with words cut out from a newspaper, as in *The Hound of Baskervilles*. La Detective doggedly insists that the poetry must hold some clue as to the identity of the killer and so Cristina, the informant, accompanies la Detective to her office in the basement, where in the harsh, artificial light the two consider the lines of poetry. In la Detective's tomb-like office[183] Cristina affirms:

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[182] The reader is reminded of Borges's *La muerte y la brújula* when Valerio pulls out a map to see if there is any link between the locations of the crimes and affirms: "Hay . . . una especie de ruta" (113). That is, like Lönnrot, Valerio suggests that there is some sort of pattern in the victims and their place of death, as they were all men who had comfortable homes in the suburbs, but were castrated and murdered in the city center.

[183] Valerio thinks of the basement that houses la Detective's office as a "sótano convertido en un sarcófago" (214).

> las minúsculas palabras en esmalte de uñas parecieron más amenazadoras y más cómicas. Un cuento infantil. Ese tipo de crueldad. En este lugar adonde no parecía llegar otra luz más que la artificial, en donde los ojos de la Detective se acostumbraron seguramente a su propia opacidad, las palabras de Alejandra Pizarnik hacían que el mundo de allá afuera, el mundo que la mató, pareciera benigno o banal. (24)

Cristina is struck first by the stark contrast between the killer's ruthless, frightening intelligence and la Detective's characteristically dull gaze. Then, however, she seems to momentarily forget about the gravity of the situation and simply marvels at Pizarnik's tragic perceptiveness of the world. As we might expect, la Detective's interest is piqued when she sees the word "castrado" in a subsequent message, but Cristina anticipates la Detective's simplistic line of reasoning and tries to explain that "la poesía no se lee así . . . . no es denotativa. No es como un manual" (42). This relationship between the author's alter ego, who is a literature professor, and la Detective, who understands little about poetry, allows Rivera Garza a medium through which she can comment upon this form of writing and language itself, a theme I will explore later in this chapter.

While Rivera Garza rids her novel of the successful detective and the dense police dichotomy, she constructs an alternative dichotomy by juxtaposing la Detective with the protagonist, Rivera Garza's alter ego. Rivera Garza is a character whose actions are dictated less by logic and more in accordance to her own desires and emotions. Her presence further highlights the way in which la Detective's strictly utilitarian mindset limits her understanding of those around her and would likely interfere with her investigations. In the protagonist's first conversation with la Detective, for example, Cristina recalls what she was doing when she

discovered the first body. She begins by saying: "*Corría. . . . No, no corro para hacer ejercicio. Corro por placer. Para llegar a algún lado. Corro, si así lo quiere ver, utilitariamente*" (18, italics in original). Although the reader only sees Cristina's half of the conversation in this section, it is clear that as she tries to describe why she runs, she is eventually forced into explaining it not in the way that she actually sees it, but in a way that la Detective can understand: she runs because it is a useful activity.

The reader observes the stark contrast between Cristina and la Detective primarily through the former's perspective such that the reader initially views la Detective as Cristina does. While la Detective seems unable to comprehend anything other than Cristina's most practical behavior, Cristina is equally dumbfounded by la Detective's lack of emotion, seemingly endless energy and self-control. After giving her statement to la Detective following the first homicide, Cristina marvels: "Me pregunté ahí . . . si la Detective que acababa apenas de interrogarme con gran meticulosidad y sin muestra alguna de cansancio, con una disciplina que por férrea daba la impresión de ser *poco humana*, habría disfrutado el coctel" (27, emphasis mine). As the narrator realizes, la Detective does not think of food and drink as being sources of potential pleasure, but rather appreciates them almost exclusively for their functionality; they are necessary for survival. She likewise sees meals as moments during which she can conduct interviews and continue her work, so she, unlike the protagonist, is unfazed by eating lunch while discussing the details of such a gruesome case: "—Ordenemos—dijo, tratando a la comida como lo que era, un mero pretexto para pasar a nuestro verdadero plato fuerte que era la castración" (54). Rivera Garza's hyperbolic depiction of the assiduous, but inept la Detective, makes a mockery of the qualities generally associated with effective police work. In other words, the investigation is doomed to

fail not because la Detective will devote too little time or energy to the case, but rather because of her lack of intuition and her inability to think like the criminal.

As mentioned previously, while depicting the police as matter-of-fact, and even dense, is fairly conventional, characterizing the detective as such is not and thus Rivera Garza's first of many deviations from the classic formula is the elimination of the successful detective figure. What makes la Detective's character even more interesting, and seemingly contradictory, is her gender. In Samuelson's words: "In her emotional unavailability, social alienation and guilty conscience, la Detective holds up a mirror to the loner image of the classic detective, but her gender takes the characters out of the real of stereotype" ("Líneas" 264). Furthermore, in Western culture women are stereotypically thought to be the more emotional and sensitive of the two sexes, and thus la Detective's lack of emotion and inability to perceive subtleties are even more striking. Even Valerio rarely sees anything but the most mechanical behavior from la Detective. One of the few times we see any sort of emotional response from la Detective is when Valerio awkwardly reminds her of the charges that are still pending after she killed someone, presumably in self-defense, after having fired her weapon into the night. First, however, we observe a conspicuously distanced description of that night's events: "La Detective . . . se ve inundada por una serie de imágenes veloces y confusas. Ahí está la mujer en cuclillas detrás de la caja de una camioneta. Ahí está la noche y, en la noche, el silbido de las balas que la cruzan. Ahí está ella . . . disparándole, el latir del corazón en el gatillo, a la noche" (115). Just as we think we might get a glimpse into la Detective's own memories, the account of la Detective's shameful mistake suddenly shifts away from her perspective to a distanced description in the third person in which la Detective is not even mentioned directly, but is implied by the words "la mujer."

Narrating the incident in this way, the author keeps la Detective at a distance, preventing us from identifying with her.

Again, while la Detective seems utterly impassive the vast majority of the time, Valerio notices an unusual flicker of emotion when la Detective glances at the newspapers he brings her with stories on the shooting. He watches la Detective as she seems to relive the events of that evening:

> Por un momento piensa que la Detective está a punto de llorar o de partirse en dos o de deshacerse en mil pedazos. Una bomba de tiempo. Apenas por un momento se convence de que la mujer con quien ha trabajado ya un par de meses sin que le pregunte nada de tipo personal, sin compartir a su vez ninguna información privada, tiene, en efecto, días y noches, minutos, horas, saliva, pasado. *Es un ser humano*, piensa. Por primera vez . . . Y el mero pensamiento silencioso lo pone de buen humor. (115, emphasis mine)

Valerio's sudden revelation that la Detective is human comically highlights her normally self-possessed, unflappable nature. Even Sherlock Holmes, one of the classic male sleuths in detective fiction, frequently suffers from bouts of depression that suddenly shift to moments of great excitement. Although Sherlock Holmes (perhaps like la Detective) believes that his emotions cloud his judgment and thus tries to oppress them when working on a case,[184] his control over his sentiments is not as total as that of la Detective's. Furthermore, despite working together for months, la Detective and Valerio know virtually nothing about each other because,

[184] In *The Sign of the Four* (1890), for example, Holmes states his philosophy on this matter: "Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner" (6). Later, he reiterates the importance of controlling ones emotions when Watson comments upon the beauty of a client: "It is of the first importance to not allow your judgment to be biased by personal qualities. A client to me is a mere unit, --a factor in a problem. The *emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning*" (31, emphasis mine).

of course, that sort of information has no practical use. The brief glimpse into la Detective's interior cited above not only shows her taciturn nature, but it also demonstrates the shame she feels for her professional mistakes.

In addition to reminders of her own failings, there are, of course, other situations that are potential emotional snares for la Detective. The narrator explains that over the years, la Detective has identified these situations and developed careful defense mechanisms against them in an effort to maintain her characteristic efficiency. In the case of the castrated men, for example, she refers to the victims by number rather than by name: "Sabe sus nombres y recuerda sus rostros, pero para poder trabajar en sus casos necesita llamarlos Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro. Así no le causan vómito. Así los protege. Esto es un velo. Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro. Los nombra así cuando se sienta a la mesa y, en lugar de comer, piensa. Recuerda, Clasifica. Enumera. Mastica" (104). Depersonalizing the victims in this way allows la Detective the emotional detachment necessary to work on the case. Similarly, when la Detective speaks with the mother of one of the victims, the narrator describes how she navigates the emotionally charged situation: "La Detective la observa sin parpadear y la escucha con la distancia profesional y ecuánime que ha logrado fabricarse con el paso de los años: sin emoción pero con empatía, sin complicidad pero con humana preocupación, con entereza" (117). Over time, la Detective has learned to strike a deliberate balance between empathy and distance, which simultaneously allows her to avoid offending the mother while encouraging the mourning woman to answer her questions. This manufactured distance therefore suggests that la Detective is quite capable of feeling emotions, but she maintains her distance to protect herself from becoming too emotionally involved. As we recall, this is quite contrary to the way Blanca behaves when investigating cases of femicide and listening to survivors' accounts of abuse. While la Detective manages, for the most part, to

repress her emotions while investigating, Blanca is moved to tears when listening to Hilda's description of the sexual violence she endured (*Backyard/Traspatio*). As the film illustrates, the increasing number of femicide cases has lead to ubiquitous apathy towards the suffering of others, but Carrera and Berman use Blanca's reaction to remind viewers that we, too, should be horrified by these atrocious crimes, and must not allow them to continue.

Indeed, la Detective has learned not only to control her tone of voice and demeanor while speaking to victims' loved ones, but she also all but treats their grief as if it were a contagious illness, and thus stays as far away from them *physically* to help her remain emotionally detached. Having worked on similar cases, la Detective identifies one of the frequent "symptoms" typical of mourning loved ones in this mother: a new wrinkle on her face that marks the loss of her son. Despite la Detective's attempts to avoid emotional involvement, the narrator reveals that la Detective is sensitive to others' pain, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> La Detective se detiene en el filo de su asiento tratando de entender las palabras de la Madre sin tener que interrumpir su relato y, por eso, la ve de cerca y no puede evitar reconocerla: es la arruga que nace un día después del anuncio de la muerte. Ella lo sabe bien. Es una arruga que viene, entera y veloz, de la violencia: la violencia de la muerte, la violencia del conocimiento de la muerte. Es la respuesta de la piel. Para evitar ver la arruga que, de súbito, la llena de pesar, la Detective se aleja tanto como puede del rostro de la Madre pero pronto comprueba que, de esa manera, no puede escuchar las respuestas que ha venido a buscar. Por eso vuelve a aproximarse aunque esta vez, trata de distraerse mirando hacia su entorno con el rabillo del ojo. . . . no puede seguirla viendo. (117)

The description above suggests that la Detective knows to be wary of certain triggers that will provoke an emotional reaction in her, but in this case the sudden manifestation of the mother's sorrow catches la Detective off guard. While la Detective usually manages to remain unruffled, her interaction with the mother above demonstrates that, despite her best efforts, she is susceptible to emotional involvement.

Like Valerio, the reader also becomes frustrated by la Detective's futile attempts to find useful information. The grieving mother tells la Detective about her son and the narrator's description of their conversation suggests that whatever minute relation there might be between the victim's life and his brutal murder will almost certainly elude la Detective: "La Madre habla de la juventud de su hijo. . . . La Detective permite la acumulación de datos, alerta y respetuosa. Algo debe decir, acaso algo ha dicho ya que le ayude a recomponer la historia que ahora le toca desentrañar" (118-19). While la Detective listens to la Madre's accounts of her son's life, the reader gets the sense that la Detective is simply acting in accordance with what she was trained to do, not that this interview will be productive in any way. La Madre proceeds to show la Detective her son's room, but then, intuiting la Detective's next thought, she assures her: "Aquí nunca va a encontrar nada extraño, señorita" (121), dissuading her from carefully combing through all of the victim's belongings. The fact that la Madre, like Cristina and Valerio, can predict la Detective's every move confirms la Detective's formulaic investigative methods.

Again, the reader first views la Detective almost entirely from Cristina's viewpoint, as she characterizes la Detective as a robotic or "poco humana" (27). Nevertheless, when the perspective of the narration shifts towards la Detective, the reader sees a more nuanced picture of a woman who, despite her working class background, has worked hard to become a detective. While Cristina makes some rather derisive comments about la Detective, we suspect she does so

purposely in order to distance herself from the detective. In this, and in Cristina's comments about poetry, the reader perceives a somewhat arrogant or elitist posture on Cristina's behalf. Shortly after the third victim is found with verses by Alejandra Pizarnik, for example, La Detective asks the professor about Pizarnik's collection, *El árbol de Diana*:

> —¿Lo conoce? –preguntó de inmediato la Detective y yo no pude sino advertir que no le llamó 'poema' o 'verso'.
>
> —Todo el mundo lo conoce –le dije sin darme cuenta de la arrogancia—. Todo el mundo en el campo de acción de la poesía –me corregí. (33)

Cristina's relative privilege has obviously afforded her a literary education and opportunities that have not been accessible for la Detective. Thus, Cristina is able to identify Pizarnik's collection as "poetry" or "verse," while la Detective simply avoids identifying the work by genre. Cristina's supercilious attitude with respect to la Detective likewise manifests itself when she explains the castrating effect of the gendered word "víctima," which is always feminine in Spanish:
"Es la palabra víctima, Detective –le expliqué sin esperanza alguna de ser comprendida mientras escribía el articulo determinado y el sustantivo sobre una servilleta de papel–. La víctima siempre es femenina. ¿Lo ve?" (30). Despite la Detective's faults, the author ironically seems to sympathize more with her rather than the professor, her namesake character, whose self-indulgent remarks on poetry seem frivolous in the face of la Detective's serial murder investigation.

Although Cristina and La Detective differ in many ways—socioeconomic class, education and profession—there are many indications throughout the novel that suggest that they are actually doubles of each other. Doubling is a common trope in analytic detective fiction, as the traditional "method of apprehending the criminal involves the detective's doubling the

criminal's thought processes so as to anticipate his next move and end up one jump ahead of him" (Irwin 5). Critics have noted, for example, numerous parallels between Dupin and his adversary, the Minister D----- in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter." Moldenhauer, for example, underscores Dupin's "ability to enter into the mind of, to *identify with*, the other person. He is therefore capable of reenacting the thoughts and feelings of the criminal; imaginatively and vicariously, he *is* the criminal, participating in the artistry that is crime as well as the artistry that is solution" (293-94, emphasis in original). Moldenhauer also points out that the last name of both men begins with the same letter, and that Dupin's "motives are hardly more philanthropic than the Minister's" (294). Similarly, Babener explains that like the Minister, "Dupin . . . employs deception to confound his opponent" (328). Borges, who greatly admired and was heavily influenced by Poe, replicates the doubling motif in his portrayal of Lönnrot and Scharlach, the investigator and criminal in his story, "La muerte y la brújula."[185] John T. Irwin observes that Lönnrot and Scharlach's names suggest a likeness between the two:

> In a note to the tale Borges says, 'The end syllable of Lönnrot means red in German, and Red Scharlach is also translatable, in German, as Red Scarlet.' Elsewhere Borges tells us that Lönnrot is Swedish, but neglects to add that in Swedish the word lönn is a prefix meaning 'secret,' 'hidden,' or 'illicit.' Thus Lönnrot, the secret or hidden red, pursues and is pursued by his double Red Scharlach (Red Scarlet), the doubly red. (30)[186]

In Borges's story, then, we see a reversal of this pattern such that Lönnrot's attempts to double the criminal's thought process lead not to the capture of the criminal, but rather to Lönnrot's own

[185] As Irwin notes (30), Borges "explicitly links" his own story to "The Purloined Letter" by describing Lönnrot in the following way: "se creía un puro razonador, un Auguste Dupin" (Borges 499).
[186] John T. Irwin delineates several other similarities between Lönnrot and Scharlach in his insightful study, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* pp. 30, 35-36, 447.

demise. Scharlach, who is able to anticipate the detective's every move, sets a trap for Lönnrot, providing clues he knows the police will overlook, but that his nemesis will follow all the way to the villa Triste-le-Roy, where Scharlach traps him easily.

Like Dupin and Minister D----- and Lönnrot and Scharlach, la Detective and Cristina share many commonalities, which even the characters themselves realize. The two women have moments in which they seem to recognize the other, as if they have known each other for a long time. Cristina notices this immediately, and describes this vague sense of recognition in the following excerpt:

> . . . cada vez que me reunía con ella [la Detective] me embargaba la sensación extraña, la sensación incómoda, de que la conocía de antes. No se trataba, por supuesto, de la familiaridad que da el trato continuo o profundo, eso lo habría recordado de inmediato, sino del conocimiento que se fragua, sinuosa, morosamente, en las coincidencias más vanas. . . . acaso esa mujer y yo habíamos asistido a una conferencia donde ambas, desde esquinas distintas del recinto, planteamos preguntas semejantes. . . . Acaso habíamos tomado el mismo avión para atravesar el mismo océano y habíamos esperado, después, una al lado de la otra, el equipaje que daba de vueltas en la misma banda. (35-36)

La Detective likewise seems to recognize Cristina, and during a conversation in which the two discuss the case, Cristina indicates that she notices la Detective gazing at her "con la atención de alguien que intenta, infructuosamente, reconocerme" (135). Moments later, la Detective looks at the professor "como si [l]e conociera de toda la vida" (136).

In addition to this uncanny, inexplicable familiarity with each other, la Detective and Cristina discover that while their work as investigator and professor may, at first glance seem

diametrically opposed, this case highlights the similarities between their respective professions. By placing verses of poetry on or near the victims' remains, the perpetrator links the written text with the victims' bodies such that "Los hombres castrados que encuentra Rivera Garza [el personaje] . . . se convierten en texto. Leer un poema se asocia por tanto con la investigación de un crimen: seguimos pistas, las palabras son huellas que descifran la clave de un enigma más profundo" (Abreu Mendoza 302). In other words, just as professors and literary critics like Cristina read texts, and extrapolate meaning from the clues on the page, investigators like la Detective "read" the victims' bodies for evidence that might lead to the murderer.[187]

In the passage mentioned above during which la Detective speaks with one of the victim's mothers, the narrator, who at this moment seems to express la Detective's point of view, pauses upon a seemingly innocuous word, "desentrañar." The violent connotations of this word force her to recall the victims' bodies following the killer's vicious attacks: "Des-entrañar. La imagen llega de inmediato, con la palabra misma, des-entrañar: ahí está otra vez el vientre machacado, abierto, todavía cubierto de sangre fresca. Una boca en realidad. Un orificio brutal. Lo sin entraña. La entraña expuesta" (119). Like this victim's once-intact body, the detective must now take apart the pieces of this puzzle to determine the motive and find the killer.[188] La Detective's reflection on the word "desentrañar," makes plain that there is an implicit violence in la Detective's process of taking apart the pieces of the crimes in order to make sense of them. The way she analyzes the evidence, scouring the clues to try to establish a connection between

[187] As Thoms suggests, the idea of the reader as detective and the detective as reader has long been a part of detective fiction: "Chronicling a search for explanation and solution, such fiction typically unfolds as a kind of puzzle or game, a place of play and pleasure for both detective and reader. The popularity of the stories of Poe and his successors partly derives from this intense engagement with the text where, in the scrutinizing of evidence and the interpreting of clues, the reader becomes a detective and the detective a reader" (Thoms 133). In Rivera Garza's novel, not only do we, the readers, become detectives, but Cristina, the professor of literature, is also likened to a detective.

[188] I will discuss the violence implied in such a task subsequently.

the victims that might tell her more about the killer is, ironically, described in violent terms, thereby linking her investigation of the crimes to castration itself:

> La Detective tiene que ver los datos como una unidad completa para poder identificar el contraste, la similitud. . . . Necesita saber . . . *Los descuartizará otra vez*. . . . La Detective tiene que exprimir esas muertes acabar esas muertes torturar esas muertes para encontrar el lazo que las vincula a su verdugo. Eso es lo que la avergüenza: tener que matar las muertes que examina. (105, emphasis mine)

La Detective is not the only one whose work is linked to castration, the violent crime at the center of her investigation; the professor, Cristina, receives messages that likewise suggest that her work also has a violent aspect to it. As one of the messages charges, "El que lee con cuidado, asesina. Estoy segura de que sabías eso, profesora. El que lee con cuidado, descuartiza. Todos matamos" (88).[189] Given Cristina's keen interest in the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik, la Detective designates her as the primary suspect. La Detective, reflecting a rather self-ironic bent on the part of Rivera Garza (the author), raises questions about Cristina's profession:

> No sólo había sido ella la Informante inicial sino que además, su oficio, ese extraño oficio, les provocaba preguntas constantes. ¿Qué hacía en realidad además de pasar horas enteras frente a la pantalla y sostener charlas banales con alumnas casi adolescentes? ¿Era leer verdaderamente un oficio? ¿Cómo regresaba a la realidad después de hundirse, por horas, en mundo que no existían más que en la imaginación provocada por las letras impresas en una página? ¿No sería alguien así, alguien que había leído, además a Pizarnik, y que lloraba ante el recuerdo de alguno de sus poemas, tal como lo había constatado la Detective en más de una

[189] The killer's comment, then, also implicates the reader of this novel who must also read closely to engage with *La muerte me da*.

> ocasión, la culpable? ¿No tenía ella, como lo decía el experto en asesinos seriales [Mark Seltzer], esa malsana curiosidad de 'mirar por dentro'? ¿Sería suficiente esa curiosidad como para abrir la herida? (241-42)

The way Cristina reads and deconstructs texts, scrutinizing each word to make sense of the work is a type of violence she performs upon the text as a whole. This is yet another commonality between Cristina and la Detective; although they work in different media, both of them are guilty of an act analogous to castration. When la Detective and Cristina dissect the verses of Pizarnik's poetry that the killer left by the victim's bodies, they both seem to perceive the violence in their task: "Las dos nos miramos a los ojos. Dubitativas. Suspicaces. Cómplices. ¿Hace cuánto tiempo? ¿Hace cuánto? ¿Hace? Un puente de papel. Un puente hecho de texto" (136). While the killer dismembers human bodies, Cristina and la Detective, whose work overlap in this case, analyze texts and crime scenes respectively, deconstructing them.

Returning now to la Detective's semantic reflections upon the word "desentrañar," we find that this is one of the many moments in which Rivera Garza draws the reader's attention to language itself. As Hutcheon explains, these moments intentionally impede our reading of the plot, forcing us to pause upon the most basic elements that comprise the text. She explains that "the linguistic self-reflectiveness or even self-generation of the text are forms of resistance to the act of reading, shifting attention to the semantic, syntactic, and often also phonetic texture of the words which actually serve to structure as well as constitute the work" (119). Cheyla Samuelson astutely compares the fragmentation of the victims' physical bodies to Rivera Garza's examination and dismantling of language, largely through Pizarnik's words: "Just as bodies are opened in *La muerte me da*, language is also subjected to a violent opening that exposes inner workings while destroying the appearance of the smooth surface of signification" (260). In an

interview I conducted with Rivera Garza in the fall of 2013, she explained: "Quería escribir un libro en el que el lenguaje fuera en sí mismo la historia, en el que el lenguaje se volviera ese tajo que corta. Entonces trabajé mucho con el modo de cortar las frases, con frases incompletas, y también con un tendido del texto en la página que no necesariamente corresponde al rectángulo bien formado y terminado del párrafo, sino que va rompiéndose, disgregándose como la historia misma" (Rivera Garza, Personal Interview). In that sense, castration is not only the actual torture the killer forces his or her victims to endure; it also serves as a metaphor for Rivera Garza's own creative process in writing this novel. By repeatedly cutting sentences to fragmentary utterances, "[u]na colección de líneas rotas (342), and by disrupting the progression of the plot, Rivera Garza mimics the violence of the criminal on a textual level.

Indeed, Rivera Garza shifts the focus of this detective novel from the traditional storyline to issues surrounding reading and writing itself. As Cheyla Samuelson points out, all of the characters are, in some form or another, writers ("Líneas" 262). The victims' professions are journalist, librarian, translator, and teacher; Cristina Rivera Garza is a professor of literature; the murderer has a clear affinity for writing, evidenced by the lines of poetry alongside the bodies and the disparaging messages he or she sends to la Detective and Cristina; and as mentioned previously, la Detective is more adept at writing enthralling reports than conducting investigative work. The medium with which these characters work, language, thus plays a central role in *La muerte me da*, like many other metafictional works.

One idea that is emphasized repeatedly, most often through la Detective and Cristina's thoughts, is that language is anything but innocent or neutral, but rather that intended or unintended signifieds abound (Saussure 963-4). After the third castrated victim is found, la Detective contacts Cristina again, and as the two are talking Cristina recalls:

> Pensé—y aquí pensar quiere en realidad decir ver—en lo larga, en lo interminable, en lo incesante que era la palabra des-mem-bra-mien-to. Pensé—y aquí pensar quiere decir enunciar en voz baja—en el término *asesinatos seriales* y me di cuenta de que era la primera vez que lo relacionaba con el cuerpo masculino. Y pensé—y aquí pensar quiere decir en realidad practicar la ironía—que era de suyo interesante que, al menos en español, la palabra víctima siempre fuese femenina (29-30).

First, the way in which Cristina obsessively clarifies the meanings of the word "pensé" is significant. By continually including addendums to the word "pensar," she demonstrates the fluid nature of the verb, which acquires distinct meanings as the context shifts. Cristina also becomes aware of additional layers of significance in the words relating to castration that have subconsciously altered her perception of the victims and make the already gruesome crimes seem even more sinister. That is, like la Detective, Cristina too recognizes the inherent violence of language. Her reflection upon the length of multisyllabic word "desmembramiento" is a metaphor that, like "desentrañar" for la Detective, allows Cristina to grasp the excruciatingly prolonged and gruesome death each victim must have suffered.

Perhaps most interesting about the passage cited above is Cristina's reflection upon the word "víctima." The word is a feminine noun in the Spanish language, and yet these victims are men, and thus every time someone refers to them, either in the newspaper or conversation, calling them 'víctimas,' "esta palabra los castrará una y otra vez" (*La muerte* 30). In that sense, this semantic dismembering perpetuates the violence, replicating the original crime again and again (Samuelson, "Líneas" 263-64). By calling attention to the gender inscribed in the word "víctima," Rivera Garza also underscores that the subjugation and victimization of women is not

just a visible reality, but it is, in fact, fundamentally associated with women in language itself. As Waugh's explains, metafictional writers like Rivera Garza "have come to focus on the notion that 'everyday' language endorses and sustains . . . power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently 'innocent' representations" (11). Later, Cristina affirms that despite the realization that "víctima" automatically implies a female referent, "Nadie encontraría . . . una forma gramatical adecuada para masculinizar a la víctima y . . . por ello . . . los diarios se referirían al caso como el de los Castrados" (228). It is as if the close association between women and victimization makes it impossible to separate the two even in language, and thus newspapers choose a word that refers to the severing of male genitalia because, ironically, that allows a male gender construction.

Nevertheless, Cristina's careful attention to language is not only reserved for its more serious associations; she also sees a playful side of language. When Cristina is in bed with Valerio, the narrator describes the following: "Es un lecho: la cama femenina. . . . Calcetines debajo de las almohadas. Demasiadas almohadas (¿almo-hadas?, ¿hadas de alma masculina?)" (147). In the first sentence, we presume that what the narrator means is not just that the word "cama" is feminine—which is already clear from the article and is also implied by "a" at the end of the word—but that the bed is Cristina's. Then, however, the narrator 'plays'[190] with the gendering of "almohadas," wondering if in "almohadas," the word "hadas" belongs to a masculine soul. The narrator's use of the more formal word "lecho," which often refers to one's deathbed, as opposed to the more colloquial "cama" is also significant. Immediately preceding the reference to the bed they share, the narrator associates sex with castration: "Piensa en la frase

[190] I am following Patricia Waugh in her use of the word "play," which is not to be understood in the trivial sense of the word, but rather it refers to the way in which metafictional authors ". . . re-evaluate the traditional procedures of communication and allow [a] release from established patterns" (36). See p. 34-39 in Waugh's *Metafiction* for more on "play."

«máquina de cortar» cuando abre sus dos piernas y cuando las cierra: tijeras . . . . Piensa en la espada" (147).[191] Referring to the lovers' bed as a "lecho" is thus intentional, as the description of this encounter is a violent, if not fatal one.

Another playful, yet macabre examination of language occurs when Cristina notes that the verses by Alejandra Pizarnik found alongside the second victim's body are dedicated to the poet's friend, Julio Cortázar and his wife, Aurora. Cristina notes: " . . . tampoco pude dejar de ver que en la misma superficie del apellido Cortázar se escondían, amenazantes, un cortar y un azar –palabras que, en ese momento, carecían de toda inocencia" (32).[192] While initially Cortázar appears to be simply a name, seen alongside the victim of castration, the name takes on a macabre connotation. Although some critics may find this manipulation of gendering or the deconstruction of words a frivolous or trivial exercise,[193] this minute attention to individual words is intended to shift the reader's attention towards the central focus of the novel: language itself. As Evelyn Fishburn reminds us, Pizarnik also experimented with this sort of semantic "play" in her correspondence with friends. Fishburn explains that the poet's " . . . punning pyrotechnics are a strategy to deterritorialize language and free it from clichéd use. Pizarnik exploits proper nouns for their sonic as much as their semantic properties, indulging freely in the

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[191] We see the same comparison between sex and castration when Cristina and el Amante de la Gran Sonrisa Iluminada are making love: "Todavía me veo verlo: un cuerpo dentro de otro, imbricados, exhaustos. Su sexo engullido por el mío. Grandes hazañas, sí. Los dos cuerpos. . . . La piel erizada por lo que observo: la falta. La inaudita castración. Por lo que no se puede observar. Aún espero el advenimiento de la sangre. Una gota. Un flujo. La marea" (40).

[192] Not only was Cortázar a friend of Alejandra Pizarnik's, they also shared some interests, which the writers explored in their work. Alejandra Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta* (1971) centers upon Erzsébet Bathory, a sixteenth-century Hungarian countess who is believed to have tortured and killed hundreds of girls. Cortázar likewise mentions Countess Bathóry in *62: Modelo para armar* (1968). In *Rayuela* (1963), Cortázar makes reference to a photograph of the Chinese torture of the thousand cuts, (80-83), a photograph that inspires Salvador Elizondo's novel about dismemberment *Farabeuf* (1972). Rivera Garza also quotes Elizondo in *La muerte me da* (207).

[193] Manuel Mejía, for example, protests that these are " . . . simples juegos de palabras, ajenos por completo a [la] trama policial" (49).

fun of making new connections" (38). This is precisely what Rivera Garza's character, Cristina, does above.

Not only do words often add inadvertent signifieds, language often limits, indeed castrates, our expression; we are forced to express ourselves within the confines of language. As mentioned previously, the assassin leaves verses of Alejandra Pizarnik alongside the victims' bodies, linking her poetry to the crime first in a very immediate way, but the association is, in fact, quite profound. The theme of castration, specifically the castration of expression via language emanates from the verses of Alejandra Pizarnik's poem "En esta noche, en este mundo":

> Las palabras del sueño de la infancia de la muerte
> Nunca es eso lo que uno quiere decir
> La lengua natal castra
> La lengua es un órgano de conocimiento
> Del fracaso de todo poema
> Castrado por su propia lengua (55)

The excerpt above suggests not only "el fracaso final de la empresa poética" (Abreu Mendoza 307), but also Pizarnik's personal struggle to write prose instead of poetry. For her, "la fragmentación . . . siempre fue, más que una elección aleatoria, y/o racional, una condena" (Rivera Garza, *La muerte* 195). The verses also express a wider frustration with one's own language, which does violence or castrates one's message (Samuelson, "Líneas" 243). In a sense, we are all victims of castration, in that we are bound to the restrictions of language.

In addition to exposing the subversive nature of language and challenging the conventional structure of the detective novel, Rivera Garza also poses intriguing issues of

fictionality by frequently blurring the lines between fiction and reality. She achieves this principally by creating a character that is nearly indistinguishable from herself, reminiscent of Borges' evocation of his own alter ego in the short story "Borges y yo" from the collection entitled *El hacedor* (1960). As Carmen Carillo contends, this is typical in metafiction: "La novela metaficcional se caracteriza por introducir como ente ficcional el autor del texto" (n. pag.). The fourth chapter of the novel, entitled "El anhelo de la prosa," consists of what appears to be a scholarly article published in the journal *Hispamérica* by Dra. Cristina Rivera Garza from ITESM-Campus in Toluca. As Samuelson notes, this "article" conforms to standards of academic writing, including copyright protection, extensive bibliographic citations, and so on ("Líneas" 284). Nevertheless, this article was not, of course, ever published in *Hispamérica*, but rather forms a part of this metafictional 'game' (Waugh 34-39).[194]

While Rivera Garza experiments with the boundaries of fiction by incorporating elements that very closely resemble reality in the narration of *La muerte me da*, she simultaneously does the opposite; she underscores the seemingly unreal in "reality"—that is to say, reality within the context of *La muerte me da.* When la Detective questions the mother whose son was killed, for example, la Detective concludes: "La mirada de la madre que ha perdido un hijo, especialmente si ese hijo ha muerto de manera violenta, no es comparable a ninguna otra cosa en el mundo. Esa mirada carece de metáfora, de analogía, de metonimia. En sentido estricto, entonces, se trata de una mirada que no existe" (116). Here again, Rivera Garza touches upon the limits of language in capturing our lived reality, as the anguished look on the mother's face is beyond description. The affirmation that the mother's look is indescribable, however, does not obscure the image of the mother's face. On the contrary, denying the reader a description of the expression

[194] The examples listed here are only a few of the ways in which Rivera Garza complicates the distinctions between fiction and reality in this novel, as examining all such instances is beyond the purview of this project. Critics have yet to study all such metafictional constructs in *La muerte me da*.

paradoxically intensifies the look upon the mother's face in the reader's mind. Similarly, after the third body is found, la Detective consults with Cristina again, and the latter muses: "cuánto esfuerzo creer lo que uno tiene frente a los ojos" (31). While in this case Cristina is specifically remarking upon how difficult it is for the mind to process these horrific crimes, the impersonal way in which she phrases this sentence leaves open the possibility for it to refer to numerous things in life that are simply unbelievable, even when we see them with our very own eyes.

Cristina Rivera Garza's subversive detective novel leaves the reader with very few answers; as we are warned midway through *La muerte me da*, "Lo que en realidad pasa: Eso no lo puede saber la novela" (107). As Samuelson notes, not only are "the crimes . . . never solved, but more importantly, we are left with the sensation that the killer has been multiplied in the novel, or that in the place of the killer there is simply a question mark" ("Líneas" 274). Abreu Mendoza applauds Rivera Garza's treatment of the detective storyline: "El acierto de la autora a la hora de posibilitar [una lectura creativa del texto] radica en no haber sucumbido a la tentación de revelar la identidad del asesino" (310). Castration is the torture by which the victims perish, but as mentioned previously, it also functions as a metaphor for the way in which language castrates our expression, thereby making all of us victims of this crime. Simultaneously, however, Rivera Garza also reiterates that the reader is an aggressor in her citation of Edmond Jabès at the end of the book: "Violamos un libro para leerlo, pero lo ofrecemos cerrado" (262). That is, in our analysis of a text, as in the investigation of a crime (la Detective's task of "desentrañando la historia"), we probe it, breaking pieces of the text apart, seeing it through our own, invariably limited, lens. As Hind explains, "la lectura exacta o 'cerrada' no viola el libro pero esa lectura es imposible; por ende cada interpretación que sea otra cosa que la *re-presentación* del texto termina violándolo al interponer tesis extrañas al original" ("Lo anterior" 323, emphasis in

original). In that sense, Rivera Garza artfully forces the reader to consider his or her own culpability rather than that of the unidentified killer.

Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman's *Backyard/Traspatio* and Cristina Rivera Garza's, *La muerte me da* both center upon a series of violent, corporal crimes. Carrera and Berman's film reveals how exploitative foreign-operated *maquiladoras,* endemic police corruption, and widespread apathy help perpetuate the femicide in Juárez. *Backyard/Traspatio* presents the disturbing idea that police officers like Blanca who aim to put an end to the serial rapes and femicide of women and girls are the exception in Juárez. By portraying officials promulgating a policy of indifference with scenes of horrific violence, Carrera and Berman forcefully condemn the general apathy among Mexican citizens, which allows the killing to continue. While Carrera and Berman forcefully denounce the femicide in Juárez, their characterizations of Blanca and Juana unfortunately reinforce the patriarchal notion that female sexuality and femininity are synonymous with vulnerability. Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da* represents another response to the recent femicide in Juárez. Unlike Carrera and Berman, Rivera Garza introduces a reversal of typical gender roles, depicting four male victims who have suffered the torture of castration. Rather than following a more traditional storyline, Rivera Garza mutilates the structure of the detective story, using castration as a metaphor through which she prompts the reader to consider reading, writing, and language. By leaving verses of Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry by the victims' remains, the murderer implies that bodies are texts to be read, but la Detective, who repeatedly refers to herself as "analfabeta," fails to uncover the culprit. Rivera Garza employs a doppelgänger motif, pointing to the violent process of deconstruction performed both by her alter ego, a professor of literature, and la Detective. In that sense, the author equates the notion of textual deconstruction with investigative work. Furthermore, by

signaling the violence of critical reading, the author implicates the reader of her own text, *La muerte me da.*

Conclusion

Women's detective fiction is thriving in Latin America today. A genre that once seemed unworkable to writers in the region, detective fiction now serves as a vehicle for socio-political criticism, allowing writers to expose and denounce corruption and challenge figures of authority. Women authors from Latin America have adopted the detective fiction frame, using it as a platform for subverting traditional gender roles and defying stereotypes. Moreover, the female detective figure provides women powerful models of resistance, granting them a role of authority in which they can address injustice. In this dissertation I have examined how female-authored Mexican and Argentinean detective fiction contests restrictive and reductive notions of femininity and female behavior, creating a new vision of empowered female agency.

Syria Poletti's detective stories are the focus of my first chapter. In Poletti's texts, the investigation of a crime provides the reader a fascinating view of the interactions and relations among families, especially between female family members. Rather than relying on physical evidence, which can be destroyed, Poletti's detectives are observant of the behavior of those around them, and use their imagination to consider the possible motives behind the crimes. By depicting female investigators who employ both stereotypically "feminine" and "masculine" investigative means—intuition and deductive reasoning, respectively—Poletti posits a detective who resists gender stereotypes. Thus, while her stories center upon a family milieu, Poletti's female protagonists are not defined by traditional gender roles. On the contrary, women are portrayed as supporting and defending the family and the community, while men are depicted as physically and emotionally fragile. In each text, a man's betrayal of his family is held up as further evidence of his weakness. However, Poletti avoids a one-dimensional representation of women by depicting in "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte" what Rita Felski calls "the

possibility of female error and cruelty" (125). Unlike investigators in classic detective fiction stories, Poletti's protagonists do not reveal what they discover over the course of their investigation, but rather become "the secret bearers of knowledge" (Simpson, *Detective* 48). In "Estampa antigua" and "Mala suerte," the detectives guard the killer's identity, as they feel a sense of solidarity with and thus wish to protect the respective murderess, while in "Rojo en la salina," the protagonist is the last in her community to discover her husband's guilt. In that sense, Poletti's stories do not provide the satisfying sense that order is restored; nevertheless, her protagonists find their own approximations of justice.

In the second chapter in this study, I examine Angélica Gorodischer's two humorous thrillers, *Floreros de alabastro, alfombras de Bokhara* and *Jugo de mango*, which feature two "little old ladies" (Chouteau and Alderson) who are comically improbable detectives. Unlike sleuths of classic detective fiction, Gorodischer's investigators eschew reason, succeeding largely thanks to chance. While Delmira is an inadvertent or unwitting detective, the protagonist of *Floreros* has experience in espionage, and is sought out and paid handsomely for her detective work. Given her experience, the protagonist of *Floreros* possesses "unfeminine" expertise, and is therefore savvy, for example, in car mechanics. Knowledge of car mechanics is such a stereotypically "masculine" domain that we see another depiction of women fixing cars in Carrera and Berman's *Backyard/Traspatio*. For these artists, then, portraying women performing tasks not typically ascribed to their gender offers a vivid way of defying gender stereotypes. While Gorodischer presents numerous gender role reversals in *Floreros*, depicting her protagonist as fighting back physically against those who aim to oppress her, Gorodischer simultaneously affirms the power of feminine acts such as childbirth and mothering. Still, the

protagonist accepts the espionage mission in Mexico despite her daughters' disapproval, signaling her refusal to allow her familial duties to restrict her professional ambitions.

Unlike the protagonist of *Floreros*, Delmira of *Jugo de mango* has no investigative experience, but rather becomes a detective inadvertently. Through Delmira's character, Gorodischer provides a model for women to assume agency and fight back against patriarchal repression. Unlike male hard-boiled detectives, the protagonist of *Floreros* and Delmira both admit to feeling fear in moments of grave danger. Nevertheless, the women either recall how or learn to acknowledge fear, while refusing to let it paralyze them. Thus, Gorodischer's novels reveal the author's aim to re-write the traditional narrative of women behaving submissively or falling victim to their fear. Although Delmira undergoes a remarkable evolution over the course of the novel, she stops short of a complete transformation, as evidenced by her insistence that the political problems that plague this Caribbean country are unlike those that could ever affect Argentina, her country of origin. The dictatorship depicted in *Jugo de mango*, in fact, bears resemblance to the Videla dictatorship in Argentina, and thus such an attitude reveals that remnants of Delmira's conservative upbringing, which instilled in her cultural elitism and xenophobia, remain.

In chapter three, I analyze Claudia Piñeiro's *Elena sabe* and Myriam Laurini's *Morena en rojo*, which are two detective novels that center not on individual crime, but rather repressive and exploitative institutions. Elena's inquiry into her daughter's death thus becomes an investigation into how she has allowed repressive institutions to victimize her. By the end of the novel, Elena recognizes the role she has played in the subjugation of others, namely Isabel Mansillas and her now-deceased daughter, Rita. Piñeiro's novel brings to light several issues that have, until very recently, scarcely been explored by male or female authors. As mentioned previously, her novel

is, to my knowledge, the only detective novel that has illustrated the shame surrounding menstruation.

Myriam Laurini's *Morena en rojo,* like *Elena sabe*, depicts not just one crime, but rather a series of abuses carried out by repressive institutions. La Morena is a reporter for the *nota roja*, and as a mulatta woman she has, like the women whose lives she chronicles, been a victim of discrimination and subjugation. Spurred by her desire to relocate María Crucita and write a book about this marginalized woman who suffers years of exploitation before retaliating against her oppressor, La Morena journeys throughout Mexico, recounting numerous stories of similarly oppressed women. Having discovered a veritable underworld of crime, La Morena attempts to denounce these abuses in the papers, but her superiors censor her, as her articles threaten to expose their complicity in the wrongdoings. Due to the rampant corruption among the police in Mexico, the fictional La Morena, like many reporters in Mexico today, carries out investigations that were once reserved for the police. Both Piñeiro and Laurini expose important issues that have, until very recently, been avoided by male and female detective fiction writers. Laurini, for example, depicts woman-to-woman violence in homosexual relationships. By weaving the detective story into the testimonial tapestry, Laurini gives voice to the marginalized, victimized women whose voices have previously been suppressed.

In the final chapter, I analyze *Backyard/Traspatio* by Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman and Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da*, both of which are artistic responses to the recent femicide in Juárez, Mexico. In *Backyard/Traspatio,* Carlos Carrera and Sabina Berman reveal how foreign-operated *maquiladoras*, rampant police corruption, and widespread apathy among the Mexican population allows the femicide of young women and girls to continue. René Girard's theory of the scapegoat provides a useful framework for understanding how Blanca, the

fictional police captain who is determined to put an end to the killings, is quickly singled out and ostracized first by her venal superior, the Comandante. While Carrera and Berman strongly denounce the corruption and profit-hungry *maquiladoras*, which help perpetuate this blatant violation of human rights, they do so while, unfortunately, failing to provide a powerful representation of femininity and female sexuality. While Blanca is a strong female character, she is intentionally "de-feminized," as she avoids makeup and wears clothing that conceals her feminine features. Juana, the rural village girl who is brutally raped and murdered towards the end of the film, on the other hand, is portrayed as highly sexualized and feminized. Cristina Rivera Garza novel, *La muerte me da*, represents a very different response to the recent femicide in Juárez. While Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da*, like nearly all works of detective fiction, begins conventionally with the discovery of a corpse, *La muerte me da* subverts almost every other convention of the genre, ultimately denying the reader a conclusive ending. Rivera Garza likewise experiments with metafiction and includes numerous intertextual references in her untraditional detective novel. Just as the perpetrators in *Backyard/Traspatio* inflict brutal corporeal violence upon their victims, the murderer in *La muerte me da* subjects his or her male victims to the torture of castration. As I have argued, castration becomes a metaphor through which Rivera Garza explores language, critical reading and writing. Just as La Detective realizes the violence required to perform detective work, Rivera Garza underscores the violence inherent in textual criticism, implicating the very reader of her novel.

Although the diverse works analyzed in this study vary in approach, they are united by their common vision of female empowerment. By locating authority in the female detective figure, women writers challenge limiting gender stereotypes and conventional norms of female behavior while refashioning the detective story in fascinating ways. This emerging field of detective

literature is not only noteworthy on an artistic level, but it also offers valuable models of female autonomy, and a rich area of scholarly criticism.

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