Born of Coatlicue: Literary Inscriptions of Women in Violence from the Mexican Revolution to the Drug War

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes literary representations of female agency and the interrelationship of women and violence in fiction from Mexican, Chicana, and Spanish authors. It is structured around two historical periods of extreme violence affecting Mexican society and the Mexican-American communities across the U.S.-Mexico border: The 1910 Mexican Revolution, and the turn-of-the-century crisis of the Nation-State that had emerged precisely out of that revolution. This comparative framework provides insight into the strategies of survival and female agency within the weakening or literal collapse of the networks of security afforded by such post-revolutionary State. I argue that although the selected literary corpus records some of the worst violence in the history of the region, the texts ultimately articulate underlying messages of female agency through active participation and do not merely reproduce images of either passivity or victimhood.

Through diverse female protagonists united by their coatlicuensidad, or dual identities of creation and destruction, I show that regardless of their subject position, these women’s agency triumphs in spite of violent environments of societal—the disruption of structures and institutions—and social—the disturbance of humane interaction among people—upheaval. The novels transcend textual boundaries to become both social and intellectual arms of resistance and remembrance against systematic gender violence, silence, and impunity because they prioritize female voices and stories. While the women born of Coatlicue defy some traditional gender roles by acting out just as violently as their male counterparts and by becoming just as
complicit in perpetuating violence, in other cases they simultaneously sustain their deep maternal and creative instincts. This oscillation between beauty and horror and peace and cruelty addresses the complexity of female subjectivities during explosions of violence at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The first chapter investigates how these narratives focus on the prominent roles of women and their memories of the emotional impact of the revolutionary violence, instead of praising the great male heroes of the Revolution and the official history of the movement. Through an analysis of material culture and critical nostalgia, we see how these women utilize the revolutionary past to comprehend widespread violence, as well as to inform and affect the present and the future. Next, chapter two examines the effects of the demise of the post-revolutionary regime and its seven-decade old model of Nation-State and the specific types of violence generated in this period. It draws attention to the victims of femicide in northern Mexico, as the border practically becomes a literal battlefield between the forces that represent the erosion or even demise of the Nation-State and those of the State’s security apparatus. The victims of this form of gender violence, in turn, come to represent the most salient casualties of such an erosion. This chapter also looks at the construction of matriarchal communities of knowledge amid this conjuncture and how they serve to foster social justice and encourage public grieving for murdered women. These novels return the voice to the women and expose the societal conditions, or structured institutional violence that precipitate and sustain femicidal violence and other abuses.

Finally, the third chapter explores the *narconovela* in order to uncover the ways in which women use their agency and power to enact the violence of the Drug War by arguably subverting the subordinate role assigned to them, or to conquer their fears to report about the
violence and stand up to it. Whether their motivations originate in perpetuating drug crime and profiting from it or denouncing it, like the women in the previous chapters their stories are largely ignored or at best mythologized. This drug-related fiction highlights women’s positions in the narcotics trade, in addition to demonstrating how they are affected by this most recent wave of violence.

To Charlotte and Clifford
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Vita

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Introduction

Since the conquest of the Aztec empire, the deity *Coatlicue*, her variations, and spectacular stone sculpture at the Museo de Antropología in Mexico City have long been studied. A complex earth goddess who is touted as both creator and destroyer of life, *Coatlicue*, or the one with the serpent skirt, dually symbolizes fertility and death. Christopher Alex Chablé affirms that “[p]oets like Pat Mora, Ana Castillo, and Sandra Cisneros use the image of Coatlicue as a conceit representing feminist creative force in their poetry…” (333). In “It Occurs to Me I am the Creative/Destructive Goddess Coatlicue,” Cisneros explores this multipart identity that is creative and destructive; strong and forceful. Gloria Anzaldúa describes *Coatlicue* as the goddess who “…da luz a todo y a todo devora” (68). Jean Franco describes “…a corpus of writing on the Latin American heart of darkness,” where stories like Rubén Darío’s “Huitzilopochtli” and Carlos Fuentes’ “Chac Mool” emphasize the various manifestations of the *Coatlicue* icon and the “…dark pre-Columbian forces [that] lurk under the surface of modern life” (205). This image combining light, life and creativity, and darkness, destruction and death has inspired the selection of the multidimensional Mexican and Mexican-American female protagonists in my study who embody these qualities individually and collectively. I use the image and symbolism

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1 Cecelia F. Klein explains that “[t]owering over visitors at the Museo Nacional de Antropología, this statue, at a height of over eight feet, remains the largest three-dimensional Mexica carving in existence. Discovered in the course of reconstruction and drainage work in the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City in 1790, the statue was named for the figure’s magnificently carved skirt, which is formed by multiple intertwined rattlesnakes. The skirt and the figure’s exposed breasts make it clear that the statue is gendered female. The snakes have long been regarded as an ideogram for the name Coatlicue, ‘Snake Skirt,’ or, more accurately, ‘Snakes-Her-Skirt.’ The skirt, in other words, tells us the name of the being portrayed in the statue” (230-231).
of Coatlicue, the mother of the Aztec deities, metaphorically in order to emphasize the fact that the women in my analysis exhibit these doubly functioning constructive and destructive identities. In the face of turbulence and violence, some of these women are creators and protectors of life, while some are destroyers, and some are both. Like Coatlicue they must occupy a subject position in and between maternity and cruelty.

Similar to the ways in which the mythological figure of Coatlicue is appropriated by scholars like Anzaldúa as a powerful creative force representing Nepantla and the mestiza consciousness, the Chicanas and Mexicanas in my analysis are constantly navigating a third space where the paths between violence and love are not at all distinct. That is, acts of humanity and acts of cruelty coalesce within them and outside of them in dynamic ways to shape their subjectivities and experiences. Anzaldúa explains further that:

Coatlicue depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror. (69)

Through the female characters in my study we will face this fusion of opposites and contradictory identities through the violent contexts of the Mexican Revolution and that of the neoliberal period in which the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, and the violence generated by the so-called Drug War appear. In each chapter we will discover how fiction portrays moments of beauty and horror amid these three diverse explosions of violence at the border, especially as they concern women. Without always explicitly mentioning Coatlicue, each chapter exhibits its own coatlicuensidad in the sense that they work through the contradictory issues relating life and death in order to expose female agency in many of its diverse manifestations.

From soldaderas and nurses to unyielding investigators, journalists, murdered women, criminals, and callous queenpins, I will show that regardless of their subject position, these
women’s agency triumphs in spite of violent environments of societal—the disruption of structures and institutions—and social—the disturbance of humane interaction among people—upheaval. Even those women with the most unfortunate of situations like the victims of femicide exhibit important agency before they are wrongfully killed at the hands of men who are threatened by their position as independent family leaders whose production at the maquiladoras produces objects of value for the global economy.

Despite the fact that nurses from the revolutionary brigades are vastly different from the female criminals of the Drug War, they are united by their female powers and metaphorical relation to the goddess Coatlicue. While I will not attempt to make this dissertation another direct study on the mythological goddess, which has already been brilliantly performed by writers like Ana Castillo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherrie Moraga, I will use the conceptualization of Coatlicue as a symbol of birth and death as a springboard for the analysis of my female protagonists who seem to contradictorily disrupt and maintain traditional binaries related to gender and violence simultaneously. In other words, I will demonstrate how these characters oscillate both inside and outside of stereotypically gender stratified roles to reveal a more complex vision of survival within moments of extreme violence at the U.S.-Mexico border.

As we journey through the lives of these women born of Coatlicue’s fusion of nurture and terror in fiction, it is important to emphasize that they come from extremely diverse historical epochs: the revolutionary period and the turn of the millennium crisis of the post-

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2 “In her novel, Sapogonia, author Ana Castillo draws upon the stories and image of Coatlicue, an Aztec goddess, to haunt the souls of her two protagonist lovers, Máximo Madrigal and Pastora Velásquez Ake” (Bonadies 1).
3 In an interview with Maria-Antònia Oliver-Rotger, Cherrie Moraga explains her interest in Coatlicue: “I discuss my fascination with Coatlicue simply based on the fact that she is the goddess with the power to create AND take away life. The latter of our powers as females has been repressed in our cultural memory. I resurrect that memory of Coatlicue” (1).
revolutionary State amid the implementation of neoliberal policies in the country, one of the most faithful practitioners of the Washington Consensus in Latin America. While it is clear that the manifestations of violence related to the female experience during these two periods are indeed extremely different, we remember that this dissertation is organized thematically with a focus on women immersed in violence in the borderlands. While it would easily be possible to write a thorough manuscript covering any one of these historical moments and the resultant cultural production, my comparative approach serves a larger purpose to discover how women’s roles in stories of violence have been represented over time in border literature. In the end, this allows us to think more abstractly about the role that fiction, mythology, and imagination play in solving real life problems on the ground—and thus moving away from a simply metaphorical understanding of the third space toward a praxis of the physical border and its crossers and inhabitants.

At every turn in my research I could not ignore the questions and ideas that connected these seemingly disparate historical poles. As I kept observing references to Mexico’s every century wars, to a second Revolution, or to Mesoamerican cosmovision and the destruction of the suns, it may have been the paradoxical Coatlicue pulling me into an inconsistent world of contradictions related to women and violence at the border. Unable to ignore the prominence of each period in Mexico and the potential for synthesizing them in this dissertation, I have opted to unify these historical events through the Mexican and Mexican-American women who, regardless of their time and place, confront and propagate violence and love with determined effort and total agency. In this way, the works included in my analysis do not idealize or essentialize femininity as merely a peaceful force on Earth. Nor do they portray masculinity as
its exact opposite. Instead, the novels in my study engage with a less simplistic depiction of
gender, violence, its agents, and the societal structures, and social conditions that perpetuate it.

In sum, my dissertation explores representations of this larger relationship between
women and violence in contemporary narratives from Mexican, Chicana, and Spanish authors
through fictional articulations of the 1910 Revolution and the collapse of the security network
established by the post-revolutionary State, which for a long time had monopolized violence in
Mexico. In fact, according to Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda with regard to the drug trade:

…during the rule of the PRI, it would appear that the government actually controlled
much of the trade and entered into pacts with traffickers to ensure the state took its
share of the profit. This arrangement maintained a relative stability until the last two
decades, during which the monolithic PRI edifice has started to crumble and power
relations have begun to shift. It was a sinister development when Mexico’s political
system switched to a multi-party democracy in 2000 and a number of cartels used the
transition to empower themselves, moving in to capture elements of the state and to
assume control over them. (8)

This comparative framework of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Mexico provides insight
into the continuity of female agency and survival over time as society evolves and violence
mutates or transforms itself. I argue that although the corpus of representative novels that I
have selected record some of the worst violence in the history of the region, they ultimately
expose underlying instances of female agency through the representations of active female
participants from and in the Revolution and more recently in a period that can be identified as
that of the demise of the post-revolutionary state and the emergence of the neoliberal state. As
a result, in many cases the novels transcend textual boundaries to become intellectual arms of
resistance against prevailing patriarchal discourses that continue to perpetuate violence, as well
as to perform acts of remembrance for the lives of these female characters to the extent that
they prioritize their voices and stories. Here, the women born of Coatlicue defy some expected
gender roles by acting out just as violently as their male counterparts, yet simultaneously sustain their deep and loving maternal instincts.

The first chapter takes on the violence of war, or the war machine in the Deleuzian sense of referring to that which lies outside of the State and is cultivated by difference and nomadic movement—in this case the various factions of the Revolution. In order to analyze the representations of women and violence in these novels, this chapter investigates how women convey the cruelty of the Mexican Revolution while honoring the anonymous multitude\(^4\) behind the frontlines. Instead of simply praising the great heroes of the Revolution and the public history of the movement, these narratives focus more on the prominent roles of women and their memories of the emotional impact from the violence and societal upheaval. At the same time, they also show how women use violence, aggression, and assertiveness to protect themselves and their families.

Borrowing from material culture theory, which looks at what the study of artifacts tells us about different cultures and time periods, I first examine how the young narrator in Nellie Campobello’s *Cartucho* (1931) juxtaposes objects of war with objects of peace in order to demonstrate how violence and acts of kindness are embedded together in a complex manner in the text. The analysis of these objects communicates the fierce brutality of the Revolution, as well as emphasizes the necessity of hope amid tragedy. As I describe how the young Nellie interacts with the objects (and the people and body parts that she objectifies), I discuss what they tell us about these dual feelings of humanity and cruelty within our narrator. Like *Coatlicue*,

\(^4\) In their acclaimed books, *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004), political philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt discuss the concept of the multitude, which constitutes the creative and productive beings and forces behind democracy that work toward a common desire of liberation. While the Empire represents a new global form of sovereignty, the multitude are the creative forces that sustain the empire that also possess the capability to autonomously create a counter-Empire or other alternative political organizations, such as revolution and revolt.
Nellie balances the opposing forces of humanization and dehumanization in order to confront the daily tragic realities of the Mexican Revolution.

Next, basing my study on Ray Cashman’s ideas regarding critical nostalgia and its practice, I illustrate how Nellie Campobello utilizes nostalgia as an effective tool for judiciously evaluating the past, present, and future in *Las manos de mamá* (1937). Here, I show how Campobello’s narrative has the potential for promoting personal and societal reform by engaging the reader in a reflective exercise regarding the past. The essential component of this particular case of looking back to the past is the way in which the text represents a female retelling of the stories of the Revolution that emphasizes a mother-daughter bond. In other words, Campobello’s homage to her Mother’s hands is fundamental to a reimaging of the revolutionary period from the female perspective. Throughout my analysis of this maternal figure whose hands both save lives and fight for her children; we will sense the presence of *la dualidad coatlicuense*.

To conclude this chapter I discuss the female-centered memories of the Mexican Revolution in *Las rebeldes* (2011) by Mónica Lavín. Although the text was written long after Campobello’s works, it serves similar ends in the sense that it explores the untold stories of the women behind the great revolt that have been overlooked in traditional accounts of Latin American histories and literatures. Here, I examine how this work of historical fiction constitutes a female remembering and rewriting of the Revolution based on Liedeke Plate’s conception of women’s rewriting as narratives of the past retold from a typically marginal female character from the original version. In our case this refers to Leonor Villegas de Magnón and the women of the nurses’ brigade who remain at the periphery of the official historical records of the Revolution. The novel, then, portrays the women as active participants in the revolt and brings
their stories to the forefront, thus challenging other accounts that have long ignored their important contributions. So, while it is true that the novels in this chapter come from varying historical and socio-political contexts, there is no denying that all contribute to the ongoing cultural process of reshaping our conceptions of female roles during the Mexican Revolution. In this chapter the act of analyzing artifacts, memories, and nostalgia transcend temporal boundaries as useful skills for evaluating the past and present in order to develop an awakened consciousness, as well as to construct a better future for Mexico and its border.

Next, chapter two moves from the revolutionary violence at the start of the 20th century to gender violence produced by the neoliberal shift at the turn of the 21st century initiated by President Miguel de la Madrid’s adoption of free-market economic policies. It marks the contrast between violence produced by the ideologies and desires of reform on the part of the multitude and their clash with federal forces, and gender violence against women as a result of a host of factors related to male dominance and State sponsored impunity. While there were indeed many complicated factions of revolutionary soldiers, each pushed, at least in some ways, for political and land reform for the masses left in the margins by a feudal division of property and power under Porfirio Díaz. In this way, they utilized the violence of war to forward their social and political platforms, often triggered by important manifestos, proclamations, and grassroots community organization. Although the neoliberal economic model and the chaos

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5 Watt and Zepeda state that: “In 1982, with the election of de la Madrid and in response to the economic crisis, the political orientation of the PRI—which until then had attempted to cater, at least on some levels, to differing political beliefs and interests—changed direction in favour of a fiercely right-wing free-market ideology. The policies resulting from this volte-face were intensified and reinforced during the subsequent administrations of presidents Salinas (1988-94) and Zedillo (1994-2000)” (74).

6 Historian Alan Knight explains that it “…often seemed less a Revolution than a multitude of disparate revolts, some endowed with national aspirations, many purely provincial, but all reflecting local conditions and concerns...it was the local roots which gave the Revolution its sustenance” (2).

7 One such example is Madero’s Anti-Re-electionist cause. Alan Knight explains that “…Madero set about publicising the Anti-Re-electionist cause, drawing on his own ample funds. In June 1909 El AntiRe-
that nurtures the femicides and the drug war surely have ideologies tied to pure capitalism and
the endless quest for profits at all costs, human or otherwise, they do not possess the same
political organization and underlying reform goals as the Revolution.

Like the nurses and other female revolutionaries, this chapter draws attention to
another more tragic group of unheard women through the victims of gender violence and the
femicide machine. I employ the term gender violence in this case to refer specifically to the
systematic abuses against the female body and spirit by men and institutions that intentionally
view and attempt to keep women in positions as marginalized subjectivities. Similarly, the
femicide machine, as defined by Sergio Rodríguez González, deals with the conditions and
institutions that lead to the murder of women at the border and guarantee impunity for the
perpetrators. Additionally, as a point of contrast to these acts of cruelty at the hands of men,
this chapter looks at the significance of the construction of matriarchal communities of
knowledge where alternative approaches to official investigations are highly valued. Similarly,
these female-centered knowledge communities serve to foster social justice and encourage
public grieving for the victims of femicide in Ciudad Juárez by reimagining their real lives instead
of solely focusing on the disheartening and impersonal statistics that journalism brings. Thus,
rather than telling the stories of the men behind the crimes, the novels included in this chapter
return the voice to the women and expose the widespread societal and social conditions that
precipitate and sustain femicidal violence and other abuses.

eleccionista, a weekly edited by José Vasconcelos, began to appear and, in the same month, Madero
undertook his first national speaking tour, sailing from Veracruz to Yucatán...thence to Campeche, back to
Tamaulipas and Nuevo León” (59).

8 Ignacio Corona and Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba define gender violence as “psychological and physical
harm that is inflicted on individuals on the basis of their gender or sexual orientation” that also goes
beyond this to include “an extended set of conditions that impedes the realization of an individual’s full
life potential” (4).
Beginning with *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and *Ciudad final* (2007) by Kama Guiter, I analyze how the novels work to expose these societal conditions that support violence against women. Here, as Alicia Gaspar de Alba has emphasized, this approach disrupts traditional images of machismo and misogyny in order to collapse the perpetrator-victim binary. Thus, by employing the theories of such scholars as Ana del Sarto and Melissa W. Wright regarding the systemic violence caused by neoliberal economic structures and policies, and the blame-the-victim discourse, respectively, I identify how the authors emphasize conditions over causalities. Simultaneously, I explore the ways in which the texts contrast this cruelty with an endless quest for knowledge and urge for social action.

Next, I utilize Judith Butler’s discussion of post 9/11 U.S. policies on war and the ways in which mourning and violence can alternatively lead to solidarity and global justice from her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* to demonstrate how the multi-perspective consciousness promoted by the novels in question also has a potential to lead to justice. Here, too, I also read these narratives about femicide as acts of public grieving to the extent that they attempt to elaborate on the possible lives of the victims. In this sense they serve a similar function as obituaries and eulogies, which Butler considers to be products of nation building through the inclusion and exclusion of specific subjectivities.

The last novel in this chapter, *If I Die in Juárez* (2008), contributes to the same conversation outlined above, and adds to the mix a series of distinct components including fantastical and magical realist elements, indigenous traditions, and a more intimate look inside of the *maquiladoras*. The strongest maternal link in this text is similar to what we see with the relationship between Nellie Campobello and her mother. In this case, however, the bond is between Abuela Teodora and her granddaughter Petra who is the one that works in the
maquiladora and experiences violence most directly. Like Campobello who extols the virtues of her mother’s autochthonous roots in the northern Mexican sierra, Petra and Abuela Teodora share a mutual respect and understanding of the Tarahumara culture from their native Montenegro. As we will witness in the analysis, Petra invokes the female powers from these enduring indigenous ties in order to survive her own attack, as well as prevent similar future incidents. Finally, this novel also depicts the importance of sisterhood by building solid connections among the three young protagonists in order to highlight the need for establishing female-centered communities that will denounce impunity and promote solidarity.

Regardless of their individual plot constructions and nuances, all three novels work together to stimulate the shift proposed by Gaspar de Alba from who is responsible for the crimes to what conditions help us understand why women are being systematically killed in Ciudad Juárez. Each narrative implicates everyone in society to some extent and points to a whole range of complicit behaviors, rather than simply blaming individual perpetrators. Through the protagonists’ journeys from unawareness to a greater consciousness about the femicides, they emphasize female-centered communities of knowledge and contest silence and impunity.

Finally, the third chapter explores the narconovela and the criminal violence related to the narco-machine, or ubiquitous presence of illicit trafficking and other illegal activities in all of their diverse forms, in order to uncover the ways in which women position themselves before the violence related to the Drug War. Whether their diverse motivations originate in enabling drug crime, resisting it, or denouncing it, like the women from the previous chapters their stories are largely ignored or at best mythologized. This drug-related fiction highlights women’s positions in the narcotics trade, in addition to demonstrating how they are affected by this most recent wave of violence. I begin with a conceptualization of the narconovela as a subgenre and
as a useful category for the academic study of multiple texts dealing with drug-related themes. Using Rafael Lemus’ argument that all northern Mexican authors who write drug fiction attempt to imitate reality as a point of departure, I seek to reveal that there are more shades to the narconovela ranging from pastel hues to sanguine tones. To that end, I argue that Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s *La reina del sur* (2002) presents a neatly packaged violence, while texts like Orfa Alarcón’s *Perra brava* (2010), Víctor Ronquillo’s *La reina del pacífico y otras mujeres del narco* (2008), and Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s *Tijuana: Crimen y olvido* (2010) move us closer to the anti-novela, which Lemus considers the only appropriate form for depicting the utter chaos of the narco-machine.

At the same time that I advocate for a positive connotation of the category of narconovela, I also emphasize the significance of female protagonism in drug-related fiction and support its further examination. Here, it is important to note that while the queenpins and other violent female perpetrators do not necessarily promote hope and social justice like their counterparts in the preceding chapters, they at least exhibit various levels of female empowerment and agency—albeit for violent ends. Although the female narco criminals accentuate Coatlicue’s cruelest aspects, in many instances we can see how the characters fluctuate between ambivalence and emotion toward humanity. Concurrently, the women also vacillate between breaking with patriarchal norms and nourishing them depending on the context. Like the women that come before them in this dissertation, like the paradoxical figure of Coatlicue, and like the chaotic nature of pure violence itself, the queenpins and other women in some way associated to drug trafficking embody these contradictory personalities during the most recent explosion of violence at the border.
Thus, whereas some women are empowered through high-end positions in the drug trade, others are victims of violence and disparaging patriarchal discourse. Here, I utilize Melissa W. Wright’s discussion of the Mexican government’s “public woman discourse” that blames the victim and depicts drug traffickers as rational, logical, and competitive businessmen. In spite of the structures of power and violence working against them in many instances, the women in this chapter especially exemplify survival and agency. Whatever the nature of their protagonism may be, like the narconovela as a subgenre, women’s roles within narcofiction warrant further scholarly examination. All told, drawing from a myriad of perspectives and approaches, each novel in my comprehensive study represents the female experience through explosions of criminal violence, gender violence, and war. Through these three categories of violence, that scholars often refer to as machines, we witness a more pronounced coatlicuensidad within the female protagonists who are forced to navigate these treacherous moments in time and space.

As we have observed thus far, just like the female protagonists of the novels, these tumultuous periods are inextricably linked through encumbering violence and trauma. Considering that the Mexican Revolution of 1910 is one of the greatest revolts of the 20th century that left at least a million dead, that the Femicides in Ciudad Juárez constitute the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history, which has claimed hundreds of lives and disappeared many more, and that the Drug War is the worst wave of violence in Mexico since the Revolution with an estimated 70,000 dead⁹, we begin to see how the two periods align for my exploration of women and violence in fiction. Although these “historical” and socio-political contexts in Mexico, at the U.S.-Mexico border, and elsewhere are indeed absolutely

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⁹ In a February 2013 article, Tracy Wilkinson of The Los Angeles Times estimates this number at 70,000. The nonprofit group Human Rights Watch released a report in February 2013 documenting 250 disappearances with the true total estimated to be approximately 20,000 (hrw.org).
distinctive, it is fruitful to examine how fiction can bond some of the most violent periods in human history.

Some leading intellectuals, such as Enrique Krauze, have even made the connection that Mexico has a war every century with the struggle for independence from Spain in 1810, the Mexican Revolution beginning in 1910, and the height of the Drug War in 2010. Journalist Luis Vega argues that one of the common factors among all three events is a struggle to control trade and its lucrative routes (The People’s Daily Online). In his article for Voces del Periodista, Rami Schwartz calls the Drug War the Second Mexican Revolution, due to the fact that not since the first has Mexico suffered such sweeping violence. Further fueling the mythology is the association of these violent disturbances with Mesoamerican cosmovision. Similar to what we observe with the figure of the goddess Coatlicue, the idea that creation is born of destruction and the subsequent order established from chaos forms part of general Mesoamerican thinking. In fact, in his acclaimed book, Memoria mexicana, Enrique Florescano discusses the three creation myths: the creation of the universe, the cyclical creation of the suns, and the creation of the Quinto Sol, which is fueled by human sacrifice (110). In each case, the new creation destroys the old and replaces it with a new cosmic order. While I would not suggest that a change in the cosmos is likely what is killing women in Ciudad Juárez or murdering those caught in the Drug War’s crossfire, I do find it useful to investigate how fiction articulates overwhelming and catastrophic eras like these, as well as how it can contain an underlying mythic level that resonates with other conceptions of myth throughout history.

Another important link among the works in this dissertation is the current popularity of historical (revisionist) fiction and the crime novel. Due to the centennial of the Revolution in

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2010 and the Femicides and Drug War, in the novel genre we are seeing a surge in those books that deal with historical, investigative, violent, and murderous themes. That is, we are witnessing a reimagining and rearticulation of historical violence, in addition to expressions of the present situation of brutality most closely affecting Mexico. Additionally, despite the thematic connections relating to violence, all of the texts raise the question of the relationship between reality and imagination in articulating these events. They all inspire us to consider the role imagination plays in thinking dynamically about how to solve real life problems. The newspaper article is too often just a list of statistics, but a novel can invent names and stories. The divergent thinking that fiction provides cannot be overlooked.

By placing these works that are directly from or represent these periods side by side, we can compare how the respective authors are addressing and responding to violence through fiction and how they are involving female protagonists as crucial and not just accessory components. Despite their many differences from origin and structure to theme and more, the literary works in my exhaustive analysis are joined together by a geocultural focus on Mexico’s northern region and by their strong female personalities, among other representational elements. My dissertation enriches the field by performing some of the first profound close readings on recently published novels relating gender and violence, and by shedding new light on more familiar texts, such as those of Nellie Campobello.

In the previous discussion of the chapter structure I have defined the violent machines distinctly. Now, I would like to define violence more broadly and summarize important theorizations on the topic in order to show why I have adopted Slavoj Žižek’s approach in this manuscript. In its most general terms, violence is defined as an exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse, as an intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force, and
as the strength of emotion or an unpleasant or destructive natural force. In his *Critique on Violence*, Walter Benjamin distinguishes between positive law, “which sees violence as a product of history,” and natural law that States use to justify the use of violent means for what they consider to be just ends. According to Benjamin, “…both schools meet in their common basic dogma: just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means used for just ends” (278). David Allinson effectively synthesizes Benjamin’s argument:

Benjamin’s critique shows that the authority of law, when seen naked, is based on a myth…This critique of violence illuminates the complex relationship between violence and the law, in its subjective and systemic manifestations. However, while Law has a tempering effect upon otherwise socially destructive interpersonal violence, despite its necessity, it is simply another form of violence which it seeks to contain. (1)

Although Benjamin’s conception of violence according to natural and positive law is clearly influential to other theories, this distinction is not something that I will allude to in this document. However, momentarily we will observe how Žižek characterizes this State-sanctioned violence in his conceptions that form the basis of my understanding of violence in this dissertation.

Likewise, before moving forward it is important to consider Hannah Arendt’s ideas about violence from her renowned book, *On Violence*. As we see in Benjamin and will see in Žižek, Arendt also recognizes that the clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence is false. That is, violence festers both inside and outside of human and natural laws. Although Arendt focuses on the relationship between violence and power and the importance of distinguishing linguistically the terms violence, power, strength, force, and authority, I will only address here her notion of violence as a destructive agent. Arendt affirms that “[v]iolence

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12 As will be discussed in a later chapter, this also relates to Achille Mbembe’s conception of the modern sovereign State that utilizes State-sanctioned violence through necropolitics, or the power to decide who will live and who must die.
can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power” (53). In Arendt’s estimation, power belongs to a group or community and refers to the human ability to act in concert with others. While according to Arendt’s definitions this type of power can never grow out of violence, I would have a difficult time arguing that paramilitary forces like the Zetas cartel are not indeed both extremely violent and powerful.

Thus, in order to approach my own study of violence in fiction, I turn to Slavoj Žižek’s recent theorizations of the subject. Although I incorporate various theories regarding violence, female agency, and other concepts addressed in the individual chapters, I appropriate Žižek’s understanding of violence as a global definition that I thread in distinct ways throughout this entire dissertation. In Violence: Six Sideways Reflections, Žižek encourages us to consider the systemic violence imbedded within generally accepted societal structures and institutions, and not just simply focus on blatant observable acts of violence. He contends that:

[a]t the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance. (1-2)

The fictional works in my thesis expose these “contours of the background” by examining violence from a multi-point perspective. They expose the many layers of violence that lurk behind the perpetrator-victim dichotomy. In this way violence embodies its own coatlicuensidad in the sense that it functions and interacts in diverse and complicated ways much like the seemingly paradoxical goddess. Therefore, the novels remind us that in any of the cases considered, there are a multitude of conditions that come together and breed violence. For
instance, many factors—societal, social, economic, and political, etc.—aligned to produce the body in the desert and the perpetrator who put it there.

Žižek, then, divides the concept of violence into two categories: subjective and objective. Subjective violence refers to visible acts of crime and terror, and objective violence is further segmented into symbolic violence, violence embodied in language and its forms, and systemic violence, resultant of the “smooth functioning” of economic and political systems (1-2). Žižek emphasizes that:

...subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against a background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the ‘normal,’ peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence. (2)

Capitalizing on the underlying economics of some news, the media does a great job of accentuating these “irrational” explosions of subjective violence. It is much easier to point a finger at a cartel leader than to blame the entire neoliberal capitalist market. Whether we are contemplating the Mexican Revolution, drug wars the world over, or school shootings in the U.S., in order to find proper solutions to preventing and combatting violence, we must be willing to admit that many of our own institutions contribute to the trauma. As the reader will discover, the novels presented here expose and condemn many of the corrupt policies and processes deeply entrenched in society.

In addition, Žižek’s glances toward violence are sideways because he believes that confronting violence directly is a mystifying feat, which ultimately, through “overpowering horror,” prevents us from thinking clearly about it. He uses the example of victims of trauma
whose stories are perceived as more truthful when they are less clear. That is, too much clarity
leads to perceived doubt about the victim’s story. While at first this step back may seem
cowardly and cold, Žižek maintains that “[t]he only appropriate approach to [the] subject thus
seems to be one which permits variations on violence kept at a distance out of respect towards
its victims” (4). In the same vein, Žižek criticizes the fake sense of “act now” urgency that
pervades “the left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence." He asserts that:

[t]hrough this fake sense of urgency, the post-industrial rich, living in their secluded
virtual world, not only do not deny or ignore the harsh reality outside their area—they
actively refer to it all the time. As Bill Gates recently put it: ‘What do computers matter
when millions are still unnecessarily dying of dysentery?’ (7)

Žižek exemplifies this to show why the stepping back and taking a longer and more profound
look at violence approach is considered dispassionate regarding the trauma and suffering of
others. It is my goal, then, to illustrate how works of fiction have the potential to lead us to a
deeper conceptualization of violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Thus, a similar thought could be applied to fiction: What can entering the fantasy world
of a novel do for tangible problems on the ground? Even if it does not conform to the “act now”
method, the work of fiction serves to promote more critical, divergent, and imaginative thinking
which has the potential to lead to practical solutions to contain acts of violence. My point here is
that society needs both the “act now” pushers and the “step back” thinkers to combat violence
and cruelty in all of its subjective and objective forms. This recalls Héctor Domínguez-
Ruvalcaba’s and Ignacio Corona’s ideas with regard to connecting the community to the

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13 Later on, Žižek adds that “…liberal communists are the very agents of the structural violence which
creates the conditions for the explosions of subjective violence. The same philanthropists who give
millions for AIDS or education in tolerance have ruined the lives of thousands through financial
speculation and thus created the conditions for the rise of the very intolerance that is being fought” (37).
academy in their volume *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*. They argue that:

> [a]ctivism is not only taking these issues to the streets, almost a precondition to draw media attention, but also addressing them in a diversity of critical forums that can be established even in classrooms, where they need to be heard and discussed. For most of us, interpreting and discussing textual representations constitutes our primary professional practice. In relation to such an urgent issue as gender violence, the profession can foster a direct connection between theory and practice. Like those scholars who were devoted to the testimonial genre in the eighties, the study of violence establishes a collaborative agenda with local organizations, which constitutes another form of critical intervention and linkage between community and academia. (6)

Thus, fiction, in concert with other mediums and methods, is vital to the articulation and understanding of the most violent moments in human history. As we will soon observe, many of the books in my study explicitly address and promote this collaborative agenda. As this dissertation pulls various time periods, contexts, and people together through the interactions of gender, *coatllicuensidad*, and violence, we must remember that whether we are talking about the women involved at the frontlines of the Mexican Revolution, the *maquiladora* workers, the fearless journalists and authors who expose injustice, or the women participating in the drug trade for survival, their stories must be told through diverse genres at all levels of discourse in order to combat the systematic silencing of their voices and desires throughout history. As Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy\(^{14}\) reminds us: “We know of course there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

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\(^{14}\)From *The 2004 Sydney Peace Prize Lecture*. 
Chapter 1: Female Memories of Revolutionary Violence and Love

1.1 Introduction.

The Mexican Revolution is considered one of the most violent social and cultural upheavals of the 20th century. According to Robert McCaa, who acknowledges that “there is no consensus among scholars,” the combination of the death toll through armed struggle with the Cristero rebellion, disease, immigration and other demographic factors, historians estimate that somewhere between 1.9 and 3.5 million in total were lost during the revolutionary period\textsuperscript{15}. This history of harm and cruelty, surpassed only by the Spanish Civil War\textsuperscript{16}, has produced its own subgenre of literary works depicting the people, events, and effects of the Mexican Revolution. *La novela de la Revolución* represented by such celebrated authors as Mariano Azuela, Martín Luis Guzmán, Juan Rulfo, and a host of others, broke with traditional narrative techniques to create a collective protagonism in order to demonstrate the destructive and tragic collateral damage left in the wartime conflict’s wake\textsuperscript{17}. According to Elena Poniatowska, “[l]a novela de la Revolución Mexicana es probablemente la más estudiada de las literaturas de América Latina” (qtd. in Matthews III).

\textsuperscript{15} According to his study: “Missing Millions: The Human Cost of the Mexican Revolution” (2001).


\textsuperscript{17} In her article, “La novela de la Revolución Mexicana y su adaptación al cine: El caso de *Los de debajo de Mariano Azuela,*” Claudia Arroyo Quiroz affirms that “[l]a Revolución Mexicana dio pie en México a una producción novelística que ha sido considerada por la crítica como un corpus literario específico y denominado como La Novela de la Revolución Mexicana. De acuerdo con el crítico cultural Carlos Monsiváís, este corpus comprende una serie de novelas que comparten una visión pesimista de la Revolución, se inician con la obra de Mariano Azuela (*Andrés Pérez Maderista*, 1911; y *Los de abajo*, 1916), terminan con *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (Carlos Fuentes, 1961) e incluyen otros autores como Martín Luis Guzmán, Rafael F. Muñoz, Mauricio Magdaleno, José Revueltas y Juan Rulfo” (58).
While the cultural products that have resulted from the Mexican Revolution have long been of interest to historians and cultural and literary scholars alike, not all have received the same attention and acclaim. Nellie Campobello, whose position among the great writers of the Revolution has gained impressive ground in recent decades, is worthy of additional study and inquiry even today. To this end, the first part of this chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of her now well known works, Cartucho and Las manos de mamá. By approaching these texts from new theoretical perspectives dealing with material culture and nostalgia, my analysis contributes to the continued study and relevance of Campobello’s work as part of the Latin American literary canon. I look beyond the sentimentality of the novels to reveal how violence and peace are strategically juxtaposed in a coatlicuensian sense, as well as how a recall of these moments serves as a critical evaluation of the present and the future. Following this study, I will shift the focus to Mónica Lavín’s Las rebeldes, a more recent novel that constitutes a female retelling of the prominent roles of women and their memories during the violence of the Mexican Revolution. Emphasizing the female voices and perspectives of this historical social movement is essential since:

La participación de las mujeres en la lucha revolucionaria determinó un cambio ideológico respecto de la emancipación femenina y también un cambio económico social que permitió modificar el modelo de lealtades femeninas, de sometimiento y de supuesto desinterés por los asuntos nacionales que por largo tiempo habían impedido que las mexicanas fueran consideradas miembros activos de la comunidad nacional. (Lau and Ramos 13-14)

1.2 Objects of War and Peace in Cartucho by Nellie Campobello.

In his prologue to the 2000 Era edition of Cartucho, Jorge Aguilar Mora goes as far as to say that:

Cien años de soledad no hubiera sido posible sin Pedro Páramo y Pedro Páramo no hubiera sido posible sin Cartucho de Nellie Campobello. Ésta anticipa lúcidamente muchos rasgos que definirán el estilo de Rulfo: ese trato constante de las palabras con el
While Nellie Campobello’s *Cartuco* is most frequently ignored or only mentioned briefly in literary anthologies, Aguilar Mora situates it among the foundational Latin American novels of the 20th century. While it is unclear if Rulfo ever actually read Campobello, Aguilar Mora attempts to link the two novels in order to emphasize the significance of *Cartuco*, which has not received the equal praise that it deserves. Whatever the case, there is no doubt that *Cartuco* occupies an important place among the other novelas de la Revolución.

Not exceptionally unlike the women who populate the rest of this dissertation, Nellie Campobello’s last days are shrouded in mystery. In 1997, a year before the Commission of Human Rights of the Federal District discovered that Nellie Campobello had died on July 9th, 1986 and was buried in the Progreso de Obregón Cemetery of Hidalgo; Irene Matthews published her biography with a prologue penned by Elena Poniatowska. According to Matthews, an aging Campobello disappeared from her social circles and home “right under the nose” of the court appointed judge investigating the situation with the family accused of taking advantage of her. Claudio Niño Cienfuentes and María Cristina Belmont, a former student of Campobello’s and dance teacher at the National School of Dance, allegedly began weaseling themselves into the writer’s life in 1975. Campobello began protecting the family and their children from their self-proclaimed miserable existence by allowing them to live in her basement. By 1983 they had taken over her mansion and began to represent the writer in her financial affairs, which became the impetus to the investigation against them (Matthews 174-177).

Poniatowska’s poignant words regarding Campobello’s, at that time, approximately twelve-year disappearance ring hauntingly true to today’s murdered and disappeared women in
Mexico and beyond. In fact, one of Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s characters, who we will meet in the next chapter, says virtually the same thing about the gender of the victims of femicide in Ciudad Juárez. Poniatowska sustains that:


Through her writing and dance, Nellie Campobello captured the brutality of the Revolution and Mexican society during much of the 20th century, and was ultimately treated with similar cruelty, whether psychologically or physically, during her last years of existence. While her life can be considered in many ways a success and a tragedy, Poniatowska urges us to not soon forget the ways in which both her life and works have been regarded based on her subject position as a female. In death, this marginalization is steadily rupturing through the academic study and appreciation of Campobello’s revolutionary works. This is precisely why I explore her two novels through the distinct lenses of material culture and nostalgia.

Before engaging in this analysis, however, some additional background information is required. The single most important female presence in Nellie Campobello’s life was that of her mother Rafaela Luna. Born in Villa Ocampo, Durango in 1879, Rafaela is the inspiration behind the maternal figure in both Cartucho and Las manos de mamá. Matthews informs that as the future general Francisco Villa was turning his home, Villa Ocampo, into his center of operations, Rafaela and her family moved to Hidalgo del Parral, the place where a young Nellie saw the Revolution unfold (13). Unfortunately, the violence intensified just as Rafaela and her children had situated themselves in Parral. Matthews explains that “[l]a guerra, las luchas, las balaceras, el ruido del cañón, los asesinatos, los ahorcados, los heridos, los muertos…aparecen en las
mismas calles donde intentan vivir y sobrevivir los habitantes...La vida cotidiana se veía interrumpida constantemente” (33). When Rafaela dies in 1922, Campobello and her remaining siblings, including María Soledad Luna, her younger sister and dancing partner later known as Gloria, move to Mexico City. Here she meets prolific writer and then director of *El Mundo*, Martín Luis Guzmán, whose professional relationship proves fruitful for Campobello’s maturation as a writer. While I will not attempt here to rewrite the extensive work of Irene Matthews’ seminal biography on Nellie Campobello, I hope only to emphasize the profound impact of her artistic and intelligent contributions to the areas of literature, dance, culture and public education in Mexico.

Perhaps Campobello’s most lasting impact on Latin American letters is the female voice she has provided—at a time when she herself realized that she was writing “en el vacío,” as Poniatowska puts it. Matthews also reminds us that:  

[a]un cuando parecen ser poco sofisticados políticamente, o en apariencia sumisas a las demandas de otros, las protagonistas femeninas de Nellie Campobello actúan por su propia voluntad y son conscientes de sus acciones. La versión narrativa de la vida de una madre ironiza y transforma, a través de los detalles cotidianos, la masculinidad heroica y la feminidad histérica, tan frecuentemente representadas en la épica revolucionaria tal como en las peripecias de José Vasconcelos, el *Ulises criollo*. Además, aunque mucha literatura de la Revolución es documental y autobiográfica, normalmente casi no ofrece ninguna descripción de la vida privada de los protagonistas; el poco entendimiento que tenemos del mundo interior de los personajes es porque está apagado bajo los más grandiosos estrépitos de una sociedad en guerra. Las obras de Nellie Campobello representan una visión alternativa de la guerra civil de México: una visión femenina de la catástrofe popular que rompe los límites de la poética y la ética convencionales. (80)

Like the other works in my extensive study on violence through the eyes and at the hands of Mexican and Mexican-American women, in many instances Campobello breaks with traditional

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18 Also sketchy are the details surrounding the birth of a son named Raúl. Matthews reports that on February 1st, 1919, Nellie Campobello (born Francisca Moya) gives birth to the baby boy at the age of 18. Apparently he is a family secret named a late arrival for her mother Rafaela. The secret would not last long, however, since Raúl died of bronchopneumonia on May 11th, 1921 (37).
male and female binaries, from the dual *coatlicuensian* roles of her mother to the structures themselves of her works, to reveal a more complex vision of the Revolution and its enduring brutal influence.

Divided into three thematic sections and narrated in fragments by a young Nellie, *Cartucho* exposés war’s violence and death through the eyes of a child. These divisions consist of *Hombres del norte*, episodes about soldiers fighting in the war; *Fusilados*, which depicts executions; and *En el fuego*, that tells additional stories of the cruelty, death, and destruction of war. Considering this fragmented structure, Valeska Strickland Nájera points out that “[e]l fluir del tiempo pasado al presente intensifica el sentido de irrealidad y llama la atención del lector. Cabe bien dentro del marco de ensueño establecido [a lo largo del texto]” (86). Since *Cartucho*’s narrative structure is neither chronological nor linear, it is common for the reader to witness the deaths of characters only to hear their backstories pages later. The only constant in the narrator’s life is the presence of her mother who serves as an elemental contrast to the male figures who fight and die in front of her daily. Matthews demonstrates that Nellie’s mother becomes the unlikely hero of a text named after ammunition and a dead soldier:

...el poder de Mamá no reside únicamente en la fuerza de la resistencia: ella toma la iniciativa y toma riesgos, como debe hacer un héroe...La realidad suele desmentir las ideas convencionales de cómo la guerra afecta a los no-combatientes. Nos damos cuenta de que ‘las guerras civiles pueden ocasionar para las mujeres la posibilidad de escoger politicamente,’ nos dirá Nellie: la Revolución Mexicana, y la actitud de Mamá dentro de ella, también demuestran las fuerzas escondidas de la mujer bajo el fuego. (92)

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19 In her dissertation, “La obra de Nellie Campobello,” Valeska Strickland Nájera discusses the changes from the first (1931) and second editions (1940) of *Cartucho* at length. She explains that “[d]urante los nueve años entre las publicaciones, su técnica había madurado y, por lo tanto, pudo dar una visión más amplia y completa del ambiente de su niñez. La diferencia fundamental entre las versiones se debe al cambio de perspectiva. Al poner énfasis a lo colectivo en vez de a lo familiar, se disminuye la calidad de ‘crónica’ que caracteriza la primera versión. Campobello no elimina todo lo autobiográfico, pero su preocupación artística resulta que su estilo sea mucho menos personal y que su enfoque sea más novelístico” (63). For my own analysis I am using the second edition.
In this context, where the men around her are absent or dying, Nellie’s mother must become the true hero by protecting herself and her family from the dangers of war. While she may be a non-combatant in the most literal sense, Nellie’s mother surely displays a fighting and formidable spirit throughout the text. In this way, she invokes Coatlicue’s duality through both her maternity and her necessary combative nature during wartime.

Similarly, Strickland Nájera shows how the contrast between the love of the mother and the devastation of the soldiers at war create an essential balance in the novel. She states that:

Campobello pinta la Revolución como un poder que destruye el amor, pero afirma que no todos pierden su humanidad en el ambiente alterado. En Cartucho, particularmente, los varios aspectos del amor se relacionan con el dolor. Sin embargo, las referencias a los sentimientos de los personajes, hasta el énfasis en el aprecio sincero que los villistas sienten para su general, sirven para mitigar el sentido cruel de la novela. (104-105)

In this passage, the Revolution is likened to the force that is Coatlicue. Similar to the Aztec goddess, the Revolution seems to destroy love, while simultaneously inspiring acts of humanity among Mexicans. Also, this sense of love and devotion as a mitigating force against violence and destruction is one that Campobello emphasizes in her writing. Although there is no doubt that she regarded the ideals of Villa and the “true heroes of the Revolution,” it seems that Campobello, through her own example of a lifetime of dedication to writing, dancing, and education, advocated for the arts and schools as pathways toward societal change that directed away from the need for violence. As we will observe in many of the texts included in my wide-ranging study, stories that portray some of the darkest moments in human history can still breed love, hope, and even optimism.

In his article, “Memoria y guerra en Cartucho de Nellie Campobello,” Max Parra demonstrates how Campobello approaches the subaltern or the perspective “desde abajo” of the Mexican Revolution better than any other writer of her era. Although I agree with the
emphasis he places on the elements of orality, psychology, and personal and collective
expressions of emotions imbued in the text, we should be careful to not simply equate a female
voice to these stereotypically feminized categories. Parra explains that:

La premisa general de nuestro análisis supone que en el acto de rememorar Campobello
hace visible, a través de las reacciones de los personajes ante la violencia y la muerte,
los mecanismos psicológicos de defensa que, tanto a nivel individual como colectivo,
urde la naturaleza humana para protegerse en momentos de peligro. (168)

I certainly agree that the steadfastness that Nellie’s mother exhibits in the face of the violence
of the Revolution and at the sight of her dead compatriots illustrates these psychological
mechanisms reacting toward survival. I would just problematize the notion that Campobello
deliberately makes these visible. That is to say, it seems to me that we have to infer these
reactions, rather than observe them on the written page.

Parra also states that “[e]n Cartuco las escenas de violencia constante, además de
darle credibilidad a los relatos, crean un ambiente donde se amenaza la salud mental” (169). He
describes how this causes the characters in the text, especially the young girl, to develop coping
mechanisms to survive in the face of the reality of unbearable war. Parra cites three episodes
where the narrator is desensitized toward death. He claims that:

[en ‘Desde una ventana’ el proceso de desensibilización ante la violencia y la muerte
llega a un grado extremo. En este relato la narradora es testigo de un fusilamiento que
ocurre junto a su casa...Ante esta escena de terror y muerte la niña muestra, más que
miedo, curiosidad. El cuerpo yace tres días frente a su ventana y la niña, fascinada ante
la presencia física de la muerte, termina por ‘acostumbrarse’ a la compañía de un
cadáver que, se imagina, está durmiendo muy cerca de ella. ‘Me pareció mío aquel
muerto,’ (942) dice, en un proceso mental de apropiación. Como ella no puede
confrontar la realidad devastadora de la guerra, tiene que deshumanizar al muerto. Para
la niña, el muerto no es más que un garabato, adquiere el aspecto de un muñeco que
entretiene a la niña y no el de un hombre muerto brutalmente. Al transformar al muerto
en un juguete se hace posible enfrentar el tipo de existencia que impere en el pueblo.
(170)
There is no doubt that our narrator dehumanizes the dead bodies by likening them to her dolls and playthings. At the same time, though, it seems that scholars like Parra are attributing adult mental faculties to the child that she is not yet equipped with. It is not that she cannot confront the devastating realities of war and must develop a coping mechanism. Rather, she does not fully grasp what death means. This seemingly insignificant fact is lost to many who have attempted to analyze the role of the young narrator in *Cartucho*. Wanting to read more into her words, thoughts, and actions, it seems that too many adult behaviors and mental capacities are being projected upon her. While she is growing into a woman born of *Coatlicue*, Nellie’s compass between humanity and dehumanization is nascent.

Tabea Alexa Linhard has commented similarly that “...physical violence (perpetuated in both the public and the domestic domain) is neither extraordinary nor shocking for young Nellie” (37). I contend that she is neither desensitized to nor un-shocked by death; instead, she has not yet psychologically internalized the true meaning of it. It seems to me that Campobello uses this infantile female voice precisely because she is not yet desensitized to death like the adults around her. That is, she can describe death and destruction in a crude and blunt manner without being judged as being an insensitive or "desensitized" adult already corrupted by a lifetime of despair and violence. For young Nellie, death represents so many different things—scientific observation, relief, sadness, filth, grief, a game, miracles\(^{20}\) etc.—all because she is still processing what it means and how it affects her life and the lives of those around her.

Additionally, Parra goes on to say that:

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\(^{20}\) Nellie’s infantile understanding of death is highlighted in the vignette, “El milagro de Julio.” Nellie explains that Julio believed in la Virgen del Rayo and that she granted his wish to be little again: “Al volver a la iglesia todos entraron corriendo, Julio fue el ultimo. Apenas pudo llegar; ya iba herido. Se recargó en la puerta por dentro. Cuando lo buscaron, el milagro se había hecho. Julio estaba quemado. Su cuerpo se volvió chiquito. Ahora era ya otra vez un niño” (144).
Once again, I understand the thinking that the Revolution is just a game to the narrator. This may even serve as a criticism of the senseless violence perpetuated by adults that claims too many lives. However, the argument that she does not get to know the executed is weak. Why would she get to know them? She’s a child and they are often soldiers passing through town on their way to a battle or some other post. It is the adult soldier who can desensitize himself and dehumanize his enemies, not the child who witnesses their murders. She is simply unable to ascertain the full gravity of the situation in front of her.

Along these same lines, Parra emphasizes the idea that:

...la narradora intenta alejarse del horror de la guerra y para conseguir esto opta por alterar la realidad, mezclando lo real con la fantasía de la niña; deshumaniza a los muertos, disminuyendo el impacto que tienen sobre ella; se apoya en los valores de la sociedad donde vive. Estos mecanismos facilitan la vida dentro de un mundo inundado de muerte. (173)

This mixing of reality and the fantasy of a child’s imagination is definitely an important element to Cartucho’s narration. It assists the adult reader in transporting himself back to childhood and recalling a similar mindset (albeit one that likely does not involve memories of a civil war). In my estimation this does not represent a coping mechanism nor does it diminish the impact of death over the narrator. On the contrary, it helps her incorporate the schema of death into her already existing knowledge of it.

Although I have been critical of Parra’s ideas related to the minute details of the psychological functioning and survival coping mechanisms of the characters, his overall discussion of Cartucho is thorough and informative. He especially gets it right when he discusses the maternal figure in the text:
Para la narradora adulta que rememora su infancia, la figura materna es el enlace vital entre el espacio doméstico y el mundo de afuera, entre la vida familiar y las responsabilidades sociales. La madre es, por un lado, un personaje compasivo que deplora la guerra y lamenta la cantidad de vidas gastadas, pero, a la vez, es un agente activo que actúa a favor de los villistas, no es una ‘mera observadora de la lucha sino una partícipe en el frente doméstico, una ‘colaboradora’ que ama la paz,’ quien termina por encarnar la conciencia humana que la niña, por su edad, no puede tener. (176)

Parra underscores the importance of young Nellie’s mother as an active agent in the war.

Although she is inside the private sphere, or domestic front, she heroically tends to the soldiers and her children aggressively. Not only does she manage the home, heal the sick, and provide for and educate her offspring, but she also bravely stands up for her ideals much like the soldiers out fighting in the streets. This depiction of Nellie’s mother’s position as an assertive leader defies qualities like passivity and weakness traditionally attributed to females during this time.

Furthermore, like Parra illustrated in his psychological analysis, Linhard understands that there is more to Cartucho and other narratives of war than a series of simple chronicles of violence, battles, and death. She reminds us that “...they [also] provide a way into a particular discursive process: the attempt to articulate unsettling and violent events” (33). Here, Linhard aptly pronounces what all of the texts depicting varying forms of violence mentioned in my dissertation intend to do. Whether they are fictional primary texts, as is the case of the works I analyze, or non-fictional supporting materials, each sets out to communicate and question the realities and traumas of cruelty and carnage. When Alma Guillermoprieto21 asks how we should narrate Mexico’s drug war, when Diana Washington Valdez22 reports on the “harvesting” of women in Ciudad Juárez, or when Nellie Campobello and others paint tragic scenes imbedded

into their memories in fiction, the acclaimed journalists and authors enter into a dialogue that seeks to articulate and understand violence through a profound consideration of its causes, functioning, and persistence in society.

In an attempt to comprehend the violence and juxtaposing hope in Cartucho, and to move beyond a psychological interpretation of the narrator’s thoughts and behaviors, I propose an analysis of the objects with which young Nellie interacts throughout the narrative. While others have referenced her objects and objectifications, and subsequently commented on her reactions to a soldier’s guts or the personification of her doll Pitaflorida, to my knowledge no study has looked at them from a material culture lens. In my discussion of the narrative I will look at what I will call “the objects of war and peace” that serve to communicate the fierce brutality, as well as send a prevailing message of hope amidst violence. By analyzing the objects that Nellie mentions and describes, we can discover what she regards as most worth remembering from the Mexican Revolutionary era. Her relationships to the materiality of objects, that also grotesquely include body parts, give us a glimpse into the world through her infantile eyes. Like the objects in front of her, the young narrator leaves behind the artifacts of her turbulent childhood in northern Mexico for the reader to excavate and decipher.

According to Jules David Prown in his article, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” material culture is “…the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time” (1). A term most often associated closely with fields such as cultural anthropology, ethnography, and history, Prown emphasizes that “…the material of material culture is too diverse to constitute a single field. In practice it consists of subfields investigated by specialists—

\[\text{As Prown points out, and as I will use it in this chapter, the term material culture also refers to the objects and artifacts themselves.}\]
cultural geographers or historians of art, architecture, decorative arts, science, and technology” (1). During my analysis of the objects and their function in *Cartucho*, I am appropriating this definition in order to discover what the fictional material culture in the text tells us about violence and peace. While the figure of Nellie’s mother is the most prominent example of hope and love in the narrative, there are many objects, and interactions with them, that contribute to these same feelings. At the same time, the objects of violence also communicate a message of destruction and despair. By analyzing these objects and their purposes jointly, we will further understand how the young narrator and her neighbors reconcile the conflicting forces of war and peace in their quotidian lives. These conflicting forces remind us of the nature of the *coatlicuense* duality existing within the female characters and permeating through their actions and society.

In spite of all of the vividly violent imagery, there are various objects that represent signs of peace and friendship in the novel. In the vignette, “Cuatro soldados sin 30-30,” the young narrator discusses how the soldier, Rafael, became her friend through their exchange of smiles, dolls, and food. She explains that, “[s]e hizo mi amigo porque un día nuestras sonrisas fueron iguales. Le enseñé mis muñecas, él sonreía, había hambre en su risa, yo pensé que si le regalaba unas gorditas de harina haría muy bien” (103). This small gesture of sharing objects forms part of the basic moments of humanity revealed in the text. This moment of brief happiness reaches its peak with the symbolic breaking of bread among the characters. Unfortunately, juxtaposed in this scene, are Rafael’s pants, which Nellie describes as “los pantalones de un muerto.” Based on her experience of seeing many deceased uniformed men in front of her house, this type of pants has become a symbol of death. After three days of combat in Parral, Nellie describes the instance where she realizes that her new friend is dead:
En una camilla de ramas de álamo pasó frente a mi casa; lo llevaban cuatro soldados. Me quedé sin voz, con los ojos abiertos, sufrí tanto, se lo llevaban, tenía unos balazos, vi su pantalón, hoy sí era el de un muerto. (103)

This passage seems to negate the notion that the narrator is desensitized to death through her dehumanization of the soldiers and others. She openly describes how she suffered seeing her new playmate being hauled away by his brothers in combat. Although she describes “dead man pants” in a blunt and unapologetic way, when contrasted with her suffering it shows that she is reacting to death in a way appropriate to her age. She is mourning the loss of someone to share smiles, dolls, and gorditas with.

“La sentencia de Babis” is another story about the death of a friendship. Nellie fondly remembers Babis, who sold candy at the Japanese store, for his generosity and bravery:

Hacía un mes—un año para mis ojos amarillos—sin ver a Babis...[Un soldado] traía algo que contarle a Mamá... ‘Braulio, el que trabajaba en El Nuevo Japón en la calle del Ojito, se había ido con ellos. Era un muchacho miedoso.’ Así lo dijo aquel hombre... (Yo le quise saltar al oír aquello. Babis no era miedoso. Se robaba los dulces para mí). (111)

The soldier informed Nellie’s mother that Babis was taken prisoner during his first combat and was burned to death by the enemy. Here, Nellie expresses concern for her friend, and instinctively wants to defend his bravery for the acts of kindness that he had shown her. Once again, the candy represents simple objects of peace and friendship in the narrative.

Unfortunately, another object of violence, a barrel of petroleum, destroys this bond between two people. These little acts of humanity seem to be what help sustain Nellie and her family in the midst of constant brutal conflict and bloodshed.

The absence or disuse of objects also contributes to the overall violence in the novel. In an especially torturous chapter, “El fusilado sin balas,” the refusal to use a bullet to “humanely” execute the enemy shows how objects of violence can be controlled and utilized to yield their most dramatic and devastating effect. Here is the case of Catarino Acosta, a former colonel for
Tomás Urbina, who is tortured to death by his enemy Gudelio Uribe. After mounting him on a mule and parading him around the streets of Parral:

...dijo Uribe que no quería gastar ni una bala para hacerlo morir. Le quitaron los zapatos y lo metieron por en medio de la vía, con orden de que corrieran los soldados junto con él y que lo dejaran hasta que cayera muerto. Nadie podía acercarse a él ni usar una bala en su favor; había orden de fusilar al que quisiera hacer esta muestra de simpatía. Catarino Acosta duró tirado ocho días. Ya estaba comido por los cuervos cuando pudieron levantar sus restos. (104)

This lack of sympathy for human lives and bodies exhibits the darkest side of war. While most soldiers at wartime could accept killing their enemies swiftly via a bullet, the idea of torturing them to death takes on an entirely different level of cruelty and barbarity.

In some cases, the objects that our narrator points out simultaneously convey messages of violence and peace. If we consider the distressing vignette signaling the deaths of two indigenous brothers, Zafiro and Zequiel, we discover how the “red crystals” of blood represent destruction, as well as wholeness. When she goes to see their bodies strewn outside of the cemetery, Nellie remarks that “[l]a sangre se había helado, la junté y se la metí en la bolsa de su saco azul de borlón. Eran como cristalitos rojos que ya no se volverían hilos calientes de sangre” (105). The act of returning the crystalized blood to their bodies by placing it into the jacket pocket represents an effort to re-member the brothers and make their bodies whole again.

While the frozen blood ultimately serves as a signifier of death, Nellie repurposes it as a small way to honor her Indian friends who did not speak Spanish and communicated to her through gesture. Also, at first glance it seems that she is desensitized to their deaths when she says:

No me saltó el corazón, ni me asusté, ni me dio curiosidad; por eso corrí. Los encontré uno al lado del otro... Tenían los ojos abiertos, muy azules, empañados, parecía como si hubieran llorado. No les puedo preguntar nada, les conté los balazos, volteé la cabeza de Zequiel, le limpie la tierra del lado derecho de su cara, me conmoví un poquito y me dije dentro de mi corazón tres y muchas veces: ‘Pobrecitos, pobrecitos.’ (105)
While she expresses the fact that she is neither curious nor scared, Nellie’s actions with regard to the treatment of their bodies communicate an alternative message. She turns Zequiel’s head to clean it and counts their bullet wounds as a way to bear witness to their heinous deaths. Despite the fact that she matter-of-factly states that her heart did not jump and that she was only minimally moved by the sight of her friends, her acts of humanity, and almost maternity, here and throughout the text debunk the notion that she is desensitized and indifferent to the deaths around her. Her decidedly brusque language is an effect used by Campobello to characterize her as a young girl who calls the world and its problems as she sees them.

The chapter, “Nacha Ceniceros,” is one of the most cited from analyses of Campobello’s text. It is also one that underwent significant changes for the second edition. Related here is the story of a female revolutionary soldier who inadvertently shoots her lover in the head and kills him while she is cleaning her gun. In the original version, Villa does not care that she is a women and orders his troops to execute her. The story’s end confirms this outcome by sharing the legend of her burial: “Hoy existe un hormiguero en donde dicen que está enterrada” (107). However, in the subsequent version, Nacha Ceniceros is alive in her own home. The narrator explains that the truth had come out years after everyone thought she had been executed by Villa’s army. The brief description of Nacha that she was a “…coronela y usaba pistola y tenía trenzas,” illustrates how objects helped define her identity. The gun reveals her violent and aggressive side, while her braids serve as a marker of femininity; thus distinguishing her from her male counterparts. The following passage effectively encapsulates this dichotomy and reminds us of the representations of the goddess Coatlicue:

Nacha Ceniceros domaba potros y montaba a caballo mejor que muchos hombres; era lo que se dice una muchacha del campo, pero al estilo de la sierra; podía realizar con destreza increíble todo lo que un hombre puede hacer con su fuerza varonil. Se fue a la revolución porque los esbirros de don Porfirio Díaz le habían asesinado a su padre. Pudo
haberse casado con uno de los más prominentes jefes villistas, pudo haber sido de las mujeres más famosas de la revolución, pero Nacha Ceniceros se volvió tranquilamente a su hogar deshecho y se puso a rehacer los muros y tapar las claraboyas de donde habían salido miles de balas contra los carrancistas asesinos. (107)

First, this mythological description extols Nacha’s virtues as a female soldier and explains her motivations in avenging her father’s death for joining Villa’s brigade. I find most relevant, though, the second part regarding the various life paths she could have taken. Instead of becoming the hero of a violent revolution, she returned home to literally put the pieces back together after such widespread destruction. This seems to contrast Nacha’s ability to enact violence, with her healing skills as a maternal figure. At the same time, the last phrase emphasizes that Nacha never backed down from the enemy, which further demonstrates Campobello’s own continued support for la causa Villista throughout her life. In other words, the text seems to show that while the true ideals of the Revolution should never be abandoned, there comes a time when it is necessary to stop the fighting and pick up the pieces to ensure a better future for Mexico.

We catch a glimpse of José Díaz’s life and death through the vignette, “Mugre.” This title contrasts with the description of Díaz as “el más bello” with who all the women of la calle Segunda del Rayo were in love. Pitaflorida, Nellie’s doll, serves as the object of focus here. The young narrator shares how she will gussy up her doll to be Jose Díaz’s girlfriend. In a statement that foreshadows Díaz’s death, Nellie informs that:

Un día [Díaz] le contó a Toña que él odiaba el sol, por su cara y sus manos. A ella le parecía muy bien y a mí (que me decían ‘solera’) me pareció mucho muy bien, por Pitaflorida; yo nunca hubiera casado a mi princesa con un hombre prieto. (113)

While she is more than likely repeating the prejudices of the adults around her, the use of the color brown alludes to the filthy burned bodies found in the plaza, one of which was José Díaz’s. The description of this sight is particularly startling:
Al llegar a la plaza Juárez, en Guanajuato, vimos unos quemados debajo del kiosco, hechos chicharrón, negros negros... Vimos a nuestra izquierda el cuartel valiente, estaba cacarizo de balas. La banqueta regada de muertos carrancistas. Se conocían por la ropa mugrosa, venían de la sierra y no se habían lavado en muchos meses... [A]l ver un bulto pegado a la pared corrimos; estaba boca abajo, el cabello revuelto, sucio, las manos anchas, morenas. Las uñas negras, tenía en la espalda doblado un sarape gris, se veía ahogado de mugre, se me arrugó el corazón... José Díaz, joven hermoso, murió devorado por la mugre; los balazos que tenía se los dieron para que no odiara al sol. (114)

This innocent scene of role-play with her doll is starkly contrasted to the trauma in the plaza. On the one hand, her doll and the imaginary scenarios she creates function as an escape from the violence. On the other, the plaza littered with bodies brings the narrative back to the harsh reality of war.

On various occasions, Nellie mentions the quantity of bodies accumulating in her vicinity. At one point she notes, ‘[m]ás de trescientos hombres fusilados en los mismos momentos, dentro de un cuartel, es mucho muy impresionante,’ decían las gentes, pero nuestros ojos infantiles lo encontraron bastante natural” (115). For the young girl and her companions, the mass killing was not unique, since body after body was continuously being paraded in front of their eyes. As we have discussed previously, this frank statement has led some to believe that Nellie is desensitized to death. Rather than representing nonchalance for the dead, this declaration serves more as a criticism toward the adults. That is, it says more about them than it does about our narrator. Although the execution of 300 people simultaneously is indeed horrifying, so too are the individual acts of murder taking place around them every day. It seems that Nellie’s voice is used to criticize the desensitized adults; not the other way around. On a related note, it is difficult to understand why Nellie remarks: “Nosotras, ansiosas, queríamos ver caer a los hombres; nos imaginábamos la calle regada de muertos” (112). Here again, it is tempting to say that she is insensitive to the dead. We must resist this impulse to judge her under the same standards we would hold for an adult. With an
understanding of the world as divided between winners and losers at battle, as the Revolution has taught them, Nellie and her friends know that one side of men must fall for their heroes to win. Within this comment, it must be understood that she is objectifying the dead as part of this game—not because she is desensitized, but because that is what she has learned is supposed to happen.

The story of “Las tripas del General Sobarzo,” serves as one of the best examples of Nellie’s infantile understanding of death. In this scene, the General’s intestines are an object of “scientific” intrigue for the children. When they ask the soldiers what pretty pink thing they are carrying, the soldier’s inform them that they are General Sobarzo’s intestines:

Al bajar el callejón de la Pila de don Cirilo Reyes, vimos venir unos soldados con una bandeja en alto; pasaban junto a nosotras, iban platicando y riéndose. ‘¿Oigan, qué es eso tan bonito que llevan?’ Desde arriba del callejón podíamos ver que dentro del lavamanos había algo color de rosa bastante bonito. Ellos sonrieron, bajaron la bandeja y nos mostraron aquello. ‘Son tripas,’ dijo el más joven clavando sus ojos sobre nosotras a ver si nos asustábamos; al oír, ‘son tripas,’ nos pusimos junto de ellos y las vimos; estaban enrolladitas como si no tuviera punta. ‘¡Tripitas, qué bonitas!, ¿y de quién son?’, dijimos con la curiosidad en el filo de los ojos. ‘De mi general Sobarzo—dijo el mismo soldado--, las llevamos a enterrar al camposanto.’ (117)

The soldiers are the ones who are portrayed as desensitized to death because they are chatting and laughing as they carry General Sobarzo’s intestines. The children refer to the organs as something that looks pretty, and only after the soldiers smile and try to scare them do they maintain the playful atmosphere by rhyming tripitas and bonitas. Here, again, they are imitating the reactions of the adults. Also, the children are able to separate the body part from the body and General Sobarzo’s identity. It is as if the pretty pink organs were just another object of intrigue from the barbarism surrounding them.

Likewise, in another frequently cited vignette, “Desde una ventana,” Nellie imagines possessing one of the dead bodies outside of her home. She explains:
Como estuvo tres noches tirado, ya me había acostumbrado a ver el garabato de su cuerpo, caído hacia su izquierda con las manos en la cara, durmiendo allí, junto de mí. Me parecía mío aquel muerto. Había momentos que, temerosa de que se lo hubieran llevado, me levantaba corriendo y me trepaba en la ventana; era mi obsesión en las noches, me gustaba verlo porque me parecía que tenía mucho miedo... Un día, después de comer, me fui corriendo para contemplarlo desde la ventana; ya no estaba. El muerto tímido había sido robado por alguien, la tierra se quedó dibujada y sola. Me dormí aquel día soñando en que fusilarían otro y deseando que fuera junto a mi casa.

(119)

Here, Nellie objectifies the body as an object to own and admire. Its presence in front of her house for three days also serves in her childlike mind as something constant in her life when everything around her seems to be changing so fast. We recall that she has already commented on “child time” when she describes Babis’ one month absence that seemed like a year to her. When Nellie says that she is obsessed with the body and likes to look at him because he seems scared, it appears as if she is longing to know more about him. So, instead of interpreting this reaction as potentially a sliver of evil inside of her, we can read this as a commentary on telling the stories of the dead. Nellie looks at the bodies and tries to read their emotions. Since she is unable to know more about them, she invents things in her head. This demonstrates the fact that Nellie Campobello sought to emphasize the remembering of the Revolution’s dead and the causes for which they fought. Certainly the idea that the young narrator wants someone else to be executed so that she can possess another dead body to “interact” with is gruesome. However, if we consider that she is objectifying the body and viewing it much like she would her dolls; it is obvious that she is not being insensitive. Nellie simply wants to continue having something to think about and obsess over at night.

“Los hombres de Urbina” gives us the blue rock that marks the spot where José Beltrán, one of the family’s paisanos, died fighting. This object serves as a landmark for a geography of local memory that Nellie’s mother wants her to honor and remember throughout her life. Here
again, Nellie’s mother is taking leadership and ownership of historical memory, something that is generally officially charged to men. In this way she defies the patriarchal norm that the masculine perspective of history, violence, and war is the most dominant. Additionally, in this episode, Nellie laments the fact that the executions of her mother’s fellow men make her mother so devastatingly sad. Nellie says that she enjoys hearing the stories:

Yo tenía los ojos abiertos, mi espíritu volaba para encontrar imágenes de muertos, de fusilados; me gustaba oír aquellas narraciones de tragedia, me parecía verlo y oírlo todo. Necesitaba tener en mi alma de niña aquellos cuadros llenos de terror, lo único que sentía era que hacían que los ojos de Mamá, al contarlos, lloraran. Ella sufrió mucho presenciado estos horrores. Sus gentes queridas fueron cayendo, ella las vio y las lloró. (121)

Once again, I have a difficult time conceiving of this quote literally. That is, there is more to what Nellie says about liking the stories and needing to fill her soul with the traumatic imagery. Perhaps she is so intrigued by them because they relate directly to her own life in Parral. Nevertheless, her Mother’s stories and material remembrances of her comrades emphasize the importance of understanding the effects of violence and remembering its victims.

The everyday object that is a gray shirt forms the nucleus of the episode of the same name: “La camisa gris.” This tells the story of Tomás Ornelas, a traitor to Villa’s army, whose train was attacked by Villa and his men. In the following passage, the shirt becomes a symbol of violence as Ornelas falls to his death with it:

La camisa gris cayó junto de la vía del tren y en medio del desierto; los ojos de Mamá detienen la imagen del hombre que al ir cayendo de rodillas se abraza su camisa y regala su vida. Cuentos para mí, que no olvidé. Mamá los tenía en su corazón. (126)

Through her mother’s stories, the gray shirt becomes a symbol of death. The association of this particular object with this moment in time is etched in her mother’s memory. Similarly, in “Las tarjetas de Martín López,” the soldier’s photos reveal his emotions: “Martín López [general Villista] tenía una colección de tarjetas. En todas las esquinas se ponía a besarlas, por eso lloraba
y se emborrachaba” (132). Martín López would show everyone the picture of his brother, Pablo López, describing his bravery even upon capture and execution. Martín wants to die valiantly like his brother because he taught him “…cómo deben morir los villistas” (132). Yet again, we see how cruel violence and brotherhood intersect simultaneously in the narrative.

Further, the constant fighting and damage is juxtaposed to the curative abilities of normal civilians like Nellie’s mother. Once again, we observe how destruction and creation go hand in hand in complex ways. In the first story from the “En el fuego” section, Nellie talks about her mother’s involvement at the house turned hospital:

Allí estaban los heridos de Torreón, con las barrigas, las piernas, los brazos clareados. Villa en esos momentos era dueño de Parral; siempre fue dueño de Parral. Tenía muchos heridos, nadie quería curarlos. Mamá habló con las monjitas del Hospital de Jesús y consiguió ir a curar a los más graves...[Los carrancistas] decían que aquellos hombres eran unos bandidos, nosotros sabíamos que eran hombres del Norte, valientes que no podían moverse porque sus heridas no los dejaban. Yo sentía un orgullo muy adentro porque Mamá había salvado a aquellos hombres. (136-137)

As we will see more definitively in the analysis of Las manos de mamá, Nellie’s mother’s hands are an object of peace for the wounded and sick. The pride that our narrator feels at the sight of her mother aiding la causa Villista through her restorative powers demonstrates the essential impact that women had during the Revolution, as well as the importance of remembering it years later.

These same signs of care amid war are not unique to the females in the text. When some enemy soldiers invade their home, Nellie describes them as fascinated by her three month old sister, Gloria. According to Nellie:

Uno de ellos, llamado Chon Villescas, levantó una mantilla, se la puso a la niña, y se la entregó. Se fueron saliendo de la casa. Muy contentos se despidieron. Dieron la contraseña para que otros no vinieran a molestar. Iban gritando que muriera Villa y tirando balazos para el cielo. (138-139)
The baby blanket functions as an object of peace juxtaposed to the battles going on outside the door. Immediately after the men leave happy and order their troops not to bother Mamá and her children, they begin shouting death threats and shooting. It is essential to compare this episode to what Žižek has said regarding this seemingly contradictory behavior. Here we might say that coatlicuensidad penetrates the masculine. Žižek asks us to think about this paradox:

Isn’t it strange that the same soldier who slaughtered innocent civilians was ready to sacrifice his life for his unit? That the commander who ordered the shooting of hostages can that same evening write a letter to his family full of sincere love? This limitation of our ethical concern to a narrow circle seems to run counter to our spontaneous insight that we are all humans, with the same basic hopes, fears, and pains, and therefore the same justified claim to respect and dignity. (48)

This problem of counterintuitive contradictions is what Campobello’s narrative seems to engage through the various objects of love and terror left behind by the young protagonist’s memories. While the text attempts to reconcile these two disparate poles, it effectively shows how complicated this feat is. In this way, we see how a complete understanding of violence considers the embedded symbolic and systematic manifestations alongside the outwardly traumatic ones.

In “Las sandias,” the reader notes how an object of basic sustenance reveals the calmer side of Villa’s soldiers. After detaining the train that carries watermelons from Mexico City to Ciudad Juárez because they were thirsty, Villa “…les gritó a sus muchachos: ‘Bajen hasta la última sandilla, y que se vaya el tren.’ Todo el paisaje se quedó sorprendido al saber que aquellos hombres no querían otra cosa” (144). They may have stolen from the train, but they did not initiate additional acts of violence. This quote aptly shows the human side of the soldiers and contributes to the message of the heroism of the disenfranchised through Campobello’s support of Villa’s ideals. In a similar, almost comedic scene, Severo tells Nellie about the time that he turned himself into a breadmaker when Villa came to his shop full of tailors and
musicians. Severo explains that his place of business was a former bakery and shares the story with our narrator:

Prendimos los hornos abandonados. Nos remangamos y ahí estamos haciéndola de panaderos...Nunca supo el general que nosotros no éramos panaderos; todos nos sentimos contentos de haberle sido útiles en algo. (145)

Here, the bread became an object of camaraderie among the men. It also gave Severo the satisfaction that he was able to support Villa’s cause even in the minutest of ways. Finally, it is an entertaining anecdote that serves as a reprieve from the other moments of vicious brutality.

“El sombrero,” constitutes the memory of Pepita Chacón when the General Pancho Villa himself showed up at her house when she was dining with some of her friends. Within the group, Villa remembers a store employee who measured him for a hat that his boss did not want to sell to him. Apparently, Don Guillermo, the store owner, told Villa that a ranchero like him did not have the money to buy the hat. The employee recalls the incident:

Se lo midió, le quedó muy bien, parecía hecho a su medida. Luego me miró, recuerdo muy bien sus ojos, y dándome dos pesos a cuenta, me dijo que se lo apartara. Días después vino y se lo llevó. —Qué buena memoria tiene, cómo te reconoció—dijeron los jóvenes elegantes que habían escuchado el relato. (149)

Following this story, Pepita critiques the emphasis on an object instead of people’s lives. She says, laughing at the elegant youth with Mamá, that “[u]n sombrero fusilado por los rurales es a veces de más interés que las vidas de algunos hombres” (149).

As other scholars have noticed, Pablo Mares from “Los dos Pablos” represents a father-like figure for Nellie. She recounts that he held her when she was small and sang her to sleep. Mamá tells her: Pablo ‘[f]ue como un hermano mío; a todos mis hijos los quería como si fueran suyos,’ afirmó Mamá guardando el retrato de Pablo Mares,” who died in battle. The portrait serves to remember the heroes that died fighting for the true ideals of the Revolution. In a subsequent episode, Pancho Villa is depicted as a father figure for Martín López, who we saw in
the chapter named after the photos that he carried around with him. According to the story in “Las hojas verdes de Martín López,” Carranza’s men dug up his body since they did not believe that Villa’s second in command had perished. The title refers to the green leaves that they detached from his body in order to confirm the existence of his bullet wounds. Here, we learn that:

El general Villa lo lloró más que a nadie. Lo quería como un hijo. Desde la edad de doce años, en 1911, Martín López era su asistente…era su hijo guerrero. En él el general realizó sus ideas guerreras con exactitud matemática. Nadie pudo haberlo entendido mejor en los momentos de batalla. (158)

Again, this alludes to what Žižek argued about the soldier who can compartmentalize distinct actions and emotions. Similarly, we also observe how the soldiers formed familial communities for strength and support in battle. Finally, the narrator cites phrases from the corrido written for one of the greatest heroes of Villa’s army: “Todos los cerros del Norte recordarán a Martín, a caballo los subió, sin miedo de irse a morir” (159).

In addition to the corridos that venerate the heroes’ lives, the chapter, “Las mujeres del norte,” briefly showcases how women are important witnesses to tragedy. This means that their observations and memories constitute a living history of the violence. And, as we saw with the blue rock Nellie’s mother pointed out, they also remember the place and circumstances of the soldiers’ deaths:

Las voces siguen preguntando: ¿Y Gándara? ¿Y El Chino Ortiz? Sí—contestan aquellas mujeres testigos de las tragédias—, sí, como no, allí donde está esa piedra le tumbaron el sombrero y lo fueron a matar hasta allá, frente a aquella casa. (161)

This episode also demonstrates the hope that the women have that their men will return in April or May. Despite the fact that Nellie refers to them as “las buenas e ingenuas mujeres del Norte,” their memories and solidarity demonstrate their strength in the face of war. Lastly, the final vignette in the novel offers hope that the good cause will prevail someday. According to
Campobello, this is la causa Villista and its ideals for true societal reform. After a triumphant battle that killed some 2,800 of Carranza’s men, Nellie describes her mother’s reaction:

Los ojos de Mamá tenían una luz muy bonita, yo creo que estaba contenta. Las gentes de nuestros pueblos les habían ganado a los salvajes. Volverían a oírse las pezuñas de los caballos. Se alegraría otra vez nuestra calle, Mamá me agarraría de la mano hasta llegar al templo, donde la Virgen la recibía. (163)

Although this passage reiterates the good and evil dichotomy, it also demonstrates how Mamá fervently believes in what she considers to be a just cause and takes a stand in its defense through her actions in healing the wounded and protecting her own family. Thus, while she occupies the traditional gender role as mother, she also adopts traits typically reserved for the masculine.

In this section, I have tried to move away from psychological interpretations in order to analyze the objects with which Nellie interacts. This contact further tells the story of the complex nature of war and peace, and sends a message that hope and love are still possible during and after the Revolution much like how this dichotomy exists within Coatlicue and the women born of her loins. So, while many of Nellie Campobello’s memories of the brutality and hardship are traumatic, she still views them as useful in shaping a better future for Mexico. The fictional material culture in Cartucho tells us that there is much more to the Revolution than battles in the streets. It exemplifies the fact that communities and families were drawn together through solidarity and survival. In the next section, we will expound upon these memories to see how nostalgia serves as a critical tool for evaluating the present and future. It will show how the past can effectively inform future decisions and actions.

1.3 Critical Nostalgia in Las manos de mamá by Nellie Campobello.

The analysis of the role of Nellie’s mother leads us to a discussion of Las manos de mamá. This text, which constitutes another fragmented narrative, extols the virtues of strong
female figures, like Campobello’s mother, who held firm and protected their children during the strife and violent times of the Mexican Revolution. Although she could have easily called her text “Mother’s Heart,” or “Mother’s Soul,” Campobello seems to deliberately refer to her mother’s hands to highlight her willingness to always rise to action, and thus, by extension accentuate the other traditionally considered “more masculine” sides that her mother possessed. Campobello has explained that the title was easy to come up with since “…de todo lo que recibimos de la madre, las manos son, a lo largo de la vida, lo que está en contacto permanente con los hijos…” (qtd. in Matthews 114). Irene Matthews links this personal adoration of the mother to the adulation of Guadalupe and the indigenous goddess Tonantzin24. She asserts that:

[n]o es casual que esta figura materna encarne la pureza y el misterio de la Virgen, quien también, al final pierde a su hijo inocente y precioso. El hai-kai tarahumara del prefacio de Las manos de Mamá ya indica aquel sentido: ‘Tu cara de luz, madre, despierta y llora, como antes, hoy cuando yo te grito.’ Se dirige a una madre cuya ‘cara de luz’ contiene la luminosidad de la naturaleza y lo etéreo de la santidad. La Virgen de Guadalupe, la dulce morenita, patrona de México, se parece a la Mamá del texto de Nellie Campobello: la frente clara y alta, la nariz fina, el cabello largo y simple; ambas imágenes se adornan con rosas. Guadalupe cristaliza la pureza y la inocencia al ser la reina católica de los cielos mexicanos pero también es una activa protectora como lo fue Tonantzin, ‘la pequeña madre,’ la diosa benigna a la que Guadalupe reemplazó. Su papel es el de defensora que protege a sus propias tropas de todos los peligros; significa una fuerza especial contra las agresiones que puedan surgir dentro de la familia. (107-108)

At the same time that Nellie’s mother is the children’s rock of consistency and solidarity throughout the brutality of the Revolution; she is ultimately broken down by the death of her youngest child, which will be explored in more detail subsequently. So, although fortunately she

24 Kemy Oyarzún makes a similar connection to the Nahua goddess, Teteoinnan, who is often portrayed as the mother of all the gods and as an aspect of Tonantzin. She argues that “[l]a configuración matrocéntrica de la escritura parecería apuntar a la inscripción del relato en el cronotopo idílico, mítico, mitopoético, de fuerte raigambre precolombina” (187).
is able to carry her children relatively safely through the war, she is unable to defend against the complications from pneumonia that take her baby’s precious life.

Furthermore, Kemy Oyarzún has also argued that the text resembles the testimonial literature from the sixties and seventies in Latin America. Likewise, through her rereading of Las manos de Mamá, Doris Meyer says that writing was Campobello’s:

...way of telling the truth of life as she knew it, and, given the distorted picture of the Revolution she saw painted by politicians after the fact, the need to testify became, in her case, a moral imperative: ‘...yo tenía que escribir, decir verdades en el mundo de mentiras en que vivía.’ Like Martín Luis Guzmán, her friend and supporter, she felt that the Revolution had been betrayed and its true heroes maligned by those who came to power once the fighting had ceased. (747)

As we have seen with Cartucho as well, Campobello seeks to contest this distorted picture through juxtaposing violence with humane acts and communal experiences among ordinary people. Similarly, as Meyer notes, Campobello also challenges the patriarchal order through the structure of Las manos de mamá. In her estimation, Campobello wrote a decidedly female biography by emphasizing the mother-daughter bond and rejecting the “…traditional patterns of biographical (or autobiographical) linearity, unity, and chronology” (750). Following this line of criticism, Campobello’s narrative aligns itself with the French écriture feminine that constituted:

... [a] uniquely feminine style of writing characterized by disruptions in the text; gaps, silences, puns, rhythms, and new images...It is eccentric, incomprehensible, and inconsistent, and if such writing is difficult or frustrating to read, it is because the feminine voice has been repressed for so long, and can only speak in a borrowed language, that is unfamiliar when it is heard. Masculine language represents the symbolic: it is linear, logical, authoritative, and realistic, and écriture feminine, behaving like the semiotic, disrupts the symbolic and threatens to unleash chaos where there is order. (Tolan 335-336)

Despite the fact that Las manos de mamá is decidedly less chaotic than this description of pure écriture feminine, it is still useful to consider the text as an alternative to the masculine retellings and reimaginings of the Mexican Revolution in fiction.
Meyer also highlights the duality of Mamá’s character contrasted with the Mexican Revolution. She sustains that:

If the hands of revolutionaries fired the rifles that demanded social and political reform in Mexico, the hands of mothers cared for and healed the victims of that violence\(^25\). Her own mother was no stranger to warfare—Campobello’s grandfather had fought Comanches and her father died fighting the federales when Nellie was five—yet she also had a deep matriarchal reverence for nature and human life. It was this mythic, spiritual dimension of her mother’s influence that led Campobello to create the long prose-poem in her memory. (748)

Mamá’s support for Villa and the ideals for political and social reform coincide with this motherly connection to human life. This development of her character helps show how \textit{coatlícuensidad} operates, as well as how convoluted times of war can truly be. Finally, Meyer makes an essential distinction when she explains that \textit{Las manos de mamá} “…makes clear that the \textit{villista} in Nellie Campobello was more an expression of concern for historical justice than an endorsement of aggression” (752).

Oyarzún also focuses on the figure of the mother and female identity. She discusses how the construction of Nellie’s mother’s character opposes the patriarchal order. She contends that:

La madre no es una figura estática: gira metafóricamente, danza, borda, canta, juega; es una ‘artista.’ (p. 199). La progenitora no es una mera reproductora de la especie, sino una creadora y productora de actividad gratuita en diversos géneros y medios artísticos. Campobello introduce de esta forma una oposición entre el homo faber de Occidente y la madre lúdica de los pueblos precolombinos; esta última también aparece en la figura de la vieja abuela del Popol Vuh. Con una intencionalidad género-sexual, \textit{Las manos de mamá} va yuxtaponiendo lo indígena y lo matrocéntrico, apuntando a una armonía que supone en los orígenes de la nación mexicana un ordenamiento pre-edípico y no patriarcal. (189)

Once again, we witness a reference to the creative properties of the female spirit in contrast to the destructive elements both inside of her and outside on the battlefield. Thus, in addition to

\(^{25}\) Here, we must also remember the \textit{Adelitas}, or \textit{soldaderas}, who also fought with guns in their hands alongside male soldiers during the Mexican Revolution.
the narrative and its structure, Mamá’s characterization serves to contest male-dominated social organization, and recalls a matriarchal and indigenous lineage of skills.

Staying within this matriarchal realm, I intend to look at the function of nostalgia in the text. If we understand that Las manos de mamá is a narrative homage to Nellie’s own mother, it is important to uncover how this is relevant to greater Mexican society. To this end, I will use Ray Cashman’s conception of critical nostalgia in order to analyze how Campobello’s narrative becomes a decisive piece for crucial societal reform. In his article, “Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland,” Cashman provides a case study of a nostalgic Northern Irish community that preserves and displays artifacts from the past, granting them “…new life as symbols necessary for inspiring critical thought that may lead to positive social change” (137).

Cashman argues that:

> By focusing on the grass-roots collection, preservation, and display of material culture in this community, we may better appreciate how nostalgia can be critical in both senses of the word. Nostalgia can be critical in an analytic sense for instantiating informed evaluation of the present through contrast with the past. Nostalgia can also be critical, in the sense of being vitally important, for inspiring action of great moral weight, action that may effect a better future. (137-138)

Although we will be working with Nellie Campobello’s fictionalized memoir of her mother instead of material objects, it is still useful to adopt Cashman’s ideas regarding the critical nature of nostalgia that can motivate change. Like the ideals upon which the Mexican Revolution was founded, the narrative promotes societal reform. Historically considered an actual disease\(^\text{26}\), and consistently devalued for its lack of insight into a critical understanding of the past in relation to the present and future, Cashman showcases nostalgia as an essential tool

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\(^{26}\) “In 1688, the Swiss physician Johann Hofer first coined the term...‘a painful condition’—to describe a potentially fatal form of homesickness he observed among Swiss mercenaries serving abroad. In addition to psychological manifestations including anxiety and melancholy, nostalgia was thought to cause physical ailments including weakness, fever, and anorexia” (Cashman 139).
for inspiring thought and activism. I contend that *Las manos de mamá* engages a similar reflective activity.

Before embarking on the textual analysis, it is also important to consider what Cashman has said about nostalgic practices and individual agency. He asserts that:

Nostalgic practices such as amateur preservation work can be seen, then, as a reclamation of individual agency. Nostalgic practices do not offer people the power to literally arrest change, but they do offer them the temporal perspective necessary to become critics of change, and more or less willing participants. (146)

So, the act of remembering the past becomes an important activity for evaluating the present and future. It is a way for individuals to maintain power and agency in the face of change. While they may not be able to halt the ever-changing world around them, they can use their memories to make informed and thoughtful decisions. As such, nostalgia can also “...challenge both modernization as positive progress and the impulse to romanticize the past” (148).

Through the description of Nellie’s mother’s birth in *la sierra* we witness her nostalgia for the heroics of her ancestors. She explains that her mother’s ancestors “…fueron hombres guerreros que habían peleado sin tregua con los bárbaros para defender sus vidas y sus llanuras. Así como jareaban una piel roja, así ponían flechas en el corazón de las fieras salvajes” (170).

This passage recalls the violent nature of the life of *los campesinos* that had to defend themselves from animals and people alike. Instead of simply evoking this brazen barbarism, Nellie’s nostalgia for people like this seems to pertain more to the ideals for which they fought. That is, they defended their families and lands tirelessly in order to save their dignity, sustenance, and way of life. While at times Nellie tends to glorify the indigenous past, especially through the description of her grandfather, we must understand this not only as romanticism, but also as a critique of those who have forgotten to fight for the ideals of the common people, *id est* the Mexican government in the years since the Revolution.
Nellie holds her grandfather in high regard and explains that she sees much of herself in him. She describes him as nature incarnate who loved the rivers and the plains. In addition to longing for his presence, our narrator also demonstrates how she uses nostalgia to guide her life in the present. We read the following:

Oh, Papá, cuando lo recuerdo, me siento junto, muy junto a Usted. Cada día sus consejos y palabras resuelven mis insignificantes problemas. Usted conocía la verdad de todos los rincones del alma de sus gentes. Su alegría en los ojos revelaba sus relaciones con el alba, los ríos y las huertas. (171)

The key phrase here is the notion that Nellie employs her grandfather’s advice in order to effectively navigate through her own life. This advice also helps her put her modern problems into perspective. Here, she seems to confess that she uses her grandfather’s words as a compass to help her relate with others. Along similar lines, Nellie realizes that despite the violent lives she and her grandfather have experienced through a rural existence and the Revolution, familial and brotherly love still prevails.

In various instances in the narrative, Nellie expresses nostalgia for her mother as her caretaker during the violence of the Revolution. She describes her mother’s strength against some of the cruelest of odds:

Para hacernos felices se olvidaba de aquella horrible angustia creada en los últimos momentos de nuestra revolución...Mamá; fue Usted nuestra artista; supo borrar para siempre de la vida de sus hijos la tristeza y el hambre de pan—pan que a veces no había para nadie, pero no nos hacía falta—. Usted lograba hacernos olvidar lo que para nosotros era casi un imposible. (173)

This reflection on how diligently and creatively her mother worked to keep her children happy is critical for Nellie’s own life as an adult. It helps her recognize the sacrifices her mother made to ensure a better outcome for her children. Because of her actions, Nellie and her siblings were better able to realize their full potential. Similarly, Nellie remembers her mother’s fortitude through her famous hands by saying: “No nos hacía cariños, no nos besaba: con sus manos nos
acercaba a su corazón” (174). It seems that while her mother was indeed a loving person, she emphasized strength and action for her children. Thus, by contemplating her mother’s role as defender of the family, Nellie can informatively decide what is best for herself as an adult. Once again, Nellie’s nostalgia for her mother leads to a critical understanding of her own life and the energies of Coatlicue flowing through her body.

Further, through her mother’s teaching, Nellie discovers the very importance of possessing a memory and nostalgia of the past. She reveals how her mother used real life examples to impart knowledge:

No nos contaba cuentos de hadas ni de espantos; nos contaba hechos reales: Papá Grande, San Miguel de Bocas, nuestra tierra, los hombres de la revolución, cosas de la guerra que sus ojos habían visto. Así eran sus charlas con sus hijos. Nosotros fuimos felices; ignoramos a los fantasmas. Ella así lo quiso. (175)

Nellie’s mother seems to exhibit her own critical understanding of nostalgia in this quote. She wanted her children to be happy and ignore the phantoms of the past. One reading of this suggests that Mamá expected her children to utilize only the past memories relevant to the present as springboards for effecting a better future. That is, she wanted them to use the past wisely, and not let its ghosts haunt them forever. Here, she also instills in her children the value of remembering the past.

Another important component to Las manos de mamá is the idea that nostalgia is ours; it is a possession that belongs to us. Nellie alludes to this fact in the following passage:

Esta casa marcó en nuestra vida los días que las gentes llaman desgraciados. Para Ella no existía eso: no se quejaba. Nosotros desconocíamos la tristeza. Todo era natural en nuestro mundo, en nuestro juego. La risa, las tortillas de harina, el café sin leche, las caídas y descalabradas, los muertos, las descargas de los rifles, los heridos, los hombres que pasaban corriendo en sus caballos, los gritos de los soldados, las banderas mugrosas, las noches sin estrellas, las lunas o el mediodía: todo, todo era nuestro, porque ésa era nuestra vida. Los cantos de Mamá, sus regaños y su cara preciosa eran también nuestros. (177)
Although her children experienced the fighting and the dead in the streets, Mamá sought to shape the home into a refuge for them from the outside sadness. Mamá, however, never shied away from telling them the real stories of the Revolution, as we saw in the previous quote. In this way, Mamá showed her children how love and violence often coexisted in seemingly paradoxical ways. By the same token, Nellie’s mother’s physical presence also serves as a refuge. She discusses the fact that “[l]a falda de Ella era el refugio salvador. Podía llover, tronar, caer centellas, soplar huracanes: nosotros estábamos allí, en aquella puerta gris, protegidos por Ella” (177).

In this same chapter centered on Mamá’s skirt, we observe another remark that might lead us to believe that Nellie is over-glorifying rural life. She talks about how they were able to ignore the capital and its inhabitants by focusing on what was theirs:

Allí teníamos lo nuestro: Mamá, la sierra, los ríos, los soldados en sus caballos, las banderas danzando en sus manos, y Mamá llevando sus cabellos negros a la luz del Sol. Podíamos ignorar las capitales, donde las gentes tienen capacidad para nombrar cada acto de la vida; donde hay aparadores llenos de luces, pasteles, calcetines de seda que llevan los niños de labios marchitos y con mamás de caras pintadas trajes de tul...donde la gente camina más aprisa y no tiene tiempo de conocerse... (177-178).

However, if we look at this passage from another angle we can see how it presents a critical review of modernity and progress. In other words, Nellie’s nostalgia for the countryside of natural beauty and soldiers on horses fighting for ideals of social justice and reform gives her a more profound perspective regarding the potential benefits and setbacks of the city and its rapid pace. Because of her life experiences and the nostalgic practices she carries out, Nellie is able to effectively evaluate progress and understand that change is not inherently or necessarily always good. Additionally, this citation illustrates the occasional importance of ignorance for survival. What I mean is that Nellie’s mother filled her children up physically and emotionally
before leaving home so that they were able to largely disregard the riches and injustices surrounding them.

Nellie also displays a negative view of the capital in Chihuahua later on. She says:

Amarga ciudad, admitida en pesadilla para los que han tenido la desgracia de caer allí. Roba el ímpetu, achica el espíritu, aplasta la potencia cerebral. Lo mejor está afuera, en la sierra, donde las gentes son claras como niños grandes, con sueños transparentes, y sencillas, buenas, libres, bellas, ágiles y fuertes como berrendos que cruzan el desierto y trepan los peñascos balanceando su cuerpo en los relicos. Bella raza de las llanuras de Chihuahua: me gustan, los admiro, al igual que a los tarahumaras, indios antiguos, pacíficos, sensibles, artistas, exponentes de una vida noble, resignados por naturaleza, aunque sin la civilización de los blancos. Llevan su conformidad hasta ignorar el dinero y sólo conocen la sonrisa de las gentes. (194)

Once again, this serves as a reminder that change and progress must be evaluated under the same critical lens as the romanticization of Nellie’s rural and indigenous past. It informs that one should be weary of things that try to stifle the freedom and creativity of nature unrestrained.

Here, Nellie seems to liken the noble aspirations of the people of the sierra to the ideals of social reform tied to the Revolution, and compare the bitterness and stifling atmosphere of the city to the Mexican Revolutionary governments that did not withhold these same ideals once in power.

In this same chapter, “Su falda,” we discover that Nellie’s mother was absent from her children’s lives for a brief period. Some could argue that this constitutes a reflection of machismo through Mamá’s character, since it is stereotypically the father figure who is absent in this arrangement—something that we also observe even within this same text. Nellie describes the day that she reappeared before her dead father’s family who had been caring for the children saying: ‘Vengo a llevarme a mis hijos’ (180). Here, the categories of the law and justice are placed alongside one another. Mamá says, ‘[v]ámonos hijos’ and “…echó a andar con la seguridad del que no teme y sabe que no hay ley que lo castigue por tomar lo que es suyo”
Here, Nellie’s mother disobeys man’s law in order to reclaim her maternity. While men who act in similar ways are seen as normal patriarchal *machistas*, women who behave in the same way are considered aggressive and acting outside of their established gender roles. The symbiotic *machismo-marianismo* relationship is exemplified here to illustrate its pronounced roots within classic Mexican gender roles.

Similarly, the epigraph to the following chapter reads: “La ley de los hombres es buena cuando los débiles se ponen dentro de ella” (181). In this instance nostalgia for the strength of her mother does not reflect a romantic vision of the past. Instead, it represents a crucial evaluation of the laws that perpetuate systemic violence, especially against excluded subjectivities like theirs. In order to regain legal possession of her children, Mamá rips her own clothes in order to make it seem like she was raped. Doris Meyer points out that:

No interpretation of the work in question has taken into account the critical importance of the chapter-sketch entitled “Su Dios” in which Campobello recounts her mother’s efforts to reclaim her children from their dead father’s family after an unexplained separation...Apparently, Campobello’s mother returned to claim her young children, bringing with her a one-year-old child (fruit of an illicit relationship?). The family was reluctant to give Nellie and her siblings back to their natural mother. Rather than submit to the laws of proper society and the courts, which ruled against women in such circumstances, and lose her children, Campobello’s mother feigned that she had been the victim of a rape. (750-751)

Furthermore, Nellie expresses how, through actions like the aforementioned, her mother guided her future. She states that, “[e]lla orientaba nuestro futuro. Sus palabras sencillas, dichas con el pudor de las mujeres que sólo tienen una clase, hicieron el milagro de no convertirnos en protegidos de un jefe de la revolución” (182). Mamá’s decision to take advantage of the law to work in her favor saved the children from more traumas later on. While we consider the fact that Mamá authoritatively directed her children’s futures, we must also
ponder nostalgia’s role in this orientation. Like Nellie’s mother herself, the nostalgia for
moments like these also orient her life in a particular direction.

Mamá seems to falter only when her children are in harm’s way. The first example of
this is when her 13-year-old son is injured fighting in the Revolution against the Carrancistas.
After his arm was ravaged by bullets, Mamá stayed by Nellie’s brother’s side continuously while
he was in the hospital. Strangely enough, she also “…había juntado los deditos de su hijo y los
tenía guardados en un frasco de alcohol donde nadaban como pececillos contentos,
seguramente de no acompañar a mi hermano hasta el fin de su vida” (185). Here, the fingers
preserved in a jar reflect a nostalgia for a time when her child was whole, while also
simultaneously functioning as a thankfulness for his survival. When her youngest baby dies,
Nellie recounts that her mother is never the same: “Pasaron los meses. Viendo que no
retornaba, a pesar de que, como dueña que era de nuestras vidas, las ofrecía en montón a
cambio de la de aquel niño que borró la alegría de nuestra casa, pidió morir. Sus manos, en
además enérgico, rechazaban la vida” (196). As mentioned previously, this is the first time that
Nellie’s mother admits her own personal tragic defeat.

Nellie also describes the uselessness of ordinary objects during times of war. In the
vignette, “Ella’ y la máquina,” our narrator juxtaposes her mother’s sewing machine with
weapons. She outlines the incessant violence in the following passage:

Algunas de estas noches, casi siempre, de un balacito nacían tres, ocho, veinte,
quintientos: una lluvia de balas...Algunas veces, ya los balazos entre las casas, [Mamá] salía corriendo a salvar a las gentes queridas. La máquina, muñeca tosca, se quedaba abandonada...¡Pobrecita máquina que nos regalaba bastillas mientras el cañón nos regalaba muertos, muchos muertos! Nuestras calles quedaban sembradas con aquellos cuerpos fuertes y jóvenes, tirados en el suelo sobre las bastillas que sus mamá les habían puesto en sus camisas. ¿Para qué les servían? ¿Para qué se las pusieron? (189)
This striking imagery of the meaninglessness of the hems on the soldiers’ shirts when they are dead demonstrates how tragedy alters life’s perspectives. A memory of heinous violence alongside the futility of normal life to combat it helps establish an understanding of the gravity of such cruelty. Also, the description of her mother’s quick jump to action transmits a message regarding the importance of getting involved and helping others. Although a tragic image, this scene is influential in Nellie’s cosmovision. For example, throughout her own life she still viewed Villa and regarded his ideologies because she saw how regular people from northern Mexico like him, and her mother, wanted to truly make a difference for the traditionally marginalized.

Lastly, I would like to highlight Nellie’s ultimate nostalgic memories of her mother. Here she praises the qualities of her mother that helped shape her own life so positively:

Recuerdo sus manos, sus valientes manos, las que nacieron para darnos y señalar; sus manos de mujer, sus compañeras, sus mejores camaradas. Nos inclinamos a rezar: Son las que nos levantaron y nos enseñaron el camino...Son las que nos entregaron la vida. Son las que trenzaron nuestro cabello, las que lavaron nuestra cara y nos secaban los ojos. Son las que hicieron la señal de la cruz en nuestra frente y las que hicieron florecer el trigo en racimos de tortillas. Era adorable, dulce el movimiento de sus manos: semejaban la caída de las flores en las aguas que bajan de la montaña. Como las palomas llegando al lugar donde florecieron sus alas, así eran sus manos...(198)

Nellie emphasizes the bravery of her mother’s hands primarily because it demonstrates the fact that she was ultimately a woman of action who became stronger and smarter even in the face of tragedy. This also shows how her mother taught her children through her actions and not just her words. By teaching them how to defend themselves and purposefully remember their region’s heroes, Mamá showed her children how to use their memories and nostalgia decisively to better their lives. When Nellie compares her mother’s hands to falling flowers in the waters that descend from the mountain, she is re-emphasizing her connection to nature and the gentleness of her spirit that functions in concert with her lado coatlicuense and aggressive defense of her family during the Revolution.
In his own work, Cashman has made evident the ways in which nostalgia can invoke important ideas and produce a sense of cross-community relations especially between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland (151). Although our case from *Las manos de mamá* represents a uniquely different conflict, we have seen here that nostalgia has helped build a sense of community among Nellie, her family, rural and indigenous Mexico, and the ideals of the Revolutions original heroes like Villa. The sense of loyalty to that community of people and region has informed Nellie Campobello’s own decisions, life, and works.

Finally, Cashman summarizes the multiple uses of nostalgia and nostalgic practices:

...nostalgia serves as a vehicle for knowledge that offers sought-after perspectives. Nostalgic practices, in other words, are put to critical uses. Some of these uses are existential. The individual nostalgic, such as the amateur collector/curator, gains purchase on the nature of time, conceptually interrupts modernization for the sake of evaluation, and exercises individual agency by implicitly questioning the notion of progress and deciding for him or herself which aspects of change to embrace. Other uses of nostalgia are social. Nostalgic voluntary association such as the future-oriented KDHS\(^\text{27}\) answer divisive representations of the past with alternative narratives, reformulate identity in local rather than sectarian terms, and use the contrast between past and present to inform action taken in defense of community. Put to such uses, nostalgia becomes a register for critical (that is, judicious) thought that may inspire critical (that is, vitally important) action. (154)

As we have observed through the analysis of *Las manos de mamá*, nostalgia has operated as a vehicle of knowledge between Nellie and her mother. Nellie’s memories of revolutionary violence together with her fond recollections of her mother allow her to reflect on the past in order to evaluate the present and the future, as well as to ponder her own individual oscillating identities between *Coatlicue’s* established poles. This ability to pause meditatively in a constantly changing and progressing world gives Nellie the individual agency to make informed and calculated decisions.

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\(^{27}\) The Killeter and District Historical Society, which heads historical preservation projects.
Additionally, her alternatively female narrative of the Revolution extols the efforts of the people on the periphery, as well as the battles of the northern rebels. Her nostalgia of this region and its history help vindicate its goals and purpose during the revolutionary period. Thus, while Campobello’s narrative constitutes a loving homage to her own mother and others like her, it is also relevant to the whole of Mexican society because it demonstrates how history and the past can be utilized judiciously in order to inform critical thought and pivotal actions. In this sense, the novel is a convincing story with the potential for inspiring both personal and societal reform. Corresponding to what we have already touched on here, in the final section of this chapter we will revisit the functions of nostalgia and memory in order to discover how they contribute to another feminine rereading of the Mexican Revolution.

1.4 The Untold Stories of the Mexican Revolution in *Las rebeldes* by Mónica Lavín.

Following a recent trend in contemporary literature toward historical fiction, in this next part of the chapter I will look at *Las rebeldes* by Mónica Lavín. Ann Rigney discusses the genre and the ways in which it “…has forced us to rethink the limits of fiction and the limits of history…” (363). She explains further that:

> ...historical themes have become widespread in contemporary literary practice in response to the traumatic events and rapid change that characterized the history of the twentieth century. Not only has the historical novel emerged as one of the dominant genres in postmodernism, but historical themes are also being treated extensively in a wide range of textual forms that defy traditional categorization. (362)

Published in 2011, *Las rebeldes* shares the untold stories of the women behind the Mexican Revolution that have been overlooked by official histories. In a January 2012 interview with CNN Mexico’s Carmen Aristegui, Lavín says that her novel “…es una vista a la Revolución Mexicana desde otra trinchera, la de un grupo de mujeres enfermeras que brindan servicios de salud a enfermos y heridos, en la frontera norte de México, en los estados de Texas y Tamaulipas” (CNN
México). The plot draws from Leonor Villegas de Magnón’s real memoirs\(^\text{28}\) that tell her life story as founder of la Cruz Blanca. Lavín’s inclusion of real photographs, timelines of the Revolution and la Cruz Blanca and actual historical documents contributes to the perception of veracity. The narration alternates between Villegas’ experiences and those of fictional journalist Jenny Page, who for a brief period was part of the nurses’ brigade during the Revolution. According to Lavín, “Jenny Page es un personaje ficticio probable... [que] representa a la nieta de mexicanos e hija de estadounidenses, a la joven que quiere ser periodista, la falta de prejuicios, la libertad...y luego la madurez para escribir sobre la Cruz Blanca Constitucionalista” (El universal).

Forty years after leaving Laredo behind for her new life with husband Richard Balm in St. Paul, Minnesota, Jenny Page returns to her hometown. Now fifty-nine years old, Page is back to take care of her stepmother Veronique’s affairs upon her death. Her mother, Beatriz Zavala, her father, Steve Page, and her husband are also all deceased, leaving Jenny only with the company of her long time housekeeper Otilia’s daughter, Hilaria. At the same time, even though she deserted the nurses’ brigade with no warning from what was supposed to be a one week break; Jenny Page collects a package sent to her from Leonor Villegas. It contains a hodgepodge of photos, artifacts, writings, and other memories that Leonor wants Jenny to turn into a published memoir about the life and times of the Cruz Blanca. Among these is the manuscript for La rebelde, which is a reference to Leonor Villegas’ actual memoirs of the same name published posthumously in 1994. Leonor writes to Jenny:

Escriba esta historia. Recuerdo que usted era una joven con la idea de ser periodista...No me bastaba mi vida, Jenny Page. Si este paquete la encuentra con salud y ánimo, es necesario que alguien escriba la historia que no ha sido contada ni publicada ni es visible porque no es la de las batallas ganadas, perdidas, de las traiciones y el poder que va cambiando de dueño. Escribala por mí, Jenny. Escriba. (13)

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\(^{28}\) Published in English as The Rebel in 1994, and as La rebelde in Spanish in 2004.
We learn that Jenny accompanied her aunt Lily Long to the nurses’ brigade in Mexico as an act of rebellion against her father. It should be known that Aunt Lily is not her biological aunt, but was very close to Jenny’s mother. Aunt Lily also helped Jenny get a job at the Spanish language newspaper in Laredo, *La crónica*, with Jovita Idar. This is how she becomes the journalist for the brigade along with photographer Eustasio Montoya. Jenny leaves home, then, to defy her father who has brought Alberto Narro to ask for her hand in marriage over dinner.

When Steve Page tells Jenny they are waiting for an answer to whether or not she will marry Narro, a man she barely knows, Jenny tosses her plate and says that they can continue waiting for the rest of their lives (41). After using her cousin as a decoy to prove that she already had a boyfriend, Jenny successfully ran Alberto Narro off. From there, at age sixteen, she followed her Tía Lily to El Paso and then to Chihuahua to help the wounded from the battle of Torreón. She describes this as the summer before she met Richard when, for a brief period of time, she was on the other side with *los carrancistas*, Jovita Idar, Tía Lily, and her friend Leonor Villegas (11).

Before chapter one, on the very first page of the narrative, there is a photo of the nurses of *la Cruz Blanca Constitucionalista*. From this moment we realize that there are secrets to be revealed in the story, since, for some reason, Jenny Page does not appear in any of the photos that Leonor Villegas de Magnón kept among her memories. Jenny informs us that this reason has everything to do with a soldier from the wrong side—a federal soldier with whom Jenny fell in love after he was one of her patients. Jenny remembers:

Un soldado con mirada color zapote. Un soldado del lado equivocado... Si Leonor Villegas no lo menciona en su recuento, si las fotos que tomó Eustasio Montoya donde aparecía yo también entre las que envió la difunta, ése es el motivo. Un corazón equivocado. Si Lily Long hubiera dado testimonio escrito, Jenny Page figuraría entre las veinticinco enfermeras de la tercera brigada de la Cruz Blanca Constitucionalista. Pero no hay indicio de mí en las fotos que guardó Leonor. (23)

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29 Since this is an actual photo from Villegas’ real memoirs, the fictional Jenny Page does not appear.
When Jenny abruptly left the brigade, she still possessed some of Eustasio’s photos that she was to use for her newspaper articles detailing their experiences. One night, while the captured federal soldier, Ramiro Sosa, was in the hospital, Jenny clandestinely borrowed Eustasio’s camera and snapped a photo of her lover. Upon her return to Laredo, she scoured the piles of photos, but never found the one that she took of Ramiro. In an attempt to save Ramiro Sosa from execution at the hands of the rebels, Jenny falsified a telegram, with the help of Otilia, fictitiously sent from Melquíades García, Mexican ambassador in Laredo. The message informed that Sosa should be released from Zacatecas to Laredo on account of official government business there. When Melquíades García turns up at her house later, Jenny must sign a form accepting guilt. Although García said he would only use her signature if obligated to, he tells Jenny that it would be a good idea to get away from Laredo for a while. This is how she ends up in Saint Paul, Minnesota visiting her cousins when she meets her husband Richard Balm; an event which changes the entire course of her life.

Despite the fact that she lived a long and wonderful life with her husband, Jenny never forgot about Ramiro Sosa, nor stopped wondering what had become of him. She began to conceive of her times with him and the nurses’ brigade as another lifetime. Jenny’s return to Laredo after so many years and Leonor Villegas’ assignment, gives her the opportunity to rediscover that old life and unravel the untold details. Through this act of seeking answers, Jenny Page reawakens her investigative spirit, and finally realizes her dream of becoming a journalist. So, while in the beginning of the novel Jenny reflects a more politically rebellious spirit, after facing the tragedies of the Revolution and separation from Ramiro Sosa she opts to occupy a more traditional role as wife to Richard Balm. After he dies, she seeks to recover her repressed past. Although it is true that the Revolution disrupted many gender relations and
roles, Jenny’s about face after her position in the nurses’ brigade suggests that women also had to confront many of the same patriarchal traditions when they returned home.

As we have (and will) see, this journey to reclaim her role as a journalist is not without heartache. When Otilia dies, her daughter Hilaria reveals to Jenny that she had been keeping a secret for her mother. However, upon her death, Hilaria sees it as her duty to release the information to Jenny. Apparently, not even one week after she married Richard Balm, Ramiro Sosa came to the Page house in Laredo looking for Jenny. Ironically, he too wanted to leave with at least a picture to remember her by. Otilia refused this as she said that there was no sense in Sosa torturing his heart even further. Upon hearing the news, Jenny screams out in agony, but decides to try to call Ramiro Sosa to see if he is still alive. She calls the long distance operator and he locates a Ramiro Sosa in Mexico City. She tells him that Jenny Page is calling and when they recognize each other’s voices, she hangs up, leaving it open for the reader to decide if they ever speak again in the future. Jenny aptly describes the moment saying that no words would adequately describe the emotion:

La voz concordaba con la imagen del joven de la foto. Por un momento sentí que el tiempo podría correr de nuevo. Que Ramiro podía visitarme en Laredo. Que había otra oportunidad. Retuve el aliento. Ninguna palabra era adecuada para la emoción. La voz seguía repitiendo mi nombre. Colgué el auricular. Ramiro Sosa estaba vivo y no me había olvidado. (336)

Perhaps, as the last line suggests, it was enough for a now older and more mature Jenny Page to know that her lover had survived and that she had not been forgotten despite the distance and all of the years separating them.

Similarly, as the quote cited above informs, Jenny did find the photo that she had taken of Ramiro. As part of her investigations, after finding out that Eustasio had died, she meets Eustasio’s nephew, Gregorio Montoya, who allows her to look through his uncles’ photos if she
agrees to clean and organize the house. With Hilaria’s housekeeping help, Jenny combs through mountains of papers and photos to locate Ramiro’s picture. While cleaning, Hilaria finds a note addressed to Jenny from Eustasio:

Jenny querida:
Esta carta es solo para ti. Ojalá te encuentre. De no ser así, nadie más entenderá estas imágenes donde quedó mi Página 30. Por allí me dijeron que te casaste y que por eso te fuiste de Laredo. Apenas había pasado un año de que volviste a tu casa y nos dejaste. O me dejaste, mejor dicho, criatura, porque me había encariñado contigo. Y tú lo sabes, como yo sé las razones de tu huida, porque atestigué los desfiguros de tu corazón. Ojalá que hayas llenado páginas registrando lo que ocurria, como entonces te lo proponías hacer…(335)

This letter is essential to the unraveling of the narrative since it recuperates the caring partnership between two of the most important witnesses to the nurses’, and other supporting characters’, roles during the Mexican Revolution: Jenny Page, the journalist, and Eustasio Montoya, the photographer—who later ended up working professionally alongside Venustiano Carranza. Jenny Page’s story ends as she sits on her porch watching none other than Alberto Narro walking by. She invites him to sit with her since they are both “…sobrevivientes de un pasado que se [le] había vuelto cercano [a Jenny] en los meses recientes” (337). Here, too, we find out that Jenny has completed her last mission ordered by the former leader of the Cruz Blanca:

Quise contarle [a Alberto] que había terminado el encargo de Leonor Villegas de Magnón, que había reunido las piezas, las mías también. Tuve ganas de platicarle incluso que me había enamorado de un federal, y que él seguía vivo como nosotros, y que había concluido la memoria de la Cruz Blanca Nacional. Tal vez él quisiera leerla. (337)

Highlighting the metafictional quality of Jenny’s writing within the text coinciding with the actual course of Lavín’s novel, in the end both authors complete the task of recording and

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30 Eustasio’s Spanish-ized nickname for Jenny Page.
remembering the nurses, journalists, photographers, and others at the periphery of the Revolution.

As Jenny Page’s life is narrated and hidden histories are revealed to her, we simultaneously follow Leonor Villegas de Magnón’s trajectory. This rotating structure contributes to the suspense of some of the mysteries in the novel, as well as allows us to see the many parallels between the two protagonists forever linked through their shared experiences during the Revolution. One of these experiences is the secret fondness for another man. In Leonor’s case, which is decidedly less dramatic and central as Jenny’s, she is enamored with General Felipe Ángeles, whose character is based on the real general of the same name under Pancho Villa and la División del Norte. Leonor’s story begins through Jenny, who informs the reader that she died in 1955 in Mexico City, the same year that Veronique dies and our narrator returns to Laredo. Although Lavín took certain liberties in creating Leonor the fictional character, many of the facts are true to the women who studied in New York, taught kindergarten, married Adolfo Magnón, and spent much of her life dedicated to the causes of the Mexican Revolution.

From the beginning, it is clear that Leonor yearns to be a part of the political upheaval in Mexico. This is essential to our understanding of gender during the war since women began playing a definitive part in the politics of Mexico around this same time. According to Ana Lau and Carmen Ramos:

Ese interés femenino en la vida política se acentuaba al inicio del siglo, frente al deterioro de las condiciones sociales y económicas. Por ello podemos decir que las mujeres fueron rebeldes ‘desde antes,’ rebeldes a las conductas femeninas prescritas y rebeldes frente al aislamiento político a que estaban sometidas. Rebeldía genérica y rebeldía política aparecieron simultáneamente. (23)

Starting as a supporter of Francisco Madero, and rising to some of the highest ranks under Carranza through her work with la Cruz Blanca, Leonor became a formidable historical figure in
her own right. In 1910, when her father is dying Leonor leaves her home in Mexico City for Nuevo Laredo accompanied by her children, Leonor, Joaquín, and Adolfo, to say goodbye. Similar to what Jenny Page does in 1955; Leonor is home to help her stepmother Eloísa get her father’s affairs in order. Interestingly enough, both women’s stepmothers are natives of New Orleans (although Jenny only realizes this in the end when she discovers that the self-identified French-born Veronique was not actually born in Europe). Leonor’s father dies on August 20th, 1910, the same day that Leonor will enter the capital with Venustiano Carranza and los constitucionalistas four years later in 1914. In 1911, Leonor joins la Junta Revolucionaria, opens a bilingual kindergarten in Laredo, and founds the sociocultural organization Unión, Progreso, y Caridad with Jovita Idar and at least one hundred other women. After participating in various protests against Francisco Madero’s murder, Leonor unexpectedly establishes the first brigade of la Cruz Blanca when, during the battle of Nuevo Laredo in 1913, she and other women begin treating the wounded and helping other soldiers flee. Thus, the first clinic of la Cruz Blanca, at El Hospital Civil de Nuevo Laredo, was born in March of 1913. By 1914, when intense fighting breaks out between the federal soldiers and General Pablo González’s men, Leonor and her nurses tend to the sick in her house in Laredo. As more battles transpire and more care is needed, Carranza requests that Leonor set up multiple brigades across various cities. By June of 1914 this plan comes to fruition as la Cruz Blanca Nacional is instituted.

Leonor heads the organization until she discovers that a group of soldiers, formerly supportive of Carranza, is working against el Primer Jefe. She renounces her post and returns to Laredo, which Carranza refuses, giving her the keys to the Mascarones school to establish another sector of la Cruz Blanca in Mexico city. Meanwhile, Adolfo has travelled to Veracruz with their children to help supply the Constitutional Army. There he is appointed president of a
banking commission. Leonor reunites with her family and Carranza in Veracruz, but in 1915 returns all of the documentation and archival information from the hospital in Nuevo Laredo of which she was in charge. After travelling to New York to enroll her children in school, in 1920 she receives her last letter from Carranza detailing the uprising against him. Later that same year, the train in which Carranza and her husband were travelling in to Veracruz was attacked. Although both survived, seven days later Carranza was murdered in Puebla by General Rodolfo Herrero and his men. Despite the fact that her direct involvement in Carranza’s cabinet and in the Revolution was over at this point, Leonor continued her social and political activity by writing her memoirs, establishing another school, volunteering in World War I, and being bestowed with various honors.

While the aforementioned deals with the more technical chronology of Leonor Villegas’ life, we must now turn to the fictional twists that involve implied romantic feelings between the nurse and General Felipe Ángeles. As we saw beforehand, this helps unite Leonor and Jenny’s stories and illustrates one of the reasons why she chose the young journalist to piece together the real history of the women of la Cruz Blanca and those others that supported them on the sidelines of war. Thus, not only is Jenny Page a likely choice due to her affinity for reporting, it is clear that Leonor Villegas also understood what it was like to possess an impossible and secret love. Likewise, the women had shared a life near the frontlines in the brigade, an experience of which they could not discuss openly with their husbands or with others who could not understand the sheer gravity, intenseness, and even violent and exciting nature of their tedious and heart-wrenching work at the border. Among the papers, photos, and dust from the package Leonor had left her, Jenny Page discovers a handkerchief that leads to the disentanglement of some of Leonor’s secrets:
Me lo llevé a la nariz para aspirar un aroma que, de tenerlo, ya se habría evaporado. Lo extendí intrigada y encontré entre sus pliegues aquel papel menudo doblado como un ala de paloma. Reconocí las iniciales en el bordado. Confirme lo que siempre había supuesto. El lado vulnerable de Leonor Villegas. (30)

It is not until the end until we discover that the handkerchief and the note belonged to General Felipe Ángeles, despite the fact that throughout the narrative it was easy to see how the women of the nurses’ brigade were attracted to the power and charisma of the leaders of the Revolution.

Felipe Ángeles was named director of the Military Academy at Chapultepec under then President Madero, before joining forces with Carranza and Villa. At the same time, when civil wars were breaking out among Villa’s factions and Carranza and Villa were moving further apart, Ángeles gives Leonor the note that Jenny finds in 1955. Here, Leonor discovers that Villa, Ángeles, and others are planning a meeting behind Carranza’s back. Since Felipe Ángeles knows he and Leonor will probably never see each other again, he gives her the note, the contents of which are divulged to the reader over one hundred pages later. We learn that the two do meet again for dinner when they both coincide in New York City four years later. With his wife absent and Adolfo stepped away from the table, Leonor has the opportunity to tell Felipe how she felt about his note:

Leonor tomó su bolsa y extrajo un papel pequeño con muchos dobleces. –Sin embargo, general, aún recuerdo la emoción con que leí esto en mi habitación. Y Leonor pronunció aquellas palabras nunca compartidas con nadie en voz alta: Sobre unos ojos negros, reflexivos y soñadores, y bajo el creciente de una frente pensadora, como encuadrada por una regia cabellera negra, ensortijada, vi dos alitas de seda, dos alitas negras encantadoramente arqueadas, que volaban en el país de los ensueños, que volaban muy alto, por arriba de una boquita deliciosa. Y no parece sino que esas alitas broten ahora y batirán eternamente dentro de mi corazón. (317)

Just like Jenny, Leonor experienced a love affair that could only be sustained during the passion and violence of war.
In total, Leonor spent five years separated from her husband Adolfo during the Mexican Revolution. This independence and leadership speak to the ways in which Leonor and her politically active counterparts were at least in some ways supporting women’s movement from the private to more prominent roles within the public sphere in Mexico. After he returns home from the train attack and Carranza is killed, Leonor wonders where they will end up. It is bittersweet for Leonor to say goodbye to the life that she has known with her comrades during her time as commander of *la Cruz Blanca*. As a conclusion to Leonor’s personal story, we discover that she lacks the strength to go out and avenge Carranza’s death, and resolves to take care of her husband and remember her fellow combatants:

Le quedaba su marido, el fiel compañero de su vida. Lo cuidaría y buscaría en su memoria los días intensos de aquella cruzada de los constitucionalistas. Escribiría sus memorias. Eso era lo que ahora podía hacer. Esa era su batalla. Dar testimonio de la grandeza de los hombres con los que compartió la revuelta y no condenar al olvido a las mujeres valerosas que la secundaron. Ahora estaba más segura que nunca de que los muertos mandaban. (332)

This passage demonstrates the importance of historical memory that includes all of the actors from the Revolution, both leading and secondary as Leonor points out. It also expresses the overall goals of memoirs, testimonial literature, historical fiction, and other artistic categories that seek to expose the voices of those subjectivities often excluded from mainstream official records.

In addition to exploring the act of compiling and writing memories of war, solidarity, and female agency in the novel, I also seek to examine *Las rebeldes* as a part of women’s rewriting as Liedeke Plate describes it. Although Plate’s research tends more toward a re-writing of classic and canonical texts, the basic premise can be applied to the case of *Las rebeldes*. Plate explains that:
[w]omen’s rewriting is defined as a genre in which narratives of the past are retold from the perspective of a new, marginal, and usually female character in the original story. Literally re-membering and re-calling the old stories differently, contemporary women’s rewriting engages questions of remembrance and of forgetting in relation to gendered identity. (ix)

If we consider that Villegas is literally a female character from the original story of the Revolution, and that Jenny Page is a fictional representation of a likely character, we see how they retell the story of the nurses and other essential marginalized actors during the great revolt. Even as a work of fiction, Lavín’s novel reminds us that Villegas and people like her and Page did exist, which opens the door for further inquiry into their historical impact. In that sense, the novel brings the women and their stories and writing to the forefront, challenging other accounts that have long ignored their important roles during the Mexican Revolution.

A common theme running through the novel is that of these unheard voices. Jenny comments specifically on how Leonor and Eustasio had left the world unheard despite their best efforts to tell their stories. When she is looking through Eustasio’s belongings, Jenny finds a letter he wrote to Manuel Ávila Camacho, President of Mexico in the forties, proposing that the government leader buy his images depicting the Revolutionary forces. Eustasio argued: “Conservar tales acontecimientos serviría para formar una verdadera historia de nuestra gran Revolución Mexicana...” (334). Jenny wonders:

¿Lo habría logrado? Esperaba que así fuera. Pero bastó asomarse bajo el escritorio para descubrir una caja llena de rollos. Sospeché que allí estaban esas escenas y que Eustasio había muerto en el olvido. Algo semejante a lo ocurrido con Leonor. Ambos desoídos. (334)

In real life, the fact that Leonor’s memoirs were not published in English until 1994 and were delayed even longer in Spanish to the year 2004 exemplifies the little value placed on the female perspectives of the Mexican Revolution. Plate quotes Adrienne Rich who has addressed the importance of valuing the stories rooted in female experience:
Rich spoke of the need for rereading and rewriting texts of the past from the perspective of women’s experience. Because literature does not reflect women’s lives and experiences, she maintained, its effects on women are devastating. It informs their ideas of themselves as second-class citizens and offers no ‘guides, maps, [or] possibilities’ for the young woman who ‘goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world.’ (Plate 5-6)

The act of reading Las rebeldes establishes an appreciation for the women and other unsung heroes of the Revolution. And, while the love stories are fabricated to enhance the narrative, as we have seen previously and will continue to observe, they constitute an important element in understanding the multi-layered human experience of war and violence.

In her book, Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory, Lynne Hanley discusses the power of fiction to create memory, as well as the seemingly paradoxical notion of pleasant memories of war. Hanley points to Doris Lessing’s ideas with respect to the enjoyment of war:

I think it is sentimental to discuss the subject of war, or peace, without acknowledging that a great many people enjoy war—not only the idea of it, but the fighting—itself. In my time I have sat through many many hours listening to people talking about war, the prevention of war, the awfulness of war, with it never once being mentioned that for large numbers of people the idea of war is exciting, and that when a war is over they may say it was the best time in their lives. (qtd. in Hanley 4)

Lavín seems to have understood this since many of her characters embodied similar sentiments, and consequently invoke the figure of Coatlicue. It seems that many of the nurses would describe their time in the brigade during the war as one of the best times of their lives, especially due to their newfound importance. Leonor was largely unfulfilled with her typically female gender stratified activities as a mother and teacher and on numerous occasions expressed the joy she derived from political activism. When Adolfo does not want to accompany her to see Madero speak in Mexico City, Leonor cannot fathom why he would want to stay in the margins of history:

Cuando llegó al Paseo de la Reforma, observó algunos grupos de personas que avanzaban cruzando hacia la calle Berlín. Al frente iba el coche de Madero, al que
seguían. Algunos desplegaban mantas con SUFRAGIO EFECTIVO. NO REELECCIÓN. La idea de formar parte de un deseo social la exaltó. Desplegó su sombrilla y despotricó contra Adolfo. ¿Qué pensaba Adolfo manteniéndose al margen de la historia? ¿No entendía que éste no era un día cualquiera? (18)

Similarly, Leonor frequently wonders what life would be like without Carranza’s cause, *la Cruz Blanca*, and the Revolution. On one occasion, Lily brings up this idea when she tells Leonor:

‘Hemos estado tan entretenidas curando heridos, preparando a las muchachas, yendo a cenas con delicadas personas...escuchando historias fascinantes...y no sé si me voy a acostumbrar a un mundo sosegado.’ ‘Esto no se ha acabado’—defendió Leonor. ‘Pero ya estaba sola.’ Leonor se quedó perpleja. Bebió con fruición de su vaso. Había pensado que el decaimiento de Lily era pura nostalgia familiar. ‘También nos hemos divertido—dijo Leonor, repasando aquellos días de campo con Carranza y algunos de sus hombres, las cenas en Zacatecas, las conversaciones en el vagón del Primer Jefe...‘Hemos vivido una mentira’—dijo Lily. ‘Esto es más real que nada, Lily’—defendió Leonor sin comprender. (221)

This illustrates that apart from constituting an extremely violent time in history, the Revolution also represented an exciting time, especially for these women who held prominent leading roles in *la Cruz Blanca*—roles they may not have otherwise experienced under traditional patriarchal norms. The last exchange where Lily tells Leonor that they have lived a lie and Leonor responds that their revolutionary experiences were as real as ever illustrates the ways in which war can be perceived as enjoyable or positive. Similar to the soldier who appreciates life all the more when death is just as viable an outcome as survival, Leonor appreciates the intensity of her emotions and actions experienced during the Revolution. Later, Leonor admits that she has the same fears as Lily when she ponders: “¿Qué haría con el resto de su vida cuando esto terminara? Comprendía a Lily...padecía el mismo temor. Que esto se acabara” (262).

All of these references to the enjoyment of war or the pleasures found through the human actions and interactions it produces calls to mind Tim O’Brien’s short story, “How to Tell
a True War Story,” from his award-winning collection *The Things They Carried* (1990). In this semi-autobiographical story based on O’Brien’s own experiences during the Vietnam War, the narrator outlines seemingly contradictory characteristics of how to tell a war story, while describing the death of Curt Lemon and his friend Rat Kiley’s reaction to it. Like our novel that is metafictional in the sense that Jenny is often narrating about writing, this story is a tale about storytelling. For our own purposes as another attempt to understand the juxtaposition of war with peace and acts of humanity, I would like to highlight the conclusion of O’Brien’s story. It encapsulates the reasons why Villegas and others seek to expose their personal war stories:

> Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It’s always a woman. Usually it’s an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She’ll explain as a rule she hates war stories; she can’t understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked...What I should do, she’ll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell. I won’t say it but I’ll think it. I’ll picture Rat Kiley’s face, his grief, and I’ll think, *You dumb cooze.* Because she wasn’t listening. It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story...And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It’s about sunlight. It’s about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen. (90-91)

The reference to the letter and the statement “You dumb cooze,” go back to what Rat Kiley said when he wrote to Curt Lemon’s sister telling her how much he loved and respected his combat brother, to which she never responded. Hurt by this unrequited gesture, Kiley utters the aforementioned phrase. The idea that a true war story is never really about war can be applied to the texts in this chapter. In other words, these are the stories that go beyond tales of combat and violence in order to reveal the less obvious sides of war. They emphasize that amidst cruelty and turmoil, we can find stories of hope and friendship. They prove why these identities can exist alongside one another in *Coatlicue* and her daughters. At the same time, of course, war

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31 The book won the *Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger* in France in 1990.
stories can bring on more grief. *Las rebeldes* shows us that despite depicting a story about *la Cruz Blanca* and the violence of the Mexican Revolution, the novel also explores the personal memories of love, sorrow, and humanity from a female perspective.

Returning now to the notion that *Las rebeldes* constitutes a re-reading of the Mexican Revolution, I first want to demonstrate how the novel exemplifies women as active participants in history. We have already seen this previously in the discussions of Leonor’s passions for political activity and her questioning of Adolfo’s motivations for remaining at the margins of history as she puts it. During a similar moment when Leonor yearns to be a part of Mexico’s destiny, she wonders why Adolfo does not seem to understand this desire. She wishes:

[q]ue comprendiera cómo a ella le importaba participar del destino de su país y qué tan lejano le parecía él, allá, entre huertistas. ¿Cómo se las estaría arreglando? Lo que no le gustaría [Adolfo], si lo supiera, era que ella estuviera aquella noche lejos de casa, esperando los disparos, esperando los heridos. Porque eso era lo que esperaba a Leonor. (146)

In addition to expressing the dissonance between Leonor’s goals and Adolfo’s desires for her, this passage illustrates the urgency and excitement Leonor feels as being an integral part of the action.

On various occasions, Leonor remarks how far away the capital seems, both physically and metaphorically, from her location in Nuevo Laredo after the death of her father. When Madero marches victoriously into Mexico City, Leonor wishes that she could be there to celebrate his taking of power. Similarly, Leonor’s dissatisfaction with her life on the sidelines after Madero’s death is expressed in the following quote. Here again she emphasizes the
distance to the capital, extols Carranza’s and the other generals’ Plan de Guadalupe\textsuperscript{32} that does not recognize Huerta as president, and wants to be a part of avenging Madero’s death:

Leonor llevaba meses desazonada con la noticia de esa muerte artera, así como había celebrado el triunfo de Madero y brindado con el cónsul. Cuando Adolfo avisó en telegrama del asesinato de Madero y Pino Suárez después de encerrarlos en La Ciudadela, su entusiasmo se fue a pique. Pensaba que, desde la lejanía de la ciudad de México, la gloria y la caída hacían sentir que aquello ocurría en otro país. Ni las mañanas entregadas a la dirección del kínder que había fundado para que los niños tuvieran clases en español y en inglés, ni las tardes cerca de sus hijos, ni los textos que escribía para La Crónica, ni las tertulias con el club de los martes de música y literatura de Eva, ni las reuniones para juntar fondos y apoyar proyectos humanitarios en Laredo la animaban. Cuando supo muertos a Madero y a Pino Suárez, cuando vio las fotografías, el recuerdo del café Colón y el saludo de Francisco I. Madero se le instalaron como si los hubiera tomado prestados de la vida de otra. Pensaba en Juan Sánchez Azcona y le daban ganas de buscarlo, de escribirse con él, de unirse de alguna manera a la indignación general. Uno y otro gobernador habían ido doblando las manitas y aceptando al nuevo presidente, como si fuera legítimo mandato popular y no una usurpación a mansalva. ‘Por fin hay alguien que le va a poner el alto a ese traidor. Me da gusto…’ (56)

This last line refers to Carranza and his Plan de Guadalupe. Here we observe how Leonor is unable to sit still and be away from the action. It foreshadows the fact that she will soon immerse herself completely with los constitucionalistas through her role as commander of la Cruz Blanca. Although her work in schools and writing for the newspaper, among other activities, are meaningful to Leonor, she is not appeased until she is actively participating in the Revolution.

In a similar fashion, the novel also portrays the nurses as privileged and excited to treat the wounded. To help the injured rebel soldiers after a battle with the federales in March of 1913 in Nuevo Laredo, Leonor and Jovita Idar spring into action:

\textsuperscript{32} This refers to the plan drafted by Venustiano Carranza on March, 26\textsuperscript{th} 1913 in response to Madero’s murder in which he dismissed Victoriano Huerta as President and pushed to reinstate a Constitutional Government. This, then, is another document illustrating the differences I see between the ideologies of the revolutionaries and the ideologies of the drug traffickers and other criminals in contemporary Mexico that I mention in the forthcoming chapters.
Las dos amigas pararon en algunas casas para pedir la ayuda de algunas de las mujeres de la agrupación. Jovita pasó por su hermana Elvira y, animadas por la posibilidad de ayudar, cruzaron el puente rumbo al centro de la ciudad, donde todavía se escuchaban algunos disparos dispersos. En una toalla blanca habían alcanzado a pintar una cruz. La extendieron al costado del coche y se abrieron paso hasta el hospital, donde Leonor tomó el mando, pidiendo a los camilleros que fueran por los abatidos...El Hospital Civil de Nuevo Laredo fue el primer sanatorio de la Cruz Blanca que nacía aquel marzo de 1913, y ese grupo de heridos, el primero que agradeció los servicios de Leonor Villegas de Magnón y el grupo de chicas que esperó a que se aliviaran los más graves para entretener a los guardias y que los heridos escaparan por el río. (90-91)

Like soldiers marching to the frontlines, the women walked straight into the epicenter of the action. They formed their own “ejército improvisado” as one of the wounded rebels would later tell them and commanded important leadership roles. The women also had a direct influence in protecting the rebel soldiers as we see here. Although they helped the wounded regardless of their affiliation, they supported the constitutional army directly by helping them escape. In this scene they distracted the guards, but in others they literally took living men away in coffins to get them to safety across the border:

...Leonor tenía que pensar en cómo salvar a los vivos. Y en los ataúdes había la clave...Después de franquear el paso de los soldados y de llegar al camposanto, en la penumbra y muy cerca de la capilla, los ataúdes fueron abiertos y de cada uno de ellos salió un hombre vivo que echó a caminar hacia el río. (171; 179)

Jenny Page also reminisces about Leonor’s leadership qualities and the ways in which she performed her duties with conviction and purpose. In the following quote, Jenny is referring to the time when Carranza informed Leonor that he needed more nurses in Chihuahua in addition to her operations in Nuevo Laredo and Laredo. This marks the beginning of Leonor’s political relationship with Carranza, as well as the expansion of la Cruz Blanca into a national endeavor. Jenny explains:

Estoy cierta de que esa noche ya había tomado la resolución de obedecer las indicaciones de Carranza. Se había mirado a sí misma adentrándose en territorio mexicano con ese corro de novatas entusiastas y concluido que no se podía echar para atrás. Que si había echado a andar a la Cruz Blanca y participaba de la Junta
Revolucionaria en Laredo por algo. Que cuando uno empieza a caminar en una dirección y da los pasos precisos no hay manera de desandar. Que no estaba hecha, como su cuñada, para los afanes de la casa ni para la vida social así nada más. Que era mexicana, mexicana de Laredo. Y que sentía agraviada como muchos por la muerte de Madero. Debe de haberse pensado una mujer con una cruz sanitaria en el brazo por arma. Una guerrera a su manera. (177)

Leonor rebels against the traditional female roles of inhabiting the private sphere and only venturing out for meaningless social activities by compromising herself politically through her involvement with the revolt. Once again, we witness her inability to let Madero’s death go unpunished and she helps the rebels in her own way by healing them and helping them escape. And, as one of the nurses’ fathers said, “[n]o es necesario que las mujeres tomen las armas para estar en la batalla” (188).

Leonor’s break with traditional female roles is also met with criticism. When she, Lily, and Jovita attempt to recruit women to head the nurses’ brigade in Durango, some refuse saying, “[n]o es que no nos interese la Revolución, señora Magnón, ni nos parezca loable su labor…pero no podemos apoyar el que las mujeres abandonemos a nuestras familias por estar en la lucha…” (190). Leonor, unable to keep quiet at this thinly veiled insult, responds with: ‘Espero que sus hijos estén tan orgullosos de sus madres como lo estarán los míos” (190). Leonor seems to be arguing that the causes for which she is fighting are noble and worthy of serving as examples for her children. Later on, Leonor’s sister-in-law judges her in the same way for leaving her kids behind to pursue leadership of the nurses of *la Cruz Blanca*. She echoes many of the traditionally masculine discourses that relegate the mother to the private sphere:

¿Qué clase de madre era Leonor, que dejaba a ese trío por atender a los heridos que no eran familia suya? ¿Qué clase de mujer era esa que quería andar haciendo cosas de hombres, montar a caballo, merodear las batallas, hablar con los más importantes, organizar, participar? ¿Qué no le bastaba organizar su casa? (231-232)
In spite of the criticism, Leonor is proud of her prominent role among the leaders of the rebel forces. This image is solidified in the scene on the train arriving in Saltillo:

La Mirada de Leonor se cruzó con la de Lily, sentada al otro lado del vagón...Los andenes hervían de civiles que aguardaban la llegada de Carranza. Los ánimos ya habían sido lentamente azuzados por los jefes de división, que le llevaban la delantera y ya esperaban para el gran desfile: Pablo González, José Agustín Castro, Jesús Carranza, Álvaro Obregón y Francisco Villa. Leonor miró emocionada por la ventana. Subida en aquel tren, no cabía duda, ella era parte principal de la revuelta. Y los rebeldes iban ganando la partida. (234)

Here, it is easy to imagine Leonor’s and Lily’s excitement as they glance at each other from across the train. Through their own hard work and leadership, the women had landed themselves spots next to the most important revolutionaries at the time. As the rebel forces are gaining ground, so too are the growing national branches of *la Cruz Blanca*. To commemorate Leonor and her female brigade, poet Ignacio Magaloni promises to dedicate verses to them and assures that “[d]e haber sido hombre, Leonor sería general en poco tiempo...” (252).

While it may seem that Leonor is frequently in awe of the powerful men surrounding her, she recognizes the importance of their presence for her own personal gains. In fact, much of her agency in the text lies in her ability to strategically network to get to where she wants to be. Although her relationship with Carranza does not lead to the political influence that she was aiming for due to his demise, she positioned herself close to *el Primer Jefe* because “...ella confiaba que su amistad con Carranza aseguraría el porvenir de los Magnón” (261). Also, the narrator reveals that Leonor made many of the sacrifices that she did in support of her family. Here, she imagines their future:

Instalarían una casa como Dios mandaba y los niños crecerían en la ciudad. Todos estarían juntos. Se traería a la nana y a la cocinera. Y Carranza, estaba segura, no la habría de olvidar. Sintió pudor por aquel reclamo. Sería una de muchos que esperaban su tajada en el nuevo orden. Lo admitía: quería estar en el reparto del pastel. Carranza bien conocía la lealtad y su capacidad de organización y trabajo, su entrega. ¿Acaso no había dejado familia y tranquilidad esos dos años? (292)
Leonor is unafraid to admit that she has been working toward a goal other than that of saving lives. She reveals that she has been systematically plotting her position in Carranza’s new government. This also shows that Leonor wants to continue her political activism after the Revolution since she counts on taking part in the government and plans to bring the nanny and the cook with her to fulfill her at home duties when she is absent.

Jenny Page’s role as scribe for la Cruz Blanca and later compiler of the organization’s memoirs also represents an important female rereading and rewriting of the other side of the Revolution. On numerous occasions, Jenny alludes to the fact that writing a complete history of the group is always subjective. She talks about the notion of truth in this passage:

Había leído el manuscrito en el que relataba los pormenores de la Cruz Blanca y quería hacerle justicia a su hazaña, a su valentía y a su arrojo; quería hacer a un lado ese velo de resentimiento de nuestras discusiones. No sabía si Leonor había contado la verdad. Lo había leído desconfiada de que revelara las partes que nosotras vivíamos en aquella Cruz Blanca suya. ‘Es de todos los que aquí estamos,’ insistía. Sus memorias también lo subrayaban. Su empeño por que alguien escribiera sobre ello también. Pero la Cruz Blanca era su hechura y su gloria. Ésa que también había sido insoportables para algunas. (20)

This captures the difficulty Jenny has in trying to tell the story that Leonor wants to reveal. It also exposes Jenny’s desire to keep her memories of Ramiro Sosa alive. That is, she implies here that there is more to the story of la Cruz Blanca than healing the wounded. She does not want Leonor’s account of the events to gloss over all of the other brigade members’ memories. Jenny understands that a historical recalling must involve a multi-perspective approach, which even includes those, like her, who at times found the experience under Leonor unbearable.

Similarly, as Jenny speculates again as to why Leonor wanted her to write the manuscript, she discovers that the process is autobiographical for her as well. She explains that:
Parece que la difunta Leonor Villegas quiere poner a prueba mi templanza, enfrentarme a mis propios demonios mientras rastreo y escribo en la Underwood que me dio papá. Porque leyendo sus cosas y escribiendo tengo permiso para imaginar lo que no vi. (125)

In order to tell the other story of the Revolution, Jenny had to confront her own past. If we think of the parallel lost loves between the two protagonists, we can see how Leonor put Jenny in a position to reopen the investigation into the past to find out what had happened to Ramiro Sosa. Here, it is also essential to emphasize the act of imagining in rewriting history, which goes back to the idea that historical fiction can play an important role in the formation of cultural memory—and in this case one dominated by female memories and experiences.

Later on, in a similar fashion, Jenny explains that “Leonor [le] daba una oportunidad de desvanecer los secretos, de encontrar respuestas” (311). It seems that Leonor knew that Jenny would be critical and discerning, and would use her journalistic passion to comb through an immense amount of memories in order to tell the dynamic story of the women of the brigade and their cohorts. Simultaneously, in a mothering way, Leonor would lead Jenny once again, this time on a journey through her distant past. Following this maternal motif, Jenny expresses the fact that she has inherited the obligation of the act of telling the story of la Cruz Blanca. Here, too, she laments the fact that no one listened to Leonor’s memories of the war:

Lamento, Leonor, tu destino ultimo de empleada sin gloria, de memoriosa sin escuchas. ¿Por qué si te cuestioné tus buenas acciones y te juzgué egoísta, ahora me eliges a mí? ¿Acaso es mi deber hacer el recuento de aquellos días, ahora que me has heredado la voz? ¿Por qué yo Leonor? (294)

Jenny’s task is to carry the memory of la Cruz Blanca and use her voice as a former published journalist to get the story out to others who will listen, all so the group of brave women and their associates do not continue to be neglected by history.

33 Brand of typewriter
Throughout the narrative, the characters reflect on the importance of bearing witness to history. Leonor ponders the ephemerality of life and memory when she thinks about the recent events around her:

Quizá debió decirle a Leopoldo [su hermano] lo más importante, esa sensación que le había dejado la muerte de Madero. Que todo duraba tan poco. Un presidente quince meses. Su madre que había muerto cuando ella tenía dos años. Los estudios con las ursalinas, tres años. Su estancia en la ciudad de México era la estación más prolongada, y ya le parecía lejana, como la voz de Adolfo, como las noches con su marido, como las veladas de música y teatro. Un México se le extinguía como su propia euforia matrimonial y un aleteo le renovaba la emoción por un México que ella deseaba. Le parecía que Carranza se unía a los que se manifestaron aquel 22 de febrero de 1913 con el asesinato de Madero. Que Venustiano, con su enorme porte—decían que era muy alto—, tomaba el mástil de la bandera mexicana que ella agitaba indignada por las calles de Laredo y entre los dos limpiaban esa artera muerte, despejaban de agravios el aire, para que México decidiera por sí mismo su destino. Pocas veces el alma podía ser testigo de esperanzas y grandezas. (58-59)

Although this captures the brevity and absurdity of life, it also shows a Leonor hopeful for the future and Mexico’s leaders. The passage also communicates the idea of taking action to affect a better life. Additionally, remembering these moments of hope and greatness can contribute to a better future.

Like Leonor, Jenny also had to keep many of her memories of the brigade to herself. She describes how her husband Richard saw her more as a child than a wife, and would get jealous when she was writing; wanting to make sure that her words were not confessions of love to someone else. Jenny discusses her silence as if she were directly addressing Richard:

Tanto callarme los meses que estuve en la Revolución que ya te parecía extraño. Tomaba la pluma, temerosa de que lo que escribiera fue la historia de Ramiro Sosa. Garabateaba dos o tres líneas. ¿Quién quiere recordar para no hacer nada por aliviar la nostalgia? ¿A quién le conviene revivir la sangre y la piel ennegrecida, el olor de las heridas brillantes de pus, el color pardusco de los muertos, los orines del miedo de los hombres? ¿Quién quiere recordar lo que parece la historia de otra Jenny? (63)

This passage illustrates how silence and forgetting were useful tools for Jenny as she moved on with her life with Richard. She questions what good it would have done to conjure up memories
of the “old Jenny” whose days in the brigade were so distant. Here, too, we also witness the devastating side of working for *la Cruz Blanca* through the images of the sights and smells of pain and suffering. This is why Jenny admits that she turned to Richard to forget about Ramiro and her experiences with the brigade. She describes her new life poetically: “Mientras Richard y yo nos abrazábamos, le daba la espalda al río decidida a inventarme otra vida” (216).

The idea of bearing witness to history is also shown through Jenny and the other journalists. Despite the fact the youngest women who turned up to Leonor’s house to join the brigade were dismissed, Jenny got to stay because of Tía Lily’s influence and the fact that she was writing for *La crónica*. “Tienen que saber que existimos’—insistió Leonor cuando la miró, perpleja por llevar a una chica Americana que quería participar en la revuelta mexicana” (66).

Then, and now, Jenny represents the younger generation that would keep Leonor’s memories of the Revolution alive. When Jenny asks Jovita Idar if Eustasio Montoya is a photographer, she replies, “[e]l fotógrafo de la Cruz Blanca…Deja memoria de nuestra actividad: quiénes somos, cómo trabajamos, cómo nos movemos de un sitio a otro, con qué generales tratamos. Sin memoria no hay nada” (68-69). Like Jenny, Montoya is a carrier of memory who literally leaves traces of their story behind through his photographs as Jovita asserts. Jovita recognizes that without this memory documented by Montoya, *la Cruz Blanca* and all of their hard work would largely be ignored in official histories of the Revolution.

Finally, Jenny also highlights the important role that the wounded soldiers played in bearing witness. She explains that:

Los heridos permitían a Jovita a escribir un verdadero parte de guerra, con testimonies de primera mano, impresiones y sinceridades a las que de otro modo no hubiera tenido acceso. Las heridas fragilizaban. La posibilidad de ser un prisionero de guerra aún más. Y la muy probable sentencia del fusilamiento daba a esos hombres, bajo el cuidado de la Cruz Blanca, confidentes y honestos, necesidad de futuro. (91)
The precarity of the wounded soldiers’ situation gave Jovita the opportunity to tell a candid story of war and its aftermath. This citation demonstrates the way in which a remembrance of the past can ensure a future for the men. That is, they knew that if they lost their lives, their stories would live on for generations through Jovita’s reports.

For Jenny Page, the past was also resuscitated by her interactions with certain objects and in specific places. Arguably one of the most beautiful and nostalgic moments in the novel is when Jenny finds Eustasio’s camera as she goes through his belongings searching for the photo of Ramiro. We read:

A mi espalda había algo cubierto por una sábana. Bajo ella, como un animal disecado, estaba la cámara de Eustasio. La acaricié como si rozara un pedazo mío, una parte que volvía a reconocer. La piel de Jenny a los dieciocho años. Cuando entró Hilaria con el vaso de agua, me encontró petrificada ante aquel aparato. Él, Eustasio, con Carranza, yo y quién sabe cuántas más fotos, éramos vestigios de una épica. Todo aquello una radiografía personal. (334)

This object of memory is emotionally charged by the people who interacted with it, as well as the numerous photos that it had contained over time. Without the camera and Jenny’s secret possession of it the night she took Ramiro’s photo, there would be no visual history of the two lovers for her to discover later. The fact that she employs the phrase “we were traces of an epic story,” illustrates how important the memories are to Jenny, despite the fact that she repressed them for so many years. Correspondingly, crossing the border transports Jenny back to her other life during the Revolution:

Ahora que caminaba sobre el puente y entre la malla de metal miraba el río, ese pasado volvía fresco, como si hubiera sido congelado para derretirse en otro momento y latiguar mi corazón; devolverme las razones por las que no tuve objeción en irme de Laredo muy lejos de la frontera; en dejar a Leonor y a la tía Lily con sus deberes y sus hazañas. Necesitaba poner desierto de por medio, montañas y llegar a la ribera de un lado, distinto y distante de ese río amenazante que tan pronto era promesa como destino de muerte... (63-64)
This return to the past also reminds Jenny why she had to leave so abruptly to forget her sorrow over Ramiro Sosa and the tragedies she witnessed through the wounded combatants. This passage reconciles the idea that some moments need to be forgotten in order for people to lead productive and fruitful lives in the future.

Although we have referenced it obliquely throughout this analysis of *Las rebeldes*, I want to direct our focus to the violent memories of the Revolution as they are represented in the text. We remember that while the novel is a story about memory, love, and friendship, it is also *coatlicuense* and ultimately a tale of sorrow, tragedy, and violence. Jenny Page often describes the images of the wounded as sights that she had never pictured so extremely. In this particular scene, she is shocked at what she has to do when she thought that she would just be an assistant to the other nurses, and would focus on her journalistic endeavors:

La cabeza del herido en mi regazo. La camisa hecha jirones a la altura del codo, el codo sin codo, la sangre detenida por la otra manga de la camisa que la tía Lily había apretado en lo que quedaba del brazo...No era esto lo que esperaba. Pensé en otro tipo de heridas, descalabrados, raspaduras, boquetes cuya herida habría que limpiar y poner vendas, suturas. Pensé que mi trabajo sería llevar comida a los heridos, tomarles la temperatura, darles medicamentos. Escucharlos, platicar con ellos y darles consuelo. Pero el cabello pegado a la frente por el pavor, la mirada perdida, la invalidez sobre mi delantal blanco, ahora lleno de polvo y sangre, no era lo que imaginaba. (77)

This initial moment where a young Jenny confronts the effects of violence head on is likely what leads to a lot of the unspoken trauma that helped her leave Laredo and not look back for forty years—practically an entire lifetime. So, while we recognize that Jenny was heartbroken that she never knew of Ramiro Sosa’s whereabouts all those years, we must also consider the tragic impact that witnessing the carnage of war brings.

Part of what makes Jenny Page’s character so endearing is the respect that she has for remembering others and their pain. Since Jenny “[t]emía ver el dolor de los demás,” she resented the fact that Leonor chose her to accompany the committee formed to console the
wounded and deceased rebels’ families. When Lily comes to retrieve Jenny for an organized visit
Jenny tells her that she only wants to write. Lily responds with the following, guilting Jenny into
agreeing to come along: “Muy bien, Jenny, escribirás la crónica de lo importante que es hacer
estas visitas. ¿O crees que no vale la pena para un periódico?” (155). During the visit, we
discover one of the reasons why Jenny found Leonor at times selfish and self-serving. Jenny is
taken aback by the father of one of the victims who says:

‘Mejor hubiéramos tenido mujeres’...Sus palabras me calaron y pensé que no podría
escribir una sola palabra acerca del dolor ajeno, que era una falta de respeto, pero
Leonor ya pedía a Eustasio que nos tomara la foto, diciendo: ‘Miren para acá, un poco
más al centro, Jenny, Leonor, un paso adelante, tome del hombro a la señora.’ Era una
desfachatez captar esa imagen del consuelo. (157)

The idea of writing about someone else’s pain seems disrespectful to Jenny, and articulates the
inner tension of all writers, and especially journalists, who have to recount tragic stories like
these.

Moreover, in her description of the Battle of Torreón, Jenny vividly encapsulates the
environment of violence and death:

En esos catorce días de la batalla de Torreón hubo más de dos mil heridos, y casi los
mismos muertos de la División del Norte. Muchos más de los federales. El fuego
crepitante sahumaba el aire, alejaba el olor a carne podrida, ocultaba por un momento
e el tapiz de muertos y moribundos recogidos del campo de batalla que podíamos
imaginar por el trabajo imparable, por los quejidos de los hombres, por la cantidad de
cloroformo, de laudano, de quinina que se administraba...Inesperadamente la noche se
cimbró con un coro de disparos. El murmullo de la tropa y las muchachas cesó.
Sabíamos de qué trataba. Cada tanto había un fusilado. Volvimos al fuego, los ojos
suspendidos en el oleaje amarillo. Tuvimos miedo. Ganar o perder. Morir en batalla era
mejor que el paredón. Cerré los ojos. Pensé en los brazos de Ramiro, en la manera en
que aquella noche última los estiró para alcanzar mis senos desnudos...Y aunque hacía
unos días todo era metralla, sangre y relinchos, la tranquilidad de los pastos parecía
desmentirlo. (203; 207)

Not only does she paint a vivid picture, but Jenny also aptly combines the other senses to
provide a more impactful image of war. She associates the battle sights, sounds, and smells with
the fumes of the clinic that come afterward. Once again the severe violence is cut with Jenny’s
memory of her last night with Ramiro and the tranquility of nature.

If we return to the idea of those who enjoy the beauty and organization of war, we can
see how General Felipe Ángeles forms part of this category. Here, a gruesome battle is likened
to the perfect musical performance:

Ángeles, desde el cerro, disfrutaba la música de los disparos, cuarenta cañones que
humeaban el cielo azul, la sincronía de los hombres que simultáneamente avanzaban
desde todas las direcciones. No veía la sangre, no escuchaba los lamentos. Era la
coreografía de la guerra la que se desplegaba ante sus ojos como un espectáculo
perfecto. Por más que la ciudad aún no hubiera anunciado su rendición, no había
manera de que salieran de ésa. Cinco mil federales muertos, tres mil constitucionalistas,
los cadáveres tapizando las calles porque Villa siempre daba la lección: arrasar, que
quedaba claro que la División del Norte no se andaba con tibiezas. Los cohetes en la
calle repitiendo los estallidos y la pólvora, y yo oyendo estrofas, versos, sin poder
celebrar el triunfo de las enfermeras, con Jovita, Lily y Leonor, porque no sabía si Ramiro
Sosa era un muerto más entre los cinco mil. (260)

Here, we notice that Ángeles is only seeing the choreography of war as all of the distinct brutal
elements come together to defeat the enemy. He does not see the blood, nor does he hear the
cries of pain in this moment. And, even though he surely witnessed his own share of carnage,
this passage shows how it was the nurses, and other members of the Revolution’s periphery,
who were the first responders to the damaged and deceased bodies.

Although it represents a minor moment in the trajectory of the entire Revolution, one of
the most significant acts of violence in the narrative is a result of Carranza’s brother’s death.
This instance exemplifies pure evil since General Santibáñez killed him because he meant so
much to El Primer Jefe. The narrator explains that “Santibáñez sabía cuánto quería a su
hermano, cuánto significaba ese hermano de temple cálido, buen militar, pianista y animador de
las reuniones en Laredo, leal más allá de la hermandad de sangre” (329). So, in order to
maximize the impact of the violence on Carranza, the General attacked him in one of the ways
that he was most vulnerable. This showcases the callousness of war and fighting to win the battle for power at all costs, which is in direct contrast to the solidarity and community formed by the women in the text.

Through this analysis of female agency and female memories of violence and love we have considered how *Las rebeldes* forms a part of women’s rewriting to the extent that it retells the past narratives of the Revolution from a marginal perspective. The development of the protagonists Leonor Villegas de Magnón and Jenny Page emphasize the essential roles that women carried out as active actors in the history of Mexico and the border region. Furthermore, it is necessary to reiterate the fact that Lavín’s work of historical fiction has the potential to inspire further scholarly inquiry into the historical impact of the women of *la Cruz Blanca* and the other peripheral characters from revolutionary times. In this way, the novel plays an important part in creating and reimagining a cultural memory of the Revolution.

In my own research, I found it quite intriguing that it took me several attempts to confirm that Jenny Page was a fictional character. In many of the reviews and newspaper articles that I discovered, the authors seemed to imply that Page had truly existed right alongside Villegas. While this illustrates a drawback to historical fiction’s representations of “the facts,” it effectively illustrates the power that even fictional narratives have to alter our understandings of the past. Here, we must once again turn to Rigney who reminds us that “…literary scholars have tended to view individual texts as the terminus or outcome of remembrance rather than as active ingredients in an ongoing cultural process” (369). Thus, *Las rebeldes* plays an active part in reshaping our conceptions of the Revolution, as well as in giving a voice to history’s unheard actors. We see, then, through this chapter that memories and nostalgia for objects, people, places, events, and emotions represent more than just
romanticizations of the past since “...history is not [just] the past. History is a story about the past, told in the present, and designed to be useful in constructing the future” (Glassie 1).

Writer Cherríe Moraga, who embodies coatlicuensidad and Xicanisma34 in her own life, puts it another way keeping the mestizo consciousness in focus:

I’ve come to understand myth as...an opening into the past, told in character and image, that can provide a kind of road map to our future. I am reminded here of the symbol for journeying employed by Meso-American scribes: little ‘patitas negras,’ black-inked and human-shaped footprints, marking out the road taken, traversing thousands of miles of desierto and montaña. This preoccupation with the past as a foretelling of our future may be the reason why I have lately begun to write stories placed in an imagined future. Like a ‘dream waiting to happen’... (ix)

This chapter about the Mexican Revolution describes only one of the many roads taken by the female protagonists in our study. Even though it marks a truly distinct period from the femicide breakout in Ciudad Juárez, which we will turn to in the following chapter, it represents a collection of patitas negras that serve to define and remember women’s roles and agency over time in the borderlands. Although the revolutionary dream of vanquishing social inequalities and unfair divisions of land and labor may never have been truly realized in Mexico, there is no denying that this period profoundly impacted women’s roles. As I will continue to emphasize throughout this manuscript, although the dreams of border people are still waiting to happen, there is still hope despite such encumbering moments of violence and cruelty.

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34 Xicanisma, as coined by Ana Castillo, represents the activism of the chicano movement and Chicana feminism while still recovering the Nahuatl language through the use of the X from Mexico.
Chapter 2: Confronting Gender Violence and Female Victimhood in Neoliberal Times

2.1 Introduction.

Moving away from revolutionary violence, we will now turn our attention to gender violence as it is represented in novels about the femicides in Ciudad Juárez. In this chapter we will explore the agency and embodied *coatlicuensidad* through investigators, murdered women, survivors, and others affected by femicidal violence. As I have outlined in the introduction and previous chapter, while the war time violence of the Revolution surged as a result of battles with a complex, conflictive, and yet meaningful ideological base, one articulated in the public sphere by the main warring factions, the post-revolutionary violence differs in its implicit relation to the negative impact of the imposition of neoliberal economic systems on societies with unresolved histories of inequality, poverty, and corruption. When the fragile networks of social security put in place by the post-revolutionary regime were undermined by the pernicious effect of neoliberalism on both the political structure and society, new types of social and criminal violence surfaced along with unprecedented levels of illicit economic regimes and various traffickings out of globalization’s “underbelly.” According to Kathleen Bruhn and Daniel Levy, Mexico’s political stability since the 1930s, has long been linked to its development. However, they affirm that:

The price...has been a model of development that subordinates democracy and socioeconomic justice to a sterile stability. The obsession with stability has even been portrayed as a curse, allowing government to impose unpopular and ineffective policies without democratic accountability. Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa coined the
ironic phrase ‘the perfect dictatorship’ to convey how skillfully the Mexican system functioned until recently to limit popular influence by creating a pretense of democracy. (6)

This pretense of democracy would break down in the 1990s through NAFTA and other economic policies as Mexico “joined an international ‘neoliberal’ trend that stressed reduction of the government role in the economy,” and political and economic changes negatively impacted this long-maintained stability. Bruhn and Levy explain that:

In the 1990s signs of deterioration of political management in Mexico were staggering, sometimes melodramatic and downright embarrassing. Violence reached into the upper levels and inner sanctums of power, exposing ruptures at the heart of the establishment. Assassinations, which had riddled Mexico in the early decades of the twentieth century and then disappeared during the decades of strong stability, returned with chilling frequency. (Bruhn and Levy 7-8)

Here begins an exploration of the violent aftermath and effects of this rupture of political stability in Mexico that will take us through the femicides and the drug war in this and the next chapter.

In the same way that the violence erupts and evolves differently after the Revolution, female agency takes on additional forms in the following novels. For example, the nurses, journalists, and mother from the previous chapter all used their positions and talents to further a politically charged ideological stance in support of the rebels. In this chapter, we will observe how the female investigators fight tirelessly for women’s lives, as well as how female workers survive and provide for their families. Finally, looking ahead to the third chapter, this agency will shift once again to explore women who utilize their faculties to perpetrate their own forms of violence. Moving from the femicides to the damage inflicted by the drug war, we will witness how the literary representations often constitute the extremes of women as victims of violence and women as perpetrators of violence. Nevertheless, in every one of the characters we will discover the ways in which they use their agency and creative and destructive capacities to both
sustain and contest traditional gender roles. Regardless of how they position themselves within these violent contexts, like the revolutionary women before them, the women in the next two chapters advocate for the telling of their stories despite the systematic attempts to silence their voices and unpunish the crimes against them.

Before delving into a close reading of the novels, it is necessary to briefly discuss the history and context of the femicides. Since 1993, upwards of 500\textsuperscript{35} women have been killed in Ciudad Juárez. By now we are all too aware of the gruesome crimes afflicted against largely young, impoverished, dark-skinned, and maquila working female bodies. In the introduction to their book, Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán inform that this dark period of homicides and disappearances represents “...the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history” (1). Sergio González Rodríguez\textsuperscript{36} calls this the femicide machine, or “...an apparatus that didn’t just create the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and little girls, but developed the institutions that guarantee impunity for those crimes and even legalized them” (7). Despite the fact that to date we have seen devastating statistics, heard even more tragic stories, and witnessed a number of cultural products and activists movements, we still “know too much, and yet we continue to know nothing” about the femicides (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 2). Ignacio Corona calls this “the politics of no-information,” and discusses how journalism too often neutralizes, normalizes, and reproduces violence at the U.S.-Mexico border.

\textsuperscript{35} In his book, The Femicide Machine (2012), Sergio González Rodríguez approximates the number of women killed at 400. Although other sources estimate the murders to be in the thousands. (endignorance.org). Elaine Graham-Leigh points out that the fact “[t]hat there can be such uncertainty about the numbers is an indication of how poor the authorities’ response has been to these crimes” (counterfire.org).

\textsuperscript{36} The journalist has been writing about the murders since 1996 through Hombre sin cabeza (2000) and Huesos en el desierto (2006), for which he has received death threats and government bans (Los Angeles Review of Books).
In his essay “Over their Dead Bodies: Reading the Newspapers on Gender Violence,” Corona considers the representation of the Juárez Femicides in the news. He explains that the media “…typically offer little more than a voyeuristic approach to the themes of violence and death along the border” (108). Likewise, he emphasizes that “[b]ecause the typical journalistic report focuses on action and characters, the lack of information generates a void of knowledge in reference to, among other essential elements, the identity of the killer and often the victim. The imperative is that of telling the story…because there is a public commitment to the act of telling” (117). González-Rodríguez echoes this point as he describes the portrayal of Ciudad Juárez as “…the gateway to a Mexican hell: a subject for extreme tourism and yellow journalism. The world reduced to a crime tabloid article” (21). In this chapter I will focus on how fiction tells the stories of the femicides and the violent conditions that support them. Thus, while other mediums like the press have been unable to take the “investigative stance” proposed by Corona, fiction may serve to fill in the blanks with the “interpretive contexts” that the media lacks (121).

Gaspar de Alba, whose mystery novel Desert Blood is included in this chapter, has been a leader in bringing these women’s deaths to the forefront of academic scrutiny. She explains that in organizing the 2003 conference at UCLA, “The Maquiladora Murders, Or, Who Is Killing the Women of Juárez,” she wanted to “…focus not so much on who is killing them, as on…how we could reassemble the pieces of the puzzle of their deaths to help us understand why they died and why they were killed with such viciousness directed at the brown female body” (8). Through her novel and subsequent collection of essays, Gaspar de Alba and her colleagues and friends, “…examine the traditional machismo and misogyny that pervade social attitudes toward the victims, who are represented as prostitutes responsible for provoking their own deaths,”
and “...collapse the simple binary of innocent and guilty by investigating the sociocultural devaluation of women rather than ‘whodunit’ (11).

Other scholars, like Ana del Sarto and Melissa W. Wright, have also studied the societal conditions that contribute to the violence against women. In her article, “Globalización, violencia y afectividad en Ciudad Juárez,” del Sarto reminds us to consider the systemic violence caused by neoliberal economic structures and policies. She affirms that:

...esta violencia sistémica la mayor parte de las veces es atribuida o vinculada a los sistemas político, judicial y social como si fuera posible separarlos en la realidad de la materialidad económica. Es decir, muy pocos aceptan que esta violencia sistémica es estructural e inherente al sistema capitalista mundial contemporáneo. (83)

Furthermore, del Sarto illustrates how the women of the maquiladoras represent excluded subjectivities by virtue of the fact that they are independent female workers who left behind “un mundo archaico” to branch out on their own. Unfortunately, as she points out, this subjectivity outside of the patriarchal norm is what is used to justify their position as objects of violence (89).

In “Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border,” Wright illustrates how the Mexican government’s “public woman discourse” has served to shape the politics surrounding both the femicides and drug-related murders. Utilizing Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics, Wright examines “...how the wars over the political meaning of death in relation both to femicide and to the events called drug violence unfold through a gendering of space, violence, and of subjectivity” (709). According to Wright, the Mexican government used the fact that the victims of femicide inserted themselves into the public sphere to justify the violence against them: “[t]he discourse of the public woman normalized the violence and used the victims’ bodies as a way to substantiate the politics based on the
patriarchal notions of normality. Normal Mexican families, with normal, private women safely at home, had nothing to worry about." (713-714).

In her book, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, Wright also affirms that “[t]he old story of the whore—as the consummate public woman—who contaminates the cultural space she inhabits is having new applications in Ciudad Juárez...” (168). Both Wright and del Sarto explain how impunity for those who carry out and are complicit to the violence continues to perpetuate and justify it. Del Sarto expands this idea when she shows that “[e]sta impunidad, combinada con la mercantilización de la vida, produce necesariamente cuerpos decartables de gente indeseable pero indispensable para mantener los altos retornos del capital” (81).

In Corona’s, del Sarto’s, and Wright’s respective essays, we see concrete examples of how objective (systemic and symbolic) violence often takes a back seat to external subjective violence. That is, both voyeuristic and (auto)censored journalism, as well as discourses surrounding women in the public sphere inadvertently and deliberately perpetuate the femicides and other manifestations of organized crime. As a result, I will show how fictional texts can provide an alternative space for a rethinking of the conditions that accommodate violence against women, as well as constitute a feminine reimagining of widespread societal solutions that go beyond the innocent or guilty dichotomy.

37 In her article, “Ghost Dance in Ciudad Juárez at the End/Beginning of the Millennium,” María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba also discusses the “sexed and sexist discourse at work” in Ciudad Juárez through her analysis of government advertisements and propaganda. Among others, she explores the message that “...‘decent’ women maintain themselves in private spaces. But women who dare to go dancing ‘until dawn’ put themselves at risk of becoming another statistic” (102).

38 As mentioned previously, in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, world-renowned philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek divides violence into two categories: subjective and objective. While subjective violence is the most visible and outwardly traumatic, objective violence, albeit just as powerful, seems to hide behind the surface scars of trauma. Žižek further breaks down objective violence into a symbolic category, violence embodied in language and its forms, and a systemic one, the devastating consequences of the smooth functioning of economic and political systems.
2.2 Communities of Matriarchal Knowledge for Solidarity and Justice in *Desert Blood* by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and *Ciudad final* by Kama Gutier.

The first two novels in this chapter are centered on two Chicana lesbian\(^{39}\) investigators, Ivon Villa from *Desert Blood* and Kama Gutier from *Ciudad final*. Through her article, “Writing on the Walls: Deciphering Violence and Industrialization in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood,*” Irene Mata analyzes the queer female investigator as knowledge interpreter. She explains that through the queering of the detective genre, the novel never proposes a solution to the crimes nor restores social order. Rather, it:

...illustrates the conditions under which women in the border area must labor and the impunity with which they are murdered...Gaspar de Alba employs the strategies of the detective novel to challenge the hegemonic narrative structure of detective fiction and push for an analysis of the crimes based on a critique of multiple, entrenched structures of power. (22, my emphasis)

That is, instead of focusing on causality, like the trend in traditional detective fiction, novels like *Desert Blood* and Kama Gutier’s (pseudonym for Josebe Martínez) *Ciudad final* expose the conditions—economic, political, social, etc.—that contribute to the instances of violence represented in the texts.

Julia Monárrez Fragoso, a Mexican scholar, stresses the importance of looking at these conditions when she questions the outside forces that affect female realities in Juárez:

If it is true that we women should and must be responsible for ourselves, what happens when the conditions of poverty force some women to work night shifts? What happens when you live in areas with a deficient urban infrastructure and without electric power? When there is neither private nor public transportation to leave women at the doorsteps of their homes?\(^{40}\) (5)

The authors in my study juxtapose these conditions and scenes of violence with an endless quest for knowledge and an urge for social action. For instance, the tendency of these works is

\(^{39}\) It is pertinent to identify the women as lesbians to point out the similarities between the two novels, as well as to emphasize the female-centered communities of knowledge within each.

to surpass the form novel to become an artifact that intervenes on reality by calling on activism and the reader’s involvement. Each protagonist follows a trajectory from unawareness about the femicides to that of a greater knowledge and consciousness; thus suggesting a similar path for the reader. In this sense, they defy the politics of no-information and contest the silence and impunity of authorities.

The overall didactic messages that the novels promote align them to Hayden White’s ideas regarding the relationship between history and literature. White regards the work of the historian as the process of putting events together to tell a story. He argues that historical narratives are not purely mimetic, and that it:

...is wrong to think of history as a model similar to a scale model of an airplane or ship...For we can check the adequacy of this latter kind of model by going and looking at the original and, by applying the necessary rules of translation, seeing in what respect the model has actually succeeded in reproducing aspects of the original. But historical structures and processes are not like these originals; we cannot go and look at them in order to see if the historian has adequately reproduced them in his narrative. Nor should we want to, even if we could; for after all it was the very strangeness of the original as it appeared in the documents that inspired the historian’s efforts to make a model of it in the first place. (226-227)

In a similar way to the historical narratives that do not merely copy reality, the texts in my study offer fictional perspectives on reality in order to explore as many angles of the femicide epidemic as possible. They differ in the way that they are not centered upon nor driven by historical accuracy. Like the notion that the strangeness of the original is what inspires the historian to make the model of reality in the first place, these novels based on femicide are also motivated by the absurdity of the systematic killing of women at the hands of men. Further joining history and literature, White contends that history “…has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination. In the interest of appearing scientific and objective, it has repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal” (235-236). Although the
relationship between history and literature is inversely depicted in this chapter; that is, literature is borrowing from historical fact, through White’s theories we witness a more complex understanding of how the two are intertwined through diverse narratives and discourses.

According to Mata, Ivon combines knowledge from both the academy and the community to find answers. She explains that Ivon’s differential mode of consciousness, joined with Gaspar de Alba’s power of writing, create alternative paradigms that challenge the social inequality of globalization. In Ciudad final, Kama the criminologist also embodies this socially conscious activism. Here, it is important to consider Marjorie Agosín’s ideas regarding a consciousness that is not just reserved for the testimonio genre. In the introduction to her international anthology of women’s writing, A Map of Hope: Women’s Writing on Human Rights, Agosín states that:

...some women [featured in the anthology] have not suffered violations or exile, but they are women, and they are women with a conscience. The privilege of being white does not stop Nadine Gordimer from writing about colonial societies. The privilege of owning land and being educated does not stop Rosario Castellanos from meditating on the condition of the indigenous women in Chiapas. Each voice on this map is a voice of conscience. (xxiii)

Gaspar de Alba and Gutier take part in developing this consciousness through their works of fiction. The ways in which they seek knowledge and look at the horrific crimes against women in Ciudad Juárez from diverse angles suggest a reading of the conditions that make the violence possible.

Additionally, following Judith Butler, I will explain how the novels combat violence through this multi-perspective consciousness that has the potential to lead to justice. In her book, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, Butler discusses post 9/11 U.S. policies on war and shows how mourning and violence can alternatively lead to solidarity and global justice. I will focus on the chapter, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” where Butler considers
how “certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable” (xiv). Here, she also highlights the importance of looking at conditions rather than causes. Butler illustrates this point:

> When President Arroyo of the Philippines on October 29, 2001, remarks that ‘the best breeding ground [for terrorism] is poverty,’ or Arundhati Roy claims that bin Laden has been ‘sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid waste by America’s foreign policy,’ something less than a strictly causal explanation is being offered. Both of them are pointing to conditions, not causes…Conditions do not ‘act’ in the way that individuals do, but no agents act without them. (10-11)

Although she is speaking of U.S. imperialism as a condition that helped breed the September 11th terror attacks (attacks that she wholeheartedly condemns), her message for international communities of “non-violent cooperation” are relevant to the situation at hand. She argues that we must ask how conditions come about and we must “…endeavor to re-create social and political conditions on more sustaining grounds” (17-18). Thus, the U.S. should use the vulnerability and loss of that day as a basis for “reimagining the possibility of community” (20). Through their own unofficial investigations, Kama, Ivon, and their communities reimagine this possibility of solidarity and shared knowledge that could lead to justice for the women who have been disappeared and killed. They imagine Cherrie Moraga’s notion of the future as a “dream waiting to happen.” The novels are willing to reveal the conditions that breed violence, without citing one cause or one person to blame. This serves as an open critique to the official police investigations that point to unlikely suspects or, worse, do not even investigate at all.

In my analysis I read these novels about femicide as acts of public grieving, similar to obituaries and eulogies. If violence represents the circumstances of death, the obituary is the announcement and identification of the dead, and the eulogy and the funeral, or other performance of the like, forms part of the reiteration of the person’s life story. As Volk and
Schlotterbeck⁴¹ point out, “...it is precisely because the state has failed so abjectly in stopping these murders that ‘fictional’ narratives have become both the site where victims are mourned and the means by which justice can be restored” (122). Since the State is often conceived of as a masculine force, the novels take on a woman-centered approach in order to emphasize the lack of action at the hands of authorities, politicians, and other leaders.

Here it is also pertinent to contemplate Butler’s notion of the obituary as a product of nation building. She discusses the fact that there are no obituaries for war casualties at the hands of the U.S. because “[i]f there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition” (34). Just like the women of the Revolution’s contributions to the revolt have not received their proper value and preservation (in a much less urgent way), the victims of the effects of violence brought forth by deregulation and neoliberal economic shifts have not been properly valued and mourned.

Since many of the victims of the femicides are never found or never identified, their representation in print, albeit through these novels of fiction, takes on a greater level of importance with regard to the public grieving of their lives. It must be emphasized that “what is at stake when writers...and other cultural producers take these murders on board...is not just how they address the specifics of a gruesome history...but how (or if) they locate the murders within the broader set of circumstances that produced them” (Volk and Schlotterbeck 131). Through the analysis of societal conditions, violence, and an awakened consciousness in these works, we will discover how in a place of precarity, people may still, in the words of the character Kama Gutier, desire (and hope) precariously. That is, in places of so much pain and

⁴¹ From Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán’s collection of essays in Making a Killing, “Gender, Order, and Femicide: Reading the Popular Culture of Murder in Ciudad Juárez.”
suffering the women in the novels experience simple pleasures through connecting physically and emotionally with others.

In *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, a novel based on four years of research into the femicides, her birth in El Paso, Texas just across the border from Ciudad Juárez and her own personal experiences living on the border, Alicia Gaspar de Alba introduces us to Ivon Villa, Ph.D. candidate turned investigator. The novel tells the story of how Ivon learns of the femicides and gets directly pulled into the horror when her own sister Irene is kidnapped. On the plane from Los Angeles back to her home town of El Paso, Ivon reads an article describing the *maquiladora* murders, of which she had no previous knowledge. En route she meets a fellow Texan, Jeremy Wilcox, J.W., who, as we discover later, works for the border patrol and has connections to pornography and the violent crimes against women in Ciudad Juárez. Here we are first introduced to the penny metaphor where the coins are found inside many of the victims’ bodies in the text when J.W. drops a roll of them on the ground.

In her “Disclaimer” to introduce the novel, Gaspar de Alba explains that she “…added a metaphorical dimension to the story, using the image of American coins, particularly pennies, to signify the value of the victims in the corporate machine; the poor brown women who are the main target of these murders, are, in other words, as expendable as pennies in the border economy” (v). Thus, the women are devalued in life by neoliberal economic structures and devalued posthumously as ungrievable bodies. With a similar functionality as the material culture that I analyzed in the first chapter, these coins symbolize the exchange value of dispensable bodies. That is, just like pennies that most people nowadays just throw away, these

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42 According to a February 2013 report from the group Human Rights Watch on disappearance cases in Mexico, approximately 25,000 are unsolved. Speaking for the group, Nick Steinberg states that “[w]ith a number that high, we are dealing with a crisis of disappearance in Mexico that is nothing like anything we’ve seen in Latin America in decades” (Kahn 1).
poor female bodies are easily discarded due to their perceived extremely minimal value to the rest of society. Throughout the novel, the pennies appear and eventually are part of what help Ivon link J.W. to the femicides.

These expendable lives, then, can be related to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life. He defines the difference between the Greek terms for life: zoē, which denoted the human creature stripped down to its most basic form, and bios, depicting the politically and morally qualified beings known as citizens. Based on this notion of the Greek zoē and Walter Benjamin’s das bloße Leben, or bare life, Agamben discusses “la nuda vita,” as the human creature deprived of any rights (9). For Agamben, the bare life remains included in politics for the purpose of its exclusion. He explains that:

The fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, zoē/bios, exclusion/inclusion. There is no politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion. (12)

In Desert Blood the abused and murdered women are bare lives in the sense that they are systematically excluded from true political existence by people and institutions that constantly deprive them of their rights both in life and in death. For example, their non-pregnant bodies must be maintained in order for them to keep their jobs in the maquiladoras, and their corpses do not receive the same investigations as other more important political bodies. They are killed and then denied the rights and justice of the murdered body. Yet again they are unjustly excluded since “[t]he denial of extermination is part of the extermination” (González Rodríguez 84). At every turn these women are included in society in order to feed the neoliberal transnational factory, but are simultaneously excluded when they cost more than their
established worth. Their bodies become yet another byproduct of the neofordist assembly line model.

Wright has also elaborated this notion of the devalued and disposable body in her discussion of what she calls “the myth of the disposable third world woman.” She poignantly observes that this woman’s demise and disposability paradoxically represent her value to multinational corporations. Wright states that:

...despite her ineluctable demise, the disposable third world woman possesses certain traits that make her labor particularly valuable to global firms that require dexterous, patient, and attentive workers. And these traits make her so desirable that global firms go out of their way to employ her whenever possible because the things that she makes generate value even as she depreciates in value. So, on the one hand, we hear a story of a woman who is, essentially, wasting away, and then, on the other, we hear that this very woman is creating all kinds of wonderful and popular things that can be bought and sold on the international market. And, as it turns out, the myth explains how this internal contradiction means that this disposable third world woman is, in fact, quite valuable since she, like so many other characters of mythic lore, generates widespread prosperity through her own destruction. (2)

Here, Wright seems to define one of the aspects of the maquiladora workers’ agency. In other words, although through increased and much needed attention to the femicides we tend to view these women only as potential victims of violence, we also must remember that they are producing value as they defy traditional gender roles by entering the labor force and, in many cases, becoming the family breadwinners and leaders.

Returning to the events of the novel, when we meet Ivon’s cousin Ximena in the third chapter she reveals that Ivon and her partner Brigit plan to adopt a child from Cecilia, a maquiladora worker. Alongside Ximena and Father Francis, Ivon plans to pick up Cecilia from the factory in Ciudad Juárez in order to meet her and discuss the adoption. Ximena, a social worker, and Father Francis assist with these technically unlawful adoptions in order to help the poor women in Juárez. Through his group, Contra el Silencio, Father Francis conducts rastreos to
search for the missing women and their bodies. When the three arrive at the factory, they learn that Cecilia had punched out early and was picked up by someone else. Since, as Ximena points out, it is extremely dangerous to visit Cecilia’s colonia, Puerto de Anapra, at night, they go there the following day. When they get to the colonia, they find out that Cecilia is dead. Apparently she did not come home from her shift and some guy on horseback found her body inside of an abandoned car near the airport. She had been stabbed to death and they found her still wearing her smock and nametag with rope around her neck, evidence that she had been dragged.

Father Francis goes to the morgue to comfort Cecilia’s grandmother and aunt who are identifying the body. This horrific incident further sparks Ivon’s activism and she wants to get to the bottom of what is happening in Juárez. At the morgue, they witness the autopsy and learn that Cecilia had been expecting a baby boy; the one that Ivon dreamed would someday call her Mapi, a combination of mami and papi. The first clue for Ivon’s investigation is a note that had been left on Cecilia’s machine in the factory the previous Friday. Her grandmother had shown it to the police who decided not to take the line of investigation any further. It read: “ichy’s Diary. Volume 3, No.1,” probably with the capital R missing according to Father Francis who associated it with El Paso’s most infamous serial killer, Richard Ramírez who loved cocaine, Satanism, and pornography. Further completing the allusion is the image of the pentagram inside a circle, the word trematode, which Father Frank heard at one of Ramírez’s trials, and a caption that said: “Look what’s inside: You’re next; www.exxtremelylucky” (56-57). This foreshadows Irene’s kidnapping at the hands of J.W. the border patrolman for his part in the live streaming pornography on the same website.

Throughout the book, Ivon’s tumultuous relationship with her mother, Lydia, is revealed. She often comments on Ivon’s “immoral lifestyle” and its effects on the entire Villa
family. When Irene disappears after Ivon was supposed to take her to the Juárez fair, Lydia blames Ivon for inadvertently ditching her sister and her lifestyle for bringing bad fortune to the family. Ivon and Irene had originally planned to meet Raquel, Ivon’s ex-girlfriend, at the fair, but Ivon gets sidetracked by her own investigation and adoption affairs. After Cecilia’s death, Ximena devises an alternative plan that Ivon will be able to adopt three year old Jorgito, son of Elsa who is sick from an injection that she received while working at the maquila. After Jorgito was born, Elsa developed strange tumors and was later diagnosed with cervical cancer. It seems that her illness was caused by illegal birth control trials that Amen Hakim Hassan, the Egyptian accused of serial murders in Juárez, carried out posing as a doctor who gave fake pregnancy tests to maquila workers.

The character Amen Hakim Hassan is an obvious allusion to the real Abdul Latif Sharif Sharif, an Egyptian scientist accused of murder who previously worked as an engineer in one of the maquiladoras. According to journalist Teresa Rodríguez, he was detained in 1995 when a woman called “Blanca” led authorities to his home where she had been abused and raped for three days (43). However, he was freed when Blanca recanted her story and then disappeared. At this point law enforcement was keeping a closer eye on him, especially since he fled the U.S. for Mexico to evade deportation back to Egypt on account of sex crimes. Apparently he was also active in the Juárez community and was allegedly seen with some of the women who later turned up dead, including Silvia Morales and Elizabeth Castro. Based on this information and supposed eyewitness accounts of their interactions, Sharif Sharif was arrested in December of 1995 for Castro’s murder (Rodríguez 45-47). Rodríguez explains that without proof, authorities still “…dubbed him ‘the Juárez ripper’ and hailed Sharif’s capture as a major development in the case” (47). Even though Sharif Sharif was only officially charged with Castro’s death, “…headlines
boasted of the capture of ‘the serial killer of Juárez,’ and residents of the border city breathed a collective sigh of relief” (47). Although Sharif Sharif may indeed have been guilty of some of the crimes, this attempt at finding a universal scapegoat is exactly what novels like Gaspar de Alba’s is criticizing. The point is that it is ludicrous to settle on one mastermind behind the femicides when they are clearly caused by a number of factors coalescing at the same point in time. In other words, the search for a Juárez serial killer furthers the impunity of criminals by ignoring the many other components and actors behind the crimes.

Meanwhile, Irene travels to the Juárez fair alone to meet Raquel. There, J.W., the same Texan in a cowboy hat from the plane, buys a drink for Irene and Myrna, Raquel’s niece. After a night of drinking at the fair, they all end up at one of Raquel’s friends’ houses in a colonia across the river from the now shut-down ASARCO refinery. Although Raquel tells the girls not to go near the river, Irene disobey and swims in the dirty waters of the Rio Grande to the amusement of those watching her. The next day when Ivon’s mother calls asking why she and Irene are late for lunch, Ivon explains that her sister had not stayed with her at Ximena’s, the house Grandma Maggie had bequeathed to her. Ivon and her mother realize at this moment that Irene could be missing. Ivon borrows her Uncle Joe’s truck and goes straight to Raquel’s business in Juárez, Instituto Frontelingua, and demands Irene’s whereabouts. Raquel explains that she does not know and that she has looked for her all morning. Ivon is enraged upon discovering that Raquel went to the party looking for a drug fix.

In the midst of Ivon’s search, Gaspar de Alba relates another story of a young girl preyed upon by J.W. Describing himself as a film producer of legitimacy, 14 year old, Mireya, mistakenly gets into his car that has been rigged to keep her locked inside. Later on, during one of Father Frank’s rastreos, the search teams locate Mireya’s body. During the search, Ivon finds her
nametag from the Phillips Plant and Laura, the forensic intern, explains that the penny found in her throat is often something she sees in orifices and other places on the bodies that come to the morgue. Returning to the main narrative, an American Detective, Pete McCuts is assigned to Irene’s case per Ximena’s influence as a social worker. Although at first he cannot officially work the investigation in Mexico since it is out of the El Paso Police Department’s jurisdiction, he eventually is able to take the case after finding Irene’s jeans and saves her and Ivon’s lives through his off duty surveillance. At this point as well we have discovered that Irene is trapped in a warehouse by the ASARCO refinery where J.W. and his associates torture women to maintain their online live porn streaming business. Father Francis reveals to Irene that Ximena’s previous car accident was caused by a man in a big truck with “Lone Ranger” Texas license plates, which further connects J.W. to the Villa family.

Additionally, we discover that Hassan, the incarcerated Egyptian, is also involved in the pornography ring. According to J.W.’s associates, he plans to alert the media of the online porn operation if he does not receive his order: two American women “plus the bitch at the morgue and her daughter” (196). In her own research Ivon investigates Hassan’s role in the femicides. She finds out that he lives in a fully furnished prison cell replete with amenities: private bathroom, access to phones, conjugal visits, etc. He called host Rubí Reyna of Mujeres sin Fronteras, to assert his innocence and explain how he is being used as a scapegoat in the place of an investigation into the real killers. Hassan threatens that the authorities will regret deeming him the mastermind behind the crimes in Juárez. With help from Magda, the bartender at The Red Canary, Ivon is able to connect the story of a videotaped and murdered waitress, Julie, to the pornographic X-rated site from the note left on Cecilia’s machine at the factory.
Ivon’s quest to find her sister puts her in contact with a community of people who help her interpret clues. While canvassing the bars and clubs in Juárez with her cousin William, Ivon meets a transvestite who recognizes a man in a cowboy hat riding a carousel horse in the background of Irene’s picture from the fair that she had gifted to Myrna. Although the transvestite and her friend are reluctant to name the man, we assume that it is J.W. Soon after, Magda calls Ivon and cryptically leaves the message that “it is a factory close to Jesus,” alluding to the ASARCO refinery near the statue of Christ the Redeemer on top of Mount Cristo Rey on the U.S. side of the border. Before their search ends for the day, some judiciales, or federal police officers, apprehend Ivon and William, alleging that they are selling drugs. As they are clearly being driven to a remote part of the desert, Ivon name drops reporter Rubí Reyna, and the police let them go without having to pay any bribe. As Reyna comments later, perhaps the only thing that the judiciales fear is media exposure.

Later, on her way back from a night in Raquel’s house in a clearly narco-funded neighborhood of Ciudad Juárez, Ivon is detained at the border. Unbeknownst to her, someone had stowed pornography in Irene’s car, which she had retrieved from Raquel’s. To Ivon’s surprise, Captain Jeremy Wilcox, J.W., Chief Detention Enforcement Officer at the border remembers her and is the one who takes her into custody for her child porn video. It seems that a videotape given to Ivon by Rubí Reyna has been recorded over with the pornography. Fortunately, Detective McCuts has been following Ivon all this time and is therefore now following J.W. and notifying his department to send patrols and a helicopter. J.W. takes her to
his porn operation at the site of the defunct ASARCO refinery where Ivon realizes that he is the one who is running the porn site and killing women online for entertainment.

With the authorities after J.W., Irene is able to escape Ariel, the women who had been preparing her for her debut (and evidently one of the attendees at the party she, Raquel, and Myrna attended after the fair), but is subsequently chased by large German Shepard dogs trained to respond to movie lingo like “cut” and “action.” When Detective McCuts gets shot in the leg, Ivon takes his gun and shoots the dogs that are tailing Irene. Irene is severely injured but is brought home safe to an El Paso hospital where McCuts is also in a coma. While Ivon is recovering from her injuries and watching over Irene at the hospital, Rubí Reyna phones her and pleads for the urgent return of the videotape. Ivon explains how it led to her detention and was confiscated at the border. Ivon informs Rubí that the video that her husband Walter had taken featured a young girl getting raped and strangled on camera.

In the 44th chapter of the novel we are introduced to Amber Luna Reyna, Rubí Reyna’s daughter. While waiting in the car for his stepdaughter, Walter Luna is gunned down assumedly by J.W. and his associates since Ivon had named him as the videographer of the tape. In the Epilogue to the novel we discover that after this incident Rubí, now Ramona, is living incognito in Oaxaca with her daughter. As a result of Ivon’s investigation and Detective McCuts’ efforts, the ASARCO pornography business was dismantled. The police recovered the bodies of 11 women from the site, along with the slain police officers including Border Patrol Officer, Jeremy McCuts.

43 Here is where Ivon puts the clues of her investigation together: “They had left downtown behind and were heading toward the ASARCO smokestacks on the Border Highway. It was too dark to see it, but she knew that off to the left was the river, and above it, Mount Cristo Rey. Was it just this morning that she’d been staring up at the statue’s face from Lomas de Polo? That impassive limestone face that offered nothing but…wait a minute…that impassive limestone face of Jesus. Poor Juárez, so far from the Truth, so close to Jesus. Es una fábrica cerca de Jesús, the voice had said on the phone. A factory close to Jesus. Close to Cristo Rey. What was close to Cristo Rey? She could see the smokestacks of the smelter up ahead near Executive Center” (285-286).
“J.W.” Wilcox. The irony of the situation is the fact that he too will be honored with a 21 gun salute since he “…died in the line of duty, holding the line” (326). And, in the spirit of no-information, instead of printing what Ivon had said about her investigation into the crimes, the police statement said that the Villa family had no comment on the disappearance and recovery of Irene. In the final moments of the novel, perched at her old thinking spot at UTEP, Ivon deduces that one of the real problems plaguing Ciudad Juárez and the region is the “huge malignant tumor of silence” (335). Ivon reflects that as people, society, and institutions alike cover up the actions of a vast pool of perpetrators, most everyone is implicated and there is no wonder that the individual crimes are never solved. Finally, in the Epilogue, we learn that Detective McCuts eventually woke up from his coma, Jorgito will likely soon be Ivon and Brigit’s adopted son, and that Ivon is immensely thankful for her own family.

In her disclaimer to the novel, Gaspar de Alba states that she does not intend “…to sensationalize the crimes or capitalize on the losses of so many families, but [does intend] to expose the horrors of this deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the English-speaking public…” (vi). Gaspar de Alba’s self-reflection through her novel differs from journalistic accounts rapidly churning out reports of the femicides because of the extended period of time in which she researched her subject matter. That is, she took the step back as proposed by Žižek to consider all of the angles of objective and subjective violence. Similarly, the obituary, eulogy or other public mourning of life serve this same function of disseminating information to a wider audience. Furthermore, to highlight the importance of Gaspar de Alba’s novel in comparison to traditional detective fiction, Volk and Schlotterbeck assert that “…in narrating a history of women who are victims, [she]…populates her novel with strong and resistant women. Juárez may be far from a matriarchy, but in Desert Blood [she] has created her own gynocentric
community inhabited by borderlands women who have ‘unlearn[ed] the puta/virgen
dichotomy” (146). Rather than focus on this negative binary, Ivon and the other characters rely
on the presence of Coatlicue within them in order to comprehend the complex relationship
between acts of humanity and acts of violence. This gynocentric community is the one that
seeks knowledge when the patriarchy ignores the atrocious femicides. The juxtaposition of
female victims and activists contribute to the permeating message in the novel that women
should speak out and continue to hope and desire despite what hegemonic discourses too often
tell them.

Similarly, Volk and Schlotterbeck assert that when compared with La frontera de cristal
by Carlos Fuentes, novels like Desert Blood stand out for breaking down traditional gender
binaries. They argue that:

...despite Fuentes’s critical reading of globalization’s impact on Mexico, his presentation
of its repercussions on the female work force is freighted with traditional conceptions of
a ‘proper’ gendered order. The elemental social politics at play in ‘Malintzin de las
Maquilas’ is revealed one night when four maquila women head to the Malibú...As
Fuentes enters the Malibú, he engages the imagery of the maqui-loca, the ‘hypersexual’
maquila worker targeted by authorities as the ‘real’ cause of Juárez’s problems. On this
night, as one hunk dances toward the group of maquila friends, ‘the girls elbow one
another. In my bed, just imagine. In yours. If only he’d take me, I’m ready. If
only he’d kidnap me, I’m kidnappable.’ Perhaps one can overlook Fuentes’s transposition of
kidnapping fantasies from male murderer to female clubbers, for his novel was
published just as the Juárez femicides emerged. But the tragedy he fashions in his story
suggests that death is the legitimate price paid by women who threaten patriarchal
society. While the maquila friends are enjoying themselves, Dinorah, a single mother,
receives word that her young son, whom she left tied to a table in her shack, has
strangled himself on the cord. (138)

I agree that in hindsight the word choice of kidnappable is haunting, but it is not so absurd when
we consider that at that moment the women are fawning over the gringos who could take them
away from Juárez forever or at least show them a night of pleasure. This is not exactly feminist,
but it is not necessarily a negative commentary against women either. Likewise, I do not read
Fuentes as criticizing the “maqui-loca” as the source of Juárez’s problems. It seems to me that the Malibú is a symbol of Marina’s and the other women’s brief freedom from the constraints of life in the maquiladoras and the desolate colonias. Fuentes also uses the beach name to allude to Marina’s hopes to experience the vastness and freedom of the sea. The narrator says that, “...todo era permitido en la pista de Malibú, todas las emociones perdidas, los desplantes prohibidos, las sensaciones olvidadas...” (60).

Also, in my estimation, the death of Dinorah’s son is not portrayed as a legitimate price paid by the maquila women who defy the patriarchal order. Instead, I see it as a criticism of the societal conditions that isolate women like Dinorah in their struggles to work and maintain a household. When she leaves her son home alone to go to the discotheque, she is not only depicted as a neglectful mother; but as one who needs to experience small freedoms like everyone else. Although her judgment in this case of leaving her child alone is questionable, she is not the root of the problem in Juárez. These are the conditions that have made it so that she cannot earn a wage to pay a babysitter nor find a suitable daycare nearby. In fact, this is illustrated when Marina constantly asks Dinorah on the bus how her child is and who he is with. After a while she gets sick of it, so Dinorah just tells her that the neighbor takes him to daycare, to which Marina replies that there are very few of them (51). Thus, while Fuentes’ short story does not make the same strides as novels like Desert Blood when it comes to promoting inquiry and activism against the femicides, as even Volk and Schlotterbeck acknowledge it represents an essential critique of the effects of global neoliberal economic policy. Through “Malintzin de las maquilas,” Fuentes exemplifies the neoliberal turn in the border region and the rapid incorporation of Ciudad Juárez into the global economy in recent decades.
Along the same lines of Volk and Schlotterbeck’s notions of a gynocentric community, or female centered support systems, Jane Caputi, in her discussion of “Goddess Murder and Gynocide in Ciudad Juárez,” considers “…the spiritual meanings of this ongoing male sacrifice of the women and girls of Juárez...as a form of ritual blood sacrifice, [and] modern enactment of the core patriarchal myth of Goddess murder” (280). Threatened by their fear of Coatlicue and her ability to give life and take it away, the men seem to prey on women just as they are exhibiting their strong and independent characteristics as valuable workers within the new global economy. While this male sacrifice of women is seemingly ritualistic, so too are the acts of writing, speaking, marching, performing, canvassing, and other sorts of doing in the name of putting an end to femicide in Juárez and the world over44. Caputi references artist Alma López’s design of the “re-membered” Coyolxauhqui45, Coatlicue’s daughter, in the form of the Tree of Life for the 2003 “Maquiladora Murders” Conference at UCLA as an example of both ritual killing as tradition and restoration of the female power. She cites the conference’s website, which informs that ‘Coyolxauhqui is the Aztec Warrior Moon Goddess, who was brutally dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochtli (the Sun God) for uprising against patriarchy’ (279). Like López’s

44 This also relates to González Rodríguez’s ideas regarding the ritualization inside the maquiladoras. He asserts that the assembly plants become “…a symbol, and the conduct within it attains a productive ritual status, similar in many ways to ancient societies’ rituals regarding the sacred. Deep inside the factory, female laborers carry out repetitive, reflective, compulsive, integrating, stylized, collective, and generative tasks, immersed in the connective plurality of the manufacturing-assembly plant and its ‘just-in-time’ work tempo. This ritualization of labor ultimately integrates female and male workers into the production space. In exchange, they allow themselves to be assimilated into the productive apparatus in an endless flux of sacrifice and self-sacrifice” (29-30).

45 Caputi summarizes this story from Nahua mythology: “…Coatlicue, the serpent-skirted origin Goddess of Life, Sustenance, Death, and Rebirth, is sweeping a temple. She is impregnated when a ball of feathers falls from the sky. Coatlicue’s daughter Coyolxauhqui is supposedly shamed by her mother’s inappropriate behavior and rallies her four hundred sisters and brothers to kill their mother. The action of the myth takes place on Coatepec (Serpent Mountain). As Coyolxauhqui charges up the sacred mountain, Coatlicue gives birth to Huitzilopochtli—the Sun and War God. He emerges fully grown, quickly dresses, and arms himself. He pounces on Coyolxauhqui, decapitates her, and deliberately disrespects her, leaving her head where it fell and letting her body break into pieces as she tumbles down the mountain” (281).
intricate design, Gaspar de Alba’s novel attempts to re-member the female bodies disassembled in the desert through Ivon Villa’s quest for knowledge rooted in both the community and the academy.

Scholar and activist, Kathleen Staudt is critical of the paradoxical messages that popular culture brings to the fight against femicide, yet acknowledges the interdependent relationship between spectacle and sustained reform. She first explains that:

> [p]opular culture emits mixed messages about violence against women, whether in newspapers, films, art, music, the Internet, and television or from social movement frames themselves. Violence against women is a constant, embedded theme in popular culture. Its portrayal is rarely neutral but rather emerges in one of two orientations: critique or celebration. (17)

While I contend that the fictional narratives in this chapter present a more complex view of violence against women, and thus move away from this critique-celebration dichotomy, Staudt highlights an important point regarding the function of popular culture in condemning or perpetuating the violence. Next, Staudt affirms how popular culture, dramatic performances, and other more striking mediums draw attention to the problem:

> Violence against women and woman-killing have long histories and have become so normalized that they fail to rouse and mobilize constituencies for change. Dramatic activism rouses people but depends heavily on episodic events and the media rather than everyday sustained reform. Yet, without the activism, the professional nonprofit advocates retreat into minimal visibility: only to their ‘clients,’ funders, and law enforcement institutions. (109)

Here, it is imperative to remember that the attention that novels like Gaspar de Alba’s bring to the femicidal epidemic must work in concert with sustained activism in the real world. This is why our author offers her disclaimer and stresses the need for activism at every turn throughout the narrative. While promoting the stories of the women of the Revolution seems only necessary in the retellings of their prominent roles, the victims of femicide require swifter and
specifically directed tangible action. Nevertheless, both groups of women are united through their silenced voices and *coatlicuensidad*.

In addition to Ivon, her cousin Ximena and her associate Father Francis serve as knowledge carriers and interpreters. According to Mata, they are:

...fellow border crossers who act as unofficial historians to provide the background of the industry in Juárez and bear witness to the drastic changes in migration to the city and the consequences of this population growth. Although they are agents of traditional religious and state institutions, both work outside the laws that regulate the movement of people on the border...Together, they have expedited fifty-two transnational adoptions between individuals in El Paso and maquiladora workers who cannot afford to raise a child. (24)

Although I agree that Father Francis and Ximena represent important knowledge sources that help tell the unofficial history of the murders and violence in Juárez, I am more critical of their involvement in the adoptions. They explain their role in this way:

Ximena and I are just trying to help these young women. They can’t afford another mouth to feed, they make five dollars a day in those American factories, and their food coupons don’t last the week. They have to work eleven hours just to buy a box of diapers and four hours to buy a gallon of milk. Children are running around addicted to gasoline and paint by the age of five, that is, if they don’t get run over by a bus or mauled by a wild dog or simply die from dysentery or malnutrition. We’re just trying to help clean things up around here. Which is a lot more than some people do for their own community. (39)

While I recognize their function in the text as activist figures working within a broken social services system that enlighten Ivon’s understanding of the societal conditions that have brought about the femicides, I cannot shake the idea that, in a literal sense, they too are human traffickers. They are “purchasing” a product in the sense that they are coming up with their own economic scheme of value for a baby’s life. Also, Father Francis’ remarks about cleaning the place up are hauntingly similar to the alleged motives of the killers who wish to rid Ciudad Juárez of the unclean brown female. Despite the fact that they are performing a good deed in helping the *maquila* workers who cannot afford, are not able, or do not want to keep the
babies, they are still benefiting in some way from their bodies, which I find unsettling. Perhaps Gaspar de Alba counters this possible criticism from the reader with Ivon’s initial suspicions that Father Francis may have some hand in the crimes, which, by novel’s end, are proven untrue. In spite of my critique, the adoption angle performs an essential function in the text as it reveals the controls that the factories place on female menstruation and reproduction.

I do agree with Mata’s argument that “Father Francis and Ximena represent the possibility that transnational activist networks can oppose the exploitation of workers under global systems of power” (25). Their willingness to look beyond the law and the silence of officials both in El Paso and in Ciudad Juárez to speak and act out against the crimes serves as a model for others to get involved provided we temper this with a more critical view of their adoption efforts. Perhaps, as Mata points out, Ximena and Father Francis’ greatest contribution to the text are their revelations to Ivon that expose the “...long history of capitalist greed taking precedence over the well-being of the border’s citizens” where human beings have become “collateral damage in the quest for profits” (34). In this way they nourish an understanding of the systemic violence deeply entrenched in institutions, corporations, and the neoliberal market. Furthermore, the adoptions represent simply one branch of Father Francis and Ximena’s services to the community since “[o]ther than advocate for the missing girls, [they] also picket the courthouse and the offices of the Times and the Herald Post, protesting the silence of the authorities and the media on these murders” (40).

In addition to the objective systemic and symbolic violence that characters like Ximena, Father Francis, and Ivon reveal, the novel has no shortage of subjective violence. Indeed, the opening scene is grisly and more than likely describes the death of Cecilia and other women and
expectant mothers like her. We are privy to the woman’s thoughts as she is being tortured to death:

The drug they had given her made her feel like she was under water. She could not feel the blades slicing into her belly. She saw blood splashing, heard the tearing sound, like the time she’d had a tooth pulled at the dentist’s, something torn out by the roots, deeper than the drug...She tried to scream, but someone hit her on the mouth again, and someone else stabbed into the bag of water and bones—that’s all it is, the nurse at the factory once told her, a bag of water and bones. (1-2)

This prevalence of drugs in the narration exemplifies the pervasiveness of drug culture not only in Ciudad Juárez, but also along the rest of the U.S.-Mexico border. Symbolically, the imagery of the effects of the drug alludes to the absurdity and surreal nature of the femicides against women. It suggests that only in a hallucinatory version of the world could these types of crimes occur with impunity and silence. It simultaneously exposes the ritual acts of hatred that damage the female psyche and womb before she is killed and disposed of. The silencing of the victim and the description of human life as water and bones speaks to the dehumanization and mercantilization of life at the borderland maquiladora.

At the end of the novel, Ivon concludes that the ritual acts of violence are about extinguishing the female power to reproduce since maternity and the leave of absence that ensue drive down profits. This relates to what Caputi has said about goddess murder and the killing of the female spirit:

From a feminist-spiritualist perspective, these murders ritually reflect and serve a much larger purpose: the theft of female energy and the consolidation of patriarchal power, achieved via the ongoing and systematic rape, mutilation, contamination, and murder of women and subordinated peoples along with the creatures and elements of nonhuman Nature. Domineering and destructive men, cultures, and institutions still are always trying to seize ‘female creative energy’ and redirect it into the crushing concerns of ego, father-dominated family, church, state, corporation, and empire. Proclaiming omnipotence, they evince what is actually impotence and parasitism, dependent as they are on the stolen energy of others. (288)
The conditions and events that often lead up to murder are an important form of objective violence that Gaspar de Alba’s novel focuses on. That is, before this female creative and creator energy a la Coatlicue is entirely annihilated, it is torturously always subject to being slowly snuffed out. For example, in order to conceal her pregnancy in the factory, Cecilia has no choice but to wear a girdle, which ends up causing minor complications. Ximena tells Ivon that Cecilia has been “...wearing a girdle, you know, so they can’t tell she’s pregnant or else she’ll get fired. She stands up all day at the factory, and it’s made the baby ride too low, or something like that” (11). Before acts of subjective violence slice up her womb, subtle acts of objective violence restrict its movement.

After Cecilia dies, Ximena moves immediately to find the other adoption through Elsa. This relationship also provides insight into the control and manipulation of the female womb by maquila officials. Elsa explains that Dr. Amen performed a pap smear and then gave her what she thought was a pregnancy test. She describes this experience: “The nurse took my temperature, and el doctor asked me all kinds of embarrassing questions, like did I have a boyfriend, when was the date of my last menstruation...y luego pues...he put something inside me” (91). Ximena thinks this is where she was inseminated by Dr. Amen since another woman had told her that the doctor was doing experiments for an anti-contraceptive he was developing. After her son Jorgito was born, Elsa developed ovarian cancer, which could potentially be attributed to Dr. Amen’s interventions in her body. Once again, Ximena enlightens Ivon about common bodily violations in the maquiladoras:

Listen, you have no idea the kinds of things they do to women at some of those maquilas. They give them birth control shots, they make them show their sanitary napkins every month, they pass around amphetamines to speed up their productivity. Hell, they’ve even got Planned Parenthood coming over to insert Norplant, which basically sterilizes the women for months. What’s to prevent some sick fuck from raping them during a so-called pregnancy test? (90)
A crucial connection to be made here is the double significance of female blood. In life it must be shed to retain employment, while in death it must be shed to perpetuate masculine dominance.

Paradoxically, while men attempt to control the female reproductive system, they also blame them for the degeneration of the traditional family unit. According to Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich:

There is a growing backlash against maquila women, as men attempt to preserve their dominance over family and society. Male resentment and hostility toward working women has led to the stigmatization of maquila women. They are seen as immoral and as destroying the family. A ‘bad reputation’ goes along with the factory job. Anthropologist Patricia Fernández Kelly, who worked in a garment maquiladora, reported that in northern Mexico the tabloids delight in playing up stories of scandal in the maquiladora: indiscriminate sex on the job, epidemics of venereal disease, fetuses found in factory rest rooms...Fernández Kelly believes that stigmatization of working women serves to keep them in line. (33)

Here, the tabloid discourse of fetuses in the factory rest rooms is juxtaposed with preventing pregnancy. The two notions work together to justify the tests and birth control efforts, since the heads of the maquiladoras can be seen as preventing the problems caused by wild and immoral sexual behavior. In reality, and as we see through Gaspar de Alba’s novel, the true motivation is the cost/benefit ratio of maternity leave and the employment of third world women.

Another essential perspective on violence is presented through the description of Puerto Anapra, the dangerous colonia with “[n]o roads, no electricity. Just a black hole of danger, especially for women” (22). William Langewiesche identifies additional evidence of bleak situations like these in his description of life on the border. He explains that:

When people live in cities built on industrial waste, they suffer. In the Lower Valley, miscarriage, birth defects, disease, and cancer rates are high. For this and other calamities of their lives, the workers have begun to blame the United States. In Matamoros, the city of a half million that lies across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas, I talked to a labor organizer named María Torres. She said, ‘Americans say they...
can save us from starvation. But all of us who have come to the north, if we had stayed where we were, we would not be dying of hunger. Here on the border, we are just slaves. (700)

Here, the absence of basic infrastructure is complicit violence involving both the state and multinational corporations. Altha J. Cravey describes how:

The growth of the export industrial sector is generally an explicit state policy designed to improve the country’s international economic position. To pursue this developmental goal, states subsidize industrial sectors, ensure labor tranquility through repressive tactics, and relax environmental and labor regulations... As a result, the workers endure unhealthy and unsafe working conditions to earn salaries that are inadequate for supporting themselves and their families. (6)

Additionally, if we return to Monárrez Fragoso’s ideas relating how poverty, among other factors, propels women into this “black hole,” as described by Ivon, the prevailing discourse that blames the victims for the crimes against them evaporates. On that note we can consider the economic violence being waged against these women and the other impoverished peoples at the border through the water deficiency: “The irony stung Ivon like a rock on the cheek. Water for Puerto Anapra, the sign back there had said. A port without water. Not even the Rio Grande came to this godforsaken place” (38). González Rodríguez cites the intense population growth from rapid modernization and industrialization in Ciudad Juárez in the last 50 years as a contributing factor to the infrastructural problems:

The immediate consequences of this growth were increased poverty, marginalization, and a scarce quality of life. The city’s cluster of institutions were incapable of providing satisfactory levels of housing, healthcare, safety, transportation, education, justice, culture, and environmental quality. Above all, they were unable to create a framework of respect for human rights. (8)

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46 I am using this term as Olufunmilayo I. Fawole understands it in her article, “Economic Violence to Women and Girls: Is it Receiving the Necessary Attention?”, from the July 2008 edition of criminology journal, *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*. She provides examples of economic violence in the form of limited access to funds or health care, controlled access to other institutions, and discriminatory laws, to name a few. This limited access to water experienced by those in Puerto Anapra can be considered as part of this category.
While the multinational corporations and their beneficiaries enjoy an abundance of resources, their workers are deprived of the most basic of human necessities. If the businesses and State had any true intentions of putting an end to the femicides, they would start with the infrastructure in places like Puerto Anapra.

Like we observed from the opening of the novel, the representation of brutal mutilations of female bodies is an important component in instigating outrage to generate activism afterward. From sliced and mangled breasts to bitten-off nipples, the language does not shy away from the harsh realities to protect the reader. The mistreatment of bodies is also exemplified through the scenes in the morgue where “...bottles of chemicals and broken skulls lined the rusty metal shelves,” and “[b]ones were heaped inside plastic trash bags on the floor” (50). What is more, the clumsy forensic techniques on the part of Mexican authorities further disrespect the bodies after they are dead. Like the silence and politics of no-information persisting within the community and through the news media, inept forensic investigations mute the future obituaries and eulogies of these women that they fail to identify properly. This ignorance also fails to help bring their captors to justice.

One of the saddest and most repugnant parts of the novel is when the forensic investigator describes the deceased baby boy from Cecilia’s womb. He was “...butchered, like an animal. Luckily he had the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, or else all the sharp force trauma would have cut off his little head completely” (53). The employment of the term butchered further emphasizes the barbaric nature of the ritual violence. In a subtle reference to

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47 Alicia Gaspar de Alba arranges photos of the desolate colonias and the manicured lawns and sculpted facades of the multinational corporations next to each to highlight the glaring contrasts in her article, “Poor Brown Female: The Miller’s Compensation for ‘Free’ Trade”

48 Ivon’s cousin William makes a pertinent allusion to the Middle East when he says: “I suddenly feel like I’m back in Desert Storm. This place looks like those villages outside Kuwait after a bombing” (219).
the matriarchal community that Ivon is immersed in, we observe that it is the umbilical cord, or the nurturing of the female body represented mythologically through Coatlicue’s creative powers, that protects the baby’s head from decapitation at the hands of the vicious male criminal. This is important since the face is the primary identity marker. This seems to suggest that through female ways of knowing and nurturing, like those espoused by Ivon; the identities of all of the femicide victims (and perpetrators, for that matter) will someday be revealed.

As we have seen, creating a fictional environment where multiple theories on the femicides can be explored is one of the primary functions of Gaspar de Alba’s novel. One of the more plausible ideas, when compared to a serial killer or an Egyptian chemist, is organ trafficking. Ximena explains that this black market on human body parts:

...target[s] young women because they’re healthy, they haven’t developed bad habits yet that will have a negative impact on their organs. According to our sources, some of the bodies were found with their insides carved out of them. And since those bodies were all found near areas in the desert that are used as landing strips, the theory goes, those healthy hearts and livers and whatever else the human organ market needs get harvested fresh from the kill and taken away immediately on helicopters. (95)

Although Ivon all but dismisses this notion on the grounds that a much more surgically oriented setting would be needed for this operation to be accomplished, it is still an important theory to consider. It may not be happening in the exact fashion as Ximena describes it; however, the way the women are used and disposed of points to the mercantilization of their organs and bodies.

Bringing us back to a more global view of the violence, Father Francis speaks on camera with Rubí Reyna about the context of the crimes. He asserts that:

...Juárez is not ready for the liberated woman, at least not in the lower classes. Their traditions are being disrupted in complete disproportion to changes in their economic status. They are expected to alter their value system, to operate within the cultural and political economy of the First World, at the same time that they do not move up on the social ladder. The Mexican gender system cannot accommodate the First World division of labor or the First World freedoms given to women. (252)
This shift toward greater female agency is part of what it being met with resistance in Juárez and other parts of the world where women are dying at the hands of men and ultimately traditional value systems. In another revealing comment, when Rubí asks Father Francis if he is justifying the murders, he replies:

Of course not. But let's just say I understand the social context for the crimes, which is, ultimately, a Catholic context, you see? The women are being sacrificed to redeem the men for their inability to provide for their families, their social emasculation, if you will, at the hands of the American corporations. (252)

Once more we are reminded of Caputi’s theory of Goddess murder. When we consider Father Francis’ comment regarding emasculation at the hands of corporations, he references the notion of the corporation as human being. Despite the fact that many politicians and authorities seem to behave as if corporations were humans in many aspects, the one fundamental problem is that businesses cannot be punished in the same ways as humans. If just for a brief moment we consider the three month BP oil spill into the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, we can see how this act of objective violence ultimately goes unpunished. While corporations can be fined and driven into oblivion economically, they cannot be tried for their crimes against humanity. Thus, as Father Francis so aptly highlights, it is the poor female workers in Juárez who bear the brunt of male frustrations upon emasculation by the multinational corporations at the border.

Through J.W. the Texan border patrol officer we witness the utmost devaluation of female brown bodies. He explains that in his online pornography business the men are interested in seeing the entire process of the woman moving from intact to damaged body. He says, “[o]ur clients want to see the real thing. They want a pretty girl, not one with bruises already before we even shoot the scene” (197). It seems that it is in this taking away of wholeness where masculine dominance can be reclaimed. Additionally, J.W. is sure to inform his Mexican associates that he does not want any more American girls for the business, just “their
kind.’” J.W. both diminishes the brown female other and demonstrates his knowledge of the fact that crimes against her will largely go unpunished. He does, however, understand that he must get rid of Irene and the other Americanita that the Egyptian ordered from jail:

No, I don’t want to fucking see her. I don’t want to know shit. You make sure she’s fucking melted down when you’re through with her...I don’t want to see a face, I don’t want fingerprints, I want them both fucking turned to bacon with a blowtorch. (198)

Here, too, J.W. emphasizes the importance of erasing all of their identity markers, leaving them ungrievable, or only grievable as part of a no-name collective of bodies and remains.

With their frequent rastreos in Ciudad Juárez, Ximena and Father Francis make a concerted effort to stave off J.W. and his cohorts’ identity eliminating efforts. Ultimately it is a smock and a nametag from the Phillips Company that identifies Mireya Beltrán’s body that had been mutilated beyond all recognition. In the text we read the following grim description:

Tucked into the mesquite bushes, in a nest of garbage and human hair, the body was lying face down, legs spread-eagled, wrists handcuffed over her head, a bloodstained blue smock thrown over her head and shoulders. The exposed part of the back, like the legs and the buttocks, had been picked over by scavengers, what was left of the cartilage charred black by the sun. A bottle of J & B had been inserted in her anus. The ground stank of urine and rotted flesh... The eyes were gone. The face was completely bloated and purple, facial features erased, blistered skin crusted with sand and blood and maggots. Front teeth edged in gold. *It wasn’t Irene*. Fluid drained from the ears. A thick black rope burn ran across the neck and teeth marks covered the chest. The bra was pushed up over the breasts. Worms oozed over the torn nipple of the left breast. On the right breast a five pointed star had been carved into the flesh with a serrated blade. (244-246)

Although the last line seems to lean toward the satanic cult and ritual violence theories, Laura, the medical intern from the coroner’s office finds the motivation to simply be hatred toward women, as well as the idea that the killers can control a woman’s body and do whatever they want to it (248). Whatever the correct answer may be, Gaspar de Alba seeks to highlight the unimaginable cruelty with which the female bodies are being treated before, after, and during their ultimate demises. Further, by attacking uniquely feminine features, like breasts, and
penetrating the body in more than one orifice, the assailants, or more than likely J.W. in this case, exert total dominance over the female body. The unrelenting heat of the desert also becomes an environmental enemy to the body because it aids in decomposition, and as a result leads to faulty or no identification. Thus, from this scene alone we can capture the multilayered hatred and violence against women.

With all of the discussion revolving around the women as victims, it is often difficult to understand that they too hold agency and power. Rubí Reyna remarks that since most of the women are migrants, “[t]hey’re just lambs among wolves. They’re the easiest workers to exploit. They don’t unionize, they don’t complain, they’ll accept whatever wage they get. They have no power, whatsoever” (254). While it is easy to assume that they have lost all of their power between the working conditions and crimes being committed against them, we must also acknowledge the strength and power it takes to transcend private space for the public sphere. Moreover, Ivon reminds us that one of their powers drawn from Coatlicue is to have babies—a maternal power that is a threat to the masculine space of the maquiladora:

She saw the order of the cards, now. The threat that pregnancy posed to ‘free trade’ revenue. The heavy policing of female reproductive power in the maquiladoras to safeguard that revenue. The use of pregnancy tests to filter the desirable from the undesirable, who were still desirable in another context. The overt sexualization of the bodies—not just murder, but violation and mutilation of the maternal organs, the breasts and nipples, the wombs and vaginas. The use of the Internet as a worldwide market for these same organs in easily accessible tourist sites and affordable online pornography. A cost-effective way of disposing of non-productive/reproductive surplus labor while simultaneously protecting the border from infiltration by brown breeding female bodies. (333)

Ivon’s realization is something that Gaspar de Alba hopes that we all come to after reading works like hers. That is, to grasp the number of factors working in confluence to feed the femicidal violence. Ivon desires to move beyond the “whodunit” approach, as Gaspar de Alba has expressed, for a higher consciousness of the objective violence and systematic forces at
play. Thus, to fully comprehend the horrific acts against women in Ciudad Juárez we should be asking: “Who was allowing these crimes to happen? Whose interests were being served? Who was covering it up? Who was profiting from the deaths of all these women?” (333).

As we have previously noted, Gaspar de Alba (and others) are denouncing the patriarchal discourse and institutional corruption that keep the femicides unsolved. Although most media sources in the U.S. will blame this entirely on Mexican authorities, Gaspar de Alba’s characters force us to see the damaging actions and remarks on both sides of the border. Through Bob Russell, the U.S. FBI agent selected to help profile victims in Juárez, we observe the lack of true divergent thinking in official investigations. When he is not commending the task force in Chihuahua for its thorough investigations and “procedures [which] are on par with the U.S.,” he is suggesting that the crimes are the work of a serial killer: “He says it could be a guy from El Paso crossing over to commit his crimes because he knows there isn’t a death penalty in Mexico. He also said the same shit the police have been saying for years. That the victims are leading loose lives and putting themselves in danger” (85). Even Detective McCuts who ultimately saves Ivon’s and Irene’s lives by following Ivon across the border reflects a condescending look at the young girls who, in his estimation, “…should not be allowed to cross the border, much less by themselves to imbibe in alcoholic beverages without proper adult supervision; (in other words) Irene asked for it and it’s the family’s fault for not supervising her” (166).

When Rubí Reyna states that “[i]n Juárez, only two institutions have power: the government and the maquiladoras. Even the police are nothing but pawns,” Ivon ponders this relationship (242). Following her previous card playing metaphor, Ivon thinks: “The government and the maquiladoras. Were they two separate suits, one of spades, one of diamonds, say? If
they were different suits, they’d stack up separately, but these two had something in common. What was it? The U.S.-educated rich men who ran both of them?” (242) Here, Ivon is once again alluding to the hand that the U.S. plays in what happens in Juárez. Thus, as we will also see in the case of the drug war, the femicides in Juárez are not just Mexico’s problem to solve. It is part of a larger global system of networks of power and violence.

Even though, throughout the majority of the novel, brutal violence stands out, Gaspar de Alba also seeks to exemplify the hope that still remains. This illustrates the difficult negotiation between representing and reproducing gender violence and yet attempting to confront it to find a way out of the vicious cycle. This complex balance is best seen through Ivon’s relationships with strong female characters and the ultimate happy ending to Irene’s disappearance. While at first glance this makes the text seem like another triumphant gringoesque against all odds kind of ending, upon further consideration it serves to send a message that solidarity and critical thinking could someday yield an end to the femicides. Like Butler has suggested for the U.S. after 9/11, Mexico could benefit from reimagining the possibility of community and peace. Similarly, the importance placed on female ways of knowing emphasizes the need to look beyond the patriarchal discourses, like that of the rational male criminal as defined by Wright, that have dictated the way the crimes against women in Juárez are perceived and processed by the community. By female ways of knowing, I am generally referring to knowledge passed down and shared by women. At the same time, I am also equating it to Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of la conciencia de la mestiza and its greater tolerance for ambiguity and a more global-thinking approach:

La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than
excludes. The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. (101)

First, Ivon’s outrage provides a motivation to learn about the crimes and help bring them to light. Her path from ignorance to understanding sends a powerful message to the reader regarding the complicity of silence. Awareness, in this sense, becomes an obligation—an obligation for telling the story as Corona highlighted earlier. Ivon, like many others we presume, only discovered the *maquiladora* murders through a short newspaper article that she read on the plane to El Paso. Then, “[s]he couldn’t figure out what upset her most: the crimes themselves or the fact that, as a native of that very border, she didn’t know a thing about them until just now” (3). Similar to how readers like us should behave after exposing ourselves to texts like *Desert Blood*, Ivon intended to find out more. That is, the journalist reporting of “facts” was not enough for her. She wanted to explore all the possible angles of the problem to be able to imagine possible solutions. This is why she had to put a name and a face on the crimes. Ivon takes a stand against the labeling of *muchachas o indias de l sur* by seeking out their stories.

Similarly, by putting names like theirs in print, Gaspar de Alba’s text can be considered an obituary or eulogy in so far as it calls for a public grieving of the murdered women.

Through Ivon’s and her friends’ constant quests for knowledge, as Alma López did with her artwork of the indigenous goddess, the female bodies are literally being re-membered in all senses of the term. Along similar lines, when Irene is in captivity she repeatedly tells herself that she must memorize the names of her captors. This highlights the importance of women taking back their voices, a theme that runs throughout this whole dissertation despite the many differences in circumstance and situation that the women herein are forced to face. To tell stories like Irene’s and of those women who are decidedly less fortunate, Ximena and the others piece together the body parts and other identity markers that they find during the *rastreos*:
They weren't even bodies, just bones and clothing scattered across a radius of like 300 yards in Lomas de Poleo. People were really freaked out, let me tell you. Someone in the group found a plastic Mervyn’s bag that had a trachea and a bra inside it. Someone else spotted a spinal column in some weeds, and then a skull turned up with a silver tooth in it engraved with the letter “R.” We found a pelvis, another skull, another bra, a red sweatshirt that had four holes in it...I mean it was horrible. I myself dug up a pair of size 5 women’s jeans and a black tennis shoe that still had a part of a foot inside it. (24-25)

As if killing the women were not enough, the perpetrators had to make sure that they would never be whole again. It seems as if this represents the male desire to split Coatlicue in half in order to leave her destructive capabilities behind. The aforementioned quote demonstrates the heinous levels of subjective violence that attack the female form. Ximena and Father Francis’ public activism works against official stories that attempt to minimize the impact of the femicides. To wit, “...a report issued by the National Commission of Human Rights found the Juárez authorities responsible for a number of irregularities in the investigation of the crimes, including the misidentification of corpses and incompetence in gathering crime scene evidence” (119).

Before she truly understood the nature of what was going on just outside of El Paso, Ivon, speaking from a place of profound ignorance⁴⁹, remarks that “[w]omen are always giving up babies in Juárez” (20). This statement highlights a fundamental problem as people comfortable with their own peaceful lives do not question what is going on around them. This immediately calls to mind similar cases of illegal adoption in Latin America in places like

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⁴⁹ Relevant to this lack of knowledge is the summary of Ivon’s coming to consciousness: “This is what Ivon knew to be the truth: last week at this same time she had been packing for her trip to El Paso, coming home to adopt a baby. Her blissful ignorance about what was happening just on the other side of el charco was staggering. Today her little sister was a rape victim. Other than getting mauled by dogs, who knew what other horrors she’d experienced, what post-traumatic stress she would have to live with for the rest of her life? A detective playing guardian angel to Ivon lay comatose in a hospital bed. And the baby she had come to adopt had gotten murdered and mutilated, along with his fifteen-year-old mother” (331).
Argentina during the Dirty War. It is not until she is on the plane reading about the murders that Ivon realizes the gravity of the situation in Juárez and what her potential adoption could mean.

Likewise, although Ivon’s mother’s character is cruel and cringeworthy herself, she too references the spread of acute ignorance and no-information. At one point she tells Ivon not to say anything to reporters like Rubí Reyna: “I don’t want you to say anything to that bunch of metiches, her mom had said last night. They’re just being nosey. This thing with your sister, it’s nothing but a big telenovela to everyone” (239). Here she alludes to the voyeuristic nature of news reporting and presents a valid criticism of people who seem to use the crimes to advance their own agendas. These types of criticisms voiced by the characters represent an important component to the hopeful axis of our study. That is to say, it is only through criticizing the world around us and the normalized inherently violent structures of power that we will see an end to crimes like the femicides.

In a debate with Dorinda Sáenz, special prosecutor to the cases of the murdered women on Rubí’s show, Paula Del Río of group CARIDAD that advocates as women against sex crimes and domestic abuse in Juárez, best synthesizes the situation. She says that:

In a society in which women are second class citizens and in which the poor are no better than animals, a society where cows and cars are worth more than the lives of women, we are talking about the complete devaluation of the feminine gender, as well as the utter depreciation of the female laboring class. Were these crimes happening to men...we would already know the answers to the question of ‘Who is killing the women of Juárez?’ (323)

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Gaspar de Alba points out that in the more than 10 years that NGOs have been fighting against the femicides, rifts have developed among some of the groups. She explains that “…problems, primarily based on social class, have arisen between Nuestras Hijas and some of the other mothers’ collectives. Whereas the families of the victims are all poor or working class, the leaders of the early umbrella organizations...are rich or middle-class women who are accused of using the femicides to draw public attention to their feminist causes and to make money for their organizations” (78).
Just like what Elena Poniatowska said about Nellie Campobello regarding her disappearance and the fact that if she were a man she would have never been missing for so long, Del Río illustrates the repression of the female through systematic silencing. Del Río’s ideas also speak to the goals of works of fiction like Gaspar de Alba’s. Namely, they seek to highlight the ways in which women and their bodies are regarded as lesser citizens, as well as expose this complete devaluation of their gender. The essential component to remember is that the novel is also meant to instill hope and activism in its readers through the outrage and solidarity that it provokes. This is precisely why Gaspar de Alba, in her acknowledgments at the end, urges us to act: “I hope this book inspires its readers to join the friends and families of the dead and the disappeared women of Juárez. Only in solidarity can we help bring an end to this pandemic of femicides on the border” (346).

In the conclusion to Desert Blood, Ivon makes a pertinent reference to the song, “The Sounds of Silence,” when she hears it on the radio. In that moment she pinpoints the need to look to conditions and not just causality. She thinks:

That’s what this was, she realized. A huge malignant tumor of silence, meant to protect not the perpetrators, themselves, but the profit reaped by the handiwork of the perpetrators. A bilateral assembly line of perpetrators, from the actual agents of the crime to the law enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements...This thing implicated everyone. No wonder the crimes had not been solved, nor would they ever be solved until someone with much more power than she, with nothing to lose or gain, brought this conspiracy out into the open. (335)

To borrow the words of Paloma Martínez-Cruz from her presentation on Chicana ways of knowing, from the pathogen of silence arises the curative abilities of the Chicano text. Further,

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51 This refers to the song, “The Sound of Silence” (1965) by Simon and Garfunkel. It was originally called, “The Sounds of Silence,” when it first appeared. It is said to be inspired by the assassination of president John F. Kennedy and the aftershock.
what this quote also seems to address is that the perpetrators themselves are also, in a sense, victims of the neoliberal system whose drive for profits respects little else, including human life.

We will now turn our attention to *Ciudad final*, a text which is strikingly similar to *Desert Blood* but is also replete with its own important issues framed from a variety of perspectives. The novel, by Kama Gutier, the pseudonym for professor and author Josebe Martinez, is told through the first person perspective of a criminologist by the same name. In 2001 Kama Gutier, the narrator, is invited to Ciudad Juárez by local authorities in order to assist with the investigations into the femicides. At every turn, however, her investigation is sabotaged by corrupt authorities with links to drug trafficking, political and economic power, the court, and the police. Judge and head of the femicide cases, Catita Lombardo, notably fails to continue looking for answers and instead focuses on one-dimensional theories. For example, she blames the incarcerated Egyptian, Sharif Sharif, for many of the crimes still taking place. As we saw in *Desert Blood*, this is an allusion to the real Egyptian scientist, Abdul Latif Sharif Sharif. This connection between the real and fictional characters exemplifies the almost fictional accounts of the Mexican police and the incrimination of the real Sharif Sharif. Like the real theories posed by Mexican authorities, Catita alleges that he orchestrates kills from jail with his money and influence on the outside. Catita is so obsessed with Sharif Sharif as the serial killer responsible for the growing deaths of young females in Juárez that she studies the Koran.

The novel opens with the 27 year old criminologist explaining her birth mid-bridge between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Her father, now deceased and housed in an urn atop her uncle Segundo’s television, had Anglicized his name once in the U.S. On United States soil José Gutiérrez was known as Willburg Gutier. Upon her return to Juárez, Kama stays in a hotel

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52 Presentation delivered at The Ohio State University on Friday, November 30th, 2012: “From East L.A. to Anahuac: Chicana Ways of Knowing.”
accompanied by her lizard Freddy. There she meets waitress and former *maquila* worker, Sabina. In contrast to Catita Lombardo, Kama seeks to explore all of the potential perpetrators of the femicides including Sharif Sharif, powerful men, serial killers, cartels and satanic cults. Apart from the violence she sees on television, her first crime scene is one where nine bodies are found. Here, Kama begins to notice the ineptitude of Lombardo’s forensic teams who move the bodies and do not even bring bags to contain the evidence. When Kama reports this shoddy work to Lombardo, she simply dismisses her.

This scene is the first in a series where Kama seems to be the only one advocating for a thorough investigation of the crimes. Lombardo and her associates are more concerned with getting the cases closed as quickly as possible, since the femicides are giving the city a bad name. She goes as far as to praise the *maquilas* for their contribution to Mexico, and to blame the victims with their “rancho customs” that leave them ill-equipped for proper behavior in the industrialized metropolis. This is why bus driver, “El Coco,” is tortured into confessing that he killed three women. Motivated by a visit from the Mexican president, officials declared the case resolved in a mere two days. Kama is allowed access to observe the autopsies and is enraged by the fact that protocol dictates a washing of the bodies, and among other issues, the medical examiner says that x-rays are unnecessary. Kama insists on a second autopsy and Catita assures her that she will give the order. Through the interactions between Kama and Catita we observe how although the women have both penetrated the public sphere in pivotal ways, only Kama seeks to disrupt the cycle of abuse against women by men. This fact brings up an

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53 Catita Lombardo: “…si me preguntas por las maquilas te diré que son buenas para la ciudad, y para México: crean puestos de trabajo, capital, inversiones…Vienen estas industrias y no podemos despreciarlas” (37).

54 What is more, we learn later on that la jueza and her people had tried to frame El Coco once before back in 1999 (117).
important point when considering gender in this analysis. By this I mean that although I am emphasizing the female perspective, I am in no way suggesting that women are never to blame. As will become evident in chapter three, women are also contributing in paramount ways to the drug trade and other forms of illicit activities.

During her investigations Kama meets 14 year old Marta González, an underage maquila worker (who borrowed a friend’s birth certificate) who survives an attack from El Peruano that left her for dead. The two went on a few dates after meeting at a night club where El Peruano explained he had been admiring Marta for some time on the maquila busses. He is one of the drivers. After Marta’s attack, Catita Lombardo interviews El Peruano and he claims that he last saw Marta with a dark mustached man. Unsurprisingly, rather than open an investigation on El Peruano himself, Lombardo insists on working toward the apprehension of this most likely nonexistent man.

When Sabina and Kama visit one of the bars where many of the maquila workers go on a Friday night to unwind, Kama kisses one of the female prostitutes that propositions her in the bathroom. At the end of the wild night, Sabina and Kama are detained at the border when trying to cross to El Paso. Shortly after this incident Kama’s hotel room is ransacked and thieves steal her laptop and a photo from the second autopsy, and she notices that her lizard Freddy is bleeding from a knife slash. Catita, of course, dismisses this as a common robbery with no relation to the investigation. Nearby, the prostitute that Kama kissed was also found dead in a dumpster. After her students from El Paso, who help her with autopsies and the analysis of forensic data, see this potential link, Kama considers the robbery and assault against Freddy her first warning from the people that want to keep her silent. Kama rushes to Catita’s office to
demand to see the body of the dead woman that she kissed only to find out that the body has already been shipped off and buried in Campeche.

Through her investigations Kama meets the mother of Ana Amalia who was found dead on the property of ex-governor Don Tomás Ortiz Fines. Someone reported that they saw a woman being forced into a vehicle in front of the Telemáticos Teruel company. What’s disconcerting, though, is that both the business and Don Tomás’ rancho were being remodeled at the same time with large blocks of cement being brought in frequently. Also, it is alleged that the business has strong ties to a famous drug trafficker. Lote Chico, Lomas de Poleo, Cristo Negro, and Cerro Bola in the southeastern part of the city are owned by the Ortiz Fines family. Although they were not originally from Juárez, the family began to buy up property for themselves and the multinational businesses in the area. Most important to the narrative is that Catita Lombardo is part of this extended family. To add to the now deep corruption, Ana Amalia’s mother tells Kama that the authorities actually bribed her to stop looking for her daughter. Even though they gave her a scholarship for her youngest son, a house, and a car, she continued her search.

At this point, Kama has mainly stuck to the forensic side of the investigations, and decides that she wants to branch out and talk to people on the streets. She hires Sabina to work with her and take her around the city. Kama learns from la Asociación de Mujeres that a lot of the women are killed or disappeared on payday, that the police do not want to keep the

55 “La Organización de Desaparecidos de Chihuahua se puso en contacto conmigo porque dos albañiles que habían trabajado en la remodelación del rancho de Don Tomás Ortiz querían dar su propio testimonio: ‘Nos hicieron echar enormes planchas de concreto —decía uno de los trabajadores—, en el rancho del Lote Chico había un gran sótano que fue cubierto con la excusa de construir el mini golf. Sé por cierto—continuaba—, que debajo de esas planchas hay muchos muertos” (198)

56 This “familial economic assistance” cited by many of the testimonies from mothers and others who have lost their loved ones explain how this money makes people “...stop demanding answers from the government” and shows how the authorities are “…trying to substitute justice with money” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 15).
evidence, and that regular citizens find the bodies, not the police. Kama visits Marta at home and listens to her story that it indeed was El Peruano who attacked and violated her. She and her mother have joined the women’s association, and they inform Kama that Catita Lombardo tried to convince them to accuse the Egyptian man, Sharif Sharif, for the crime. As the plot progresses, Kama finds even more lies, discrepancies, and cover-ups in the official investigations of the kidnappings and murders. In her own unofficial work, with the help of her students, Kama links hair found on three women’s bodies to seven different women, finds a strange scorpion pendant (a symbol of one of the cartels) inside one of the bodies, and matches the calibers on a bullet to the types of handguns used by police.

On their way to interview Sharif Sharif in prison, Sabina and Kama are chased by three men who shoot out their tires. Kama perceives this as a second warning from those who wish to silence her, and thinks that this is somehow connected to her role in the investigation with Catita Lombardo. When speaking to the judge on the phone, Kama reminds her that members of her court justice system were the only ones aware of the interview they were supposed to carry out with Sharif Sharif. After this incident, El Coco’s lawyer, Mariano Escobar, with whom Kama had been working closely is killed in an auto accident after being chased by police in two unidentified cars without plates. Curiously, the police officer who detained El Coco, Silvestre Marín, was the one who ended up shooting the young lawyer. As is expected, Catita says that he was killed by mistake, and that he probably died from the impact of the crash, rather than from the officer’s bullet. After the accident, Catita tells Kama to shut up and fires her from the investigation. From this point forward, international criminologists are allowed to train Mexican authorities, but can no longer directly perform the tasks of the investigations. Kama is supposed

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57 This is immediately after they visit a restaurant in the country that actually houses three real live tigers. The analogy that the three men are like vicious animals is clear to the reader.
to return the evidence, but in the end we find out that she lies to everyone and keeps it. In place of the human hair she turned in shaggy dog fur. She gave back some random articles of clothing, and instead of the x-rays of the bodies, she left an x-ray of her buttock in an ultimate act of defiance.

As a result of the signs of violence she continues to witness, Kama crosses the border to purchase a gun in El Paso to protect herself. It will come in handy too since she decides to go undercover on the *maquila* busses and hide in El Peruano’s to find out what is happening to the women. Meanwhile, her students inform her that they found rare seeds on the bodies, which were from plants imported from Virginia. At first Kama looks toward the multinational companies, but her students suggest that she investigate the homes of the wealthy and high-ranking businessmen. They find out that the seeds came from Don Tomás Ortiz Fines’ ranch and demand an official investigation. Unfortunately, because of his prominence and power in the business world, not even the FBI wants to search this rich man’s property. While in hiding on El Peruano’s bus, Kama witnesses the man attack a young girl and drag her out to the middle of the desert. Three days later her family declares the 15 year old missing. El Peruano is arrested based on Kama’s information and he confesses to killing her and takes the authorities to the location of mass graves. Perplexingly, the recently killed young girl’s body was not there, which leads Kama to believe that she was a gift for someone else. Maybe for Don Tomás?

In their quest to find the owner of the mysterious seeds, Kama’s students interview the wealthy *empresarios* as part of a staged project for their college newspaper. Armed with ulterior motives, the students obtain hair and cigarette butt samples unbeknownst to the businessmen. When La Señora Ortiz Sosa is named businesswoman of the year, Kama’s students are invited since it is decided that the representation of a *gringo* newspaper would look good for the event.
The selection committee made sure to give a woman the title this year in an act of homage to all women in Ciudad Juárez. During some politician’s speech, as Kama describes it, he explains that it is a pleasure that Ortiz Sosa represents the figure of the woman in Mexico, and that Chihuahua is the path to progress given that “…Chihuahua es el camino del norte, y el norte es el futuro de México” (197). This corresponds to the empty acts of politicians, leaders, and other important figures who seek to cover up the femicides by performing activism. That is, as Žižek so aptly pointed out, they constantly refer back to the problems that they themselves caused without ever doing anything measurable to stop them.

Before the novel’s conclusion, Kama learns that El Coco was found dead in his prison cell after a hernia operation. She also again comes in contact with Ana Amalia’s mother who visits the professor in her office at the university in El Paso. Someone had informed her that her daughter was Don Tomás Ortiz Fines’ gift on his Saint’s Day. Kama explains that the dates of disappearances often correspond to special occasions like Saints’ Days in this case, and to the confirmation of big business deals, among others. Kama affirms that this is also true in the case of the young woman she saw El Peruano attack. Similarly, the contests for Miss Maquila mentioned periodically throughout the novel, also seem to perfectly serve as a catalogue of kills for the perpetrators involved. In their description of Julián Cardona’s photograph of women getting ready for the Miss RCA Contest in 1999, Volk and Schlotterbeck explain that:

The English translation [of the photograph’s caption], which is provided (Maquila Workers Getting Ready for Miss RCA Beauty Contest) misses one of Cardona’s central ironies. In Spanish ‘maquillar’ is to put on makeup…it is hard to avoid his subtle argument that, while female workers are assembling ‘world class product,’ they are themselves being made up, reassembled. Plant managers regularly hold beauty contests to reaffirm ‘traditional standards of feminine beauty and behavior’ and to impress on women workers that the plants care about their ‘physical and emotional well-being.’ (135)
The last scene of the novel promotes the overall didactic message. It witnesses Kama’s students looking for her as she has missed their seminar, and piling into her office to hear the real life lessons that only Ana Amalia’s mother can teach them. The ending sees this group using their advanced knowledge for activism. They travel back to Ciudad Juárez and form a human chain in front of the gates to Don Tomas’ ranch in Lote Chico. Despite the fact that the police apprehend them and Kama is tossed back over the border, the criminologist embodies a sense of persistent activism. She says that it does not matter if they kick her out of Mexico a hundred times, each time she will go back to Ciudad Juárez the very next day—something, she says, we all should be doing. The prevailing end message is that the search for the truth must not cease.

As we saw in Desert Blood, Gutier’s Ciudad final values a matriarchal community of knowledge joined in solidarity to solve the femicides. We remember that I am aligning this female knowledge with Anzaldúa’s conception of the mestiza consciousness. At the same time, I understand this matriarchal community as a place where knowledge and power belong to the women, rather than the male authorities who do not solve the femicide cases. All of the novels included in this chapter give the agency of seeking, interpreting, and passing on knowledge back to the female protagonist. Additionally, Kama takes the same joining of the academy and the community approach as Ivon through Ana Amalia’s presence as leader of the impromptu seminar in her office at the novel’s conclusion. Although Gaspar de Alba’s text deals with the corruption of the authorities on both sides of the border effectively, Gutier expands upon this with her many references to forensic science, as well as her initially close working relationship with lead investigator Catita Lombardo. While Kama calls for second autopsies and more

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58 Here, it is important to note that the vast majority of Kama’s students who help her with the investigation are female: “La puertorriqueña” y “La Texana,” and even her lesbian sidekick and hotel café waitress, Sabina, for example.
thorough dissections of bodies in order to uncover possible information, the medical examiner refuses to do additional procedures. Kama says, “[l]e pedí [al forense] que realizara radiografías del cuerpo, pero me dijo que no eran necesarias. También le solicité que recogiera muestra de la fauna cadavérica, pero replicó que todo estaba lavado y limpio y que allí no quedaba nada” (32-33). Moreover, this cleansing of the bodies seems to have a dual meaning: to erase evidence and purify female bodies popularly viewed as unclean. Thus, the bodies become a metaphor for the femicides. Like the crime scenes themselves, the bodies are not even fully investigated properly.

Adding to the notion that the autopsies are just for show is the name of the space in which they are carried out: El Anfiteatro. This idea of criminal investigation as performance is embodied through characters like Catita Lombardo and Robert Ressler who is brought in from the FBI. When Kama articulates the characteristics of possible killers, Lombardo only cares about her own reputation. Kama states, “...cualquier persona que haga esto tiene que ser alguien que actúa con absoluta desfachatez y sin empacho alguno. Sin empacho y sin educación—contestó [Catita] rápida--. Fue ese chófer [El Coco], un machín de lo más bajo, pero ya lo tenemos. Dígalo en su país” (31). Here, Catita is motivated to keep up her department’s appearance of efficacy to impress her cohorts north of the river. Similarly, Ressler, an expert in criminal profiling and advisor to the movie *Silence of the Lambs*59, barely observed the Mexican police before commending their work:

Durante su fugaz visita, Ressler impartió un cursillo de quince horas a sesenta policías judiciales y les felicitó por su labor, excusando su ineficacia asegurando que la dificultad

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59 Directed by Jonathan Demme and based on a novel of the same name written by Thomas Harris in 1988, the 1991 film tells the story of how an FBI agent in training must interview incarcerated serial killer Hannibal Lecter in order to catch another serial killer nicknamed “Buffalo Bill.” Gutier is making the point that Ressler’s skills are likely only useful in the fabricated world of a movie set.
It is clear that Ressler is only brought in to appease worries publicly and clear the U.S. unit’s conscience by claiming that the Mexican authorities are doing everything they can to combat the violent crimes against women. This illusion of action is what sustains Lombardo’s and Ressler’s reputations in the public eye when people like Kama know that they are as ill-equipped to investigate the crimes as actors on the set of a movie.

This idea of performance and veiled appearances with regard to the criminal investigations in Juárez is supplemented with the implicit pact of silence. The media coverage that is prohibited from theorizing about the crimes and their relations to the maquiladoras, and by extension NAFTA, also contributes to the perpetuation of no-information. During one of the first images of violence in the beginning of the book, Kama narrates:

Me senté a cenar frente al televisor de pantalla gigante, y allí estaba, en tecnicolor: el cuerpo de una mujer ya cadáver, con el maxilar inferior destrozado y tres heridas punzantes en el costado...Las multinacionales tenían prohibido a los medios cualquier asociación de sus famosas firmas con las asesinadas. (12)

This representation of dead bodies on television dramatizes the murders and makes them seem more surreal than real. Through this continuing performance metaphor, the media coverage of the femicides serves a distancing effect. That is, the public at large can watch and contemplate these crimes from a distance. While this same argument could be applied to the works I am studying, I think that the isolation that a book provides between reader and text has the potential to incite more activism within the individual person.

Along these same lines of performance and silence, Catita Lombardo frequently lies to the public. In an appearance on television:

La jueza informaba de lo ocurrido en el sumidero y pedía tranquilidad a los juarenses porque, aseguró, este crimen tenía indicios tan claros que ya se estaba arrestando a los
culpables. Exigió de paso a las asociaciones civiles que dejaran hacer a las autoridades expertas. (26)

These experts, however, are the ones not following forensic and criminal procedures that would dictate them to find more information about the women, their lives, and deaths. Just as fast as they are opened, Catita quickly tries to close the investigations. For example, when one of the mothers goes to la jueza to plead that she investigate the whereabouts of her daughter’s cell phone to help capture the assailant, Catita responds with, “...no se enoje conmigo, pero en la Corte del Estado nos dijeron que no hay necesidad de seguir averiguando quién pueda tener el teléfono celular porque la investigación ha terminado” (104).

Sabina also reminds Kama that the silence is perpetuated by the fact that many have to keep things under wraps in order to protect themselves from authorities, and others, who are unable or unwilling to safeguard them. She asserts that “[a]quí una tiene que nomás mirar, escuchar, y mudita nomás, que en este lado no hay un programa de protección de testigos como tienen los gringos” (16). As we have seen, in addition to this lack of protection we witness the silencing of the female bodies themselves. That is, because they are so feverishly cleaned, they are unable to tell the stories of the victims. While the evidence of the crime is washed away, Kama knows better that “[c]on tantas heridas los cuerpos sangran, la piel se mancha, y estas chamacas están relimpias” (70). During their own unofficial forensic investigations, Kama and her students also discover that some of the bodies had been previously frozen. She explains that this is another technique to mask the date of the crime, or it represents a failed attempt at getting rid of the body.

Kama’s unofficial investigations actively oppose the faulty work of the Mexican authorities in Juárez. In this way, too, as Kama works to achieve public mourning of the crimes, the opposite of Butler’s ideas are occurring through Catita Lombardo and her entourage. One
such example is when Kama wants to see the body of the woman that she had relations with at the bar that was found in a dumpster near the hotel. Catita tells her that she is already gone and buried. While Kama wants to confront the woman’s identity, Catita wants to ignore and deny it. When la jueza says that “...la muchacha ya recibió cristiana sepultura, en Campeche, creo. Vinieron sus hermanos y se la llevaron a su tierra,” the act of writing an obituary for her or eulogizing her is rushed in order to hide something. The message is that in a place like Juárez if we are to mourn, we must bury and mourn quickly before the truth comes out and so that silence is adequately maintained (107). Moreover, Kama carries the evidence around with her to protect it from corrupt and inept investigators in contrast to the authorities who, according to la presidenta of Asociación de Mujeres, know how to store evidence but simply do not want to (147, 133).

The prevailing public discourse blaming the victim, previously cited in our discussion of Wright, is also apparent in Gutier’s text. Once again, it represents the symbolic violence a la Žižek that is inherent to hegemonic forms of language. In one example of this type of discourse, Ressler believes that part of the problem of the femicides could be solved if women were prevented from going out alone in the city (80). This represents the exact kind of thinking that systematically places women in the category of lambs in a society full of wolves that eventually comes around full circle to justify the crimes against them as if they were the weaker sex. We see this same issue through the language of the police officers who dismiss Marta’s mom when she tries to inform them that her daughter is missing. She explains, “[p]rimero acudí a la policía judicial, me tomaron la denuncia, pero dijeron que ni modo, que tenían cientos, que quizás la niña nomás se largó a bailar y al ratito aparecía...” (45). Through this quote we see how while the mother is trying to establish a clear identity of her daughter, the police are systematically
trying to erase it through their discourse. To them, she is just one of hundreds that are probably out dancing or doing something else that they shouldn’t without supervision. In this way, then, the police methodically work toward silence while mothers and books like Gutier’s work to remember, eulogize, and write obituaries for the women who have been lost. Fortunately, we remember, Marta’s daughter turns up safe after being assaulted by El Peruano, and thus is one of the select few survivors.

One of the more memorable symbolic moments in the novel is when Kama arrives at her hotel room in Juárez and notices a painting of a prim and proper woman holding a parasol by the sea. In this passing scene, Kama asks: “¿Dónde habitarán esas mujeres y esos parasoles?” (11). Although this question is easy to overlook, it brings to light a poignant observation. Through her simple pondering about the artwork we see the ideal of the women that the patriarchal public discourse is promoting. According to this same discourse the lost women of Juárez are the exact opposite of the women holding the parasol on the beach. Kama explains:

Ni la prensa ni otros medios consideraron necesario documentar mejor lo que suponían un ajuste de cuentas entre prostitutas. Hasta el gobernador de Chihuahua…había culpado a las víctimas: que venían de familias desintegradas, que eran emigrantes de cualquier parte de la República Mexicana y que les gustaba bailar. Según el señor gobernador, el número de asesinadas, trescientas, entre 1993 y el 2001, era normal. (9)

In the eyes of the governor, these dead prostitutes are just as normal as the woman Kama saw staring back at her on the hotel wall, and therefore are not worthy of a thorough fact-finding investigation that would require State resources.

In addition, the fiesta de quince años motif also contributes to the symbolism throughout the novel. In fact, Kama’s relationship to violence, not only as a criminologist, is established from the beginning. Early on we learn that during a game of Russian Roulette among her friends who were celebrating a decidedly anti-quince años, Kama’s disabled friend shoots
himself in front of everyone. This coming of age ceremony reappears when Catita invites Kama to her niece’s party. This is ironic, since in the previous breath Catita had been discussing the indecency of the *maquila* girls from their *ranchos* who wore short skirts and behaved like common whores at the discotheques. Kama says:

> No pude evitar mencionarle el único comentario que lo de quinceañera me provocaba: que una de las últimas muertitas estaba a punto de cumplir los quince años, y que su mamá había dicho que la niña limpiaba casas y así ganaba un dinero para celebrarlo con una fiesta. Para celebrar la fiesta ahora ya definitivamente pospuesta, pensé, porque tuvieron que identificarla por la ropa, pues del rostro no quedaba ni la rayita del labio. Según comentó la madre en las noticias ‘le arrojaron ácido a toda su carita...para evitar la identificación, pues.’ (39)

On top of illustrating the horrific violence inscribed on the daughter’s body in an attempt to erase her identity and entire existence, we witness how the 15 year olds in Juárez experience very different coming of age experiences than those from Catita’s family.

Regarding the multiple theory perspective that defies the ‘whodunit’ mystery, Kama Gutier’s novel shares many of the same theories as Gaspar de Alba’s. Again we see the relationship between the femicides and drug cartels, satanic cults, and powerful men, among other potential culprits. The difference is that Kama is able to investigate the bodies more deeply since she is a criminologist who has the opportunity to work with professional forensic teams and her students. Kama’s illustration of the cult-like killings is important in relation to our discussion of goddess murder and ritual death. She learns that some of the bodies are found near a triangle of rocks under suspicious circumstances: “...cerca del triángulo de piedras, de unos tres metros de lado, cuyo vértice más pronunciado apuntaba al Sur y guardaba en su interior los restos de una hoguera” (21). Similarly, authorities found another girl’s home in Lote Chico filled with black candles and a tableau, which included a scorpion, three naked women,

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60 “...para poder trabajar con ellos [los cárteles] tendría que empezar por asesinar a alguna persona de su familia” (15).
soldiers, and marijuana, all assumed to be symbols of the Juárez Cartel per their representation in the movie *Traffic*61 (130).

Likewise, Kama alludes to the crackdown on the drug cartels as part of the official performances of combatting societal ills. She informs Sabina that:

A partir del año 93 se les chingó a los de Juárez el paso libre de droga, y empezó la bronca. Cuando se reguló de manera bilateral entre los gobiernos de Estados Unidos y México el control del narcotráfico, no significó realmente que los cuerpos gubernamentales pondrían remedio al asunto. Pareció que era así porque se endurecieron las medidas contra narcotraficantes, por ejemplo dando permiso a Estados Unidos para extraditar narcos; pero eso es mentira, eso es cosa de *Traffic*, de películas, porque esas medidas sólo afectarían a algunos cárteles, a los de Juárez, porque lo que se hacía en realidad era favorecer que el tráfico cambiara de manos. México bien pudiera ser un narcoestado...incluso, aunque resulte invierno, un narcoterritorio fomentado por los USA...y las guerras de poder son las guerras de cárteles. ¿Por qué te crees que aparecen los ocho cuerpos en mitad de la ciudad en vísperas del viaje presidencial a Juárez? Para poner en aprieto a las autoridades, un ataque en la batalla que libran. (175)

Here, the performance of controlling the drug cartels is used to serve larger government interests. Another reference to the movie *Traffic* further cements this keeping up of appearances. Finally, another layer of performance is found in this quote when Kama describes the placement of the bodies in the center of the city. This is not by chance; rather, it is designed to send a message to the President about who really is in control of the city.

In contrast to the death and destruction, the greatest strength of Gutier’s novel is the emphasis placed on hope and desire. Juxtaposed to the devastation and the more often than not fruitless investigations, Kama and Sabina accentuate the fact that quotidian occurrences are still a major part of life in Ciudad Juárez despite its reputation as the female murder capital of the world. Kathleen Staudt also echoes this point based on her own experiences living and

61 *Traffic*, which was released in 2000, was written by Stephen Gaghan and directed by Steven Soderbergh. The movie deals with the illegal drug trade on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, including drug cartel turf wars, official corruption and the incessant war on preventing the proliferation of drugs and other illegal substances and activities.
carrying out research and activism at the border. She discusses how Ciudad Juárez is continuously demonized as a symbol of the Mexican other. She explains that:

The city has become internationally infamous as the city of femicide, corruption, and police impunity. It is a symbol of Mexico’s ongoing struggle for democracy and the rule of law...Distant journalists visit the city to cover only femicide and drugs. A city where 1.5 million people live and work has been demonized, although generalizations about the city and its inhabitants are hazardous. Many in the United States are all too ready to believe the worst about Mexico. Murder and drugs feed stereotypes of the ‘other’ in this post-9/11 world of continuous U.S. rhetoric about security, defense, and terrorism. (2)

This quote also establishes the connection between drug trafficking and femicides that Staudt further elaborates in her discussion linking economics and violence. This underlines the fact that even though the femicides and drug-related violence are not exactly the same, they are clearly not independent phenomena either.

Staudt illustrates how through foreign investments, foreign export-processing, and global free-trade, “...the border generally and Juárez particularly have become a visible frontline site of the global economy” (7). Thus, as free trade grew since the 1990s, all types of border trade, including the trafficking of illegal substances and other illicit activities increased right along with it. This corresponds directly to the rise in femicides since 1993. Pointing to many of the objective manifestations of violence, Staudt concludes that:

...paltry pay for women and for men generates the conditions under which violence and lawlessness flourish. Women cannot exit dangerous relationships with wages that amount to US $25 to $50 weekly and still support children with self-respect. Neither can men support their children with meager wages with self-respect. Yet Mexican and American corporate managers make thousands of dollars monthly. U.S. consumers choose products based more on price rather than on whether workers live in decent economic conditions and a safe city. And drug consumption flourishes. We are all implicated in this recipe for disaster. (158)

Like the novels intend to demonstrate with the violent societal conditions that they expose, Staudt connects the seemingly small-scale economic policies with broader effects and
consequences. This shows the interconnectedness among objective violence embedded in institutional structures and the subjective violence destroying female bodies (and others) in the border region.

Returning to the notion of pleasure amidst desperation and violence in the novel, which contrasts with the image of a demonized Ciudad Juárez, after having sex with the now dead prostitute in the bar, Kama reflects upon the beauty of their encounter in a place of such unabated ugliness. She expresses the importance of this dichotomy in the following quote:

Si ese encuentro fortuito y feliz se hubiera producido en El Paso o en Los Ángeles, lugares en los que, por cierto, había tenido varios, lo hubiese olvidado al subir las escaleras. Pero en Juárez no me resultaba indiferente, me había dejado el cuerpo con la sensación de que se había roto la amenaza que se sentía en el ambiente, con la idea de que se podía desear, aunque fuera de forma precaria...Todavía no me podía creer que en un sitio como aquel y en la situación que se estaba viviendo hubiera sucedido algo tan lindo. (53)

This brief, yet loving contact, with another woman is a cathartic release from the violence that Kama has been witnessing first hand. The imagery of precarious desire is a perfect description of life in places like Juárez. It communicates the message that not all is lost. Instead, the idea is that people need to continue hoping despite the losses of hundreds of women. One way to do this, according to Gutier’s novel, is to keep raising one’s voice in activism and solidarity in the face of silence and impunity. The fact that beautiful things can still occur in the city restores Kama’s faith in humanity and reminds us that there is still good to be found within this border community.

Additionally, Kama’s geographic mapping of the bodies discovered to date is reminiscent of Agosín’s *Map of Hope* anthology that I mentioned earlier. Although the accumulation of bodies is ultimately a devastating endeavor, its analysis can provide hope in the sense that Kama’s observations could someday lead to the truth. For instance, the more than 100 bodies
found in Lote Chico helps establish a possible connection of corruption to Catita Lombardo and the rest of the Ortiz Fines family (110). This amassing of bodies in particular patterns on the landscape could hold the key to solving the crimes. Here, again, we observe how Kama yearns for more information while the authorities attempt to conceal it. Kama elaborates another important point when she states that you do not have to possess all of the correct answers to speak up. This is important because it communicates the idea that the act of theorizing and imagining all of the possibilities out loud is a viable act in itself. This resonates in my own work of analyzing the novels in this study because it explains how fictional texts can potentially lead to effective change like I have previously suggested in the Revolution chapter, which highlights the ways in which memory and nostalgia can be productive. Kama teaches us that however remote that possibility may be, we should still hold out for hope. Kama explains:

No quiero callarme mis interpretaciones aunque no sean seguras. Porque callarse tampoco sería científico. No es científico fantasear, pero tampoco callarse y no comunicar pistas que podrían ser de gran ayuda. Yo diría que se estableció un juego sádico con espectador o espectadores incluidos...Todos [los cuerpos que se han analizado] sufrieron violencia sexual innecesaria, incluso para un psicópata, por ello cabe lo del espectáculo y el negocio. (173)

Taking a similar approach to that of Ivon in Desert Blood, Kama focuses on the spectacle that is the deaths, which possibly relates them to sadist pornography or other similar performance mediums. This quote embodies the notion that neither science nor the imagination alone will be able to solve the femicides or the conditions of objective violence on which they subsist. Kama illustrates the importance of the two categories functioning in concert to find answers and develop solutions. While saying the wrong thing may not be scientific, Kama shows that saying nothing can be all the more devastating.

Sabina also discusses the masculine discourses that pervert women’s lives. She affirms that:
...las jóvenes tienen ganas de vivir, de disfrutar...Pues es que ya no nos dejan ni
platicar...porque todo les da pie a la perversión. Lo están jodiendo todo. Una ya no
puede ni decir lo que haría con su pareja...Parece que estás incitando a que hagan algo
contigo...parece que eres tan perversa como esos hijos de su pinche madre. Toditito lo
pervierten, hasta las discos, pero estas discos son igualitas a cualquier otra de cualquier
otra parte del planeta... (86)

Sabina is criticizing the notion that a woman’s behavior dictates what is done to her body. If she
wears short skirts or speaks overtly sexually to her mate, she is automatically deemed an
unclean female asking for the crimes committed against her body. The last line of the quote
illustrates the fact that blaming and demonizing the discotheques and the working women has
been normalized in official discourse when these “types” of women and social settings exist
everywhere in the world. Sabina’s character asks us to recall that what is not normal is the hyper
masculinized ritual violence against women.

Finally, the call to action at the end of the novel through activist groups and the
formation of an impromptu community governed by a matriarchal source of knowledge
contribute greatly to the overarching sense of hope, desire, and solidarity in Ciudad final. We
are first exposed to the imagery of the protestors at one of the universities in Juárez:

Entrábamos en el campus de la universidad, los estudiantes, vistiendo túnicas negras y
máscaras, sostenían cruces de madera con los nombres de muchas de las fallecidas.
Sentados en la hierba los jóvenes llamaban a los medios de comunicación para que se
hicieran eco. Había también estudiantes de la universidad de Texas que habían cruzado
la frontera para solidarizarse. (129)

This public performance of grief serves a bipartite function as activism and public mourning.

That is, while the community has no official obituary or eulogy for the still disappeared bodies,

62 “La coincidencia entre muertes y eventos, la relación de fechas, la correspondencia entre sangre y
celebración, describía una dinámica de fratrias y mafias, tanto o más que una dinámica de comercio o
tráfico de órganos, o de sexo, o de películas snuff. Mis alumnos habían interpretado ya la muerte de la
joven del Nueva York en esta clave, al ver en el asesinato de la muchacha un propósito de índole mafiosa,
el aviso. Y, en efecto, así actuaba la mafia, o las fratrias, con sangre” (203).
their identities are deemed grievable through the public outcry for justice. Similarly, we find inspiration in the figure of Ana Amalia’s mother, who is the fictional narrative’s surrogate for all of the real mothers who have lost their daughters to the femicides in Juárez. Her conversation with Kama reveals the other unofficial investigators like herself working tirelessly in solidarity to find answers. Kama summarizes their discussion of

...su planeada apelación, junto con otras madres, al presidente de la nación; de su propósito de recorrer el mundo buscando ayuda...me contó de las organizaciones y las personas que les estaban ayudando, del periodista Sergio González y de la reportera de El Paso Diana Washington y del peligroso compromiso adquirido por ambos en su labor por sensibilizar a la opinión... (205)

As previously mentioned in my summary of the novel, Kama and her students are inspired by the knowledge imparted to them by Ana Amalia’s mother. This spontaneous meeting in Kama’s university office officially links the knowledge of the community and the academy in the text just like we saw in Desert Blood.

The human chain born from Ana Amalia’s mother’s sorrow and resultant activism represents the human solidarity for which Kama is advocating. She narrates the scene:

Nos fuimos a encadenar en la verja del rancho de Lote Chico, tras haber llamado asociaciones y a la prensa. Pasamos la noche encadenadas, frente a unas montañas enormes en las que en el día se ven pintados grandes letreros que dicen ‘La Biblia te salva.’ Mis estudiantes, muchas madres, gentes de la comunidad, de las asociaciones, de las maquilas...nos acompañaron en la vigilia. No sé qué pensaría la jueza cuando vio mi rostro en los noticieros de todos los canales, denunciando la impunidad y pidiendo que se hicieran las indagaciones pertinentes. A las pocas horas teníamos allá a la policía, a quienes nos enfrentamos pacíficamente, con la premisa de que sólo queríamos justicia. (205-206)

Kama describes the increasing length of the chain as other people join in order to emphasize the need for global cooperation, as well as promote a more multifaceted approach to combatting the violence that is brought on and nurtured by institutions and ideologies. The irony of the signs on the mountain claiming that the Bible saves is an essential commentary criticizing the
blind faith of many Mexicans, and undoubtedly other devout people the world over. Kama seems to be cautioning that this blind faith in Catholicism, neoliberal capitalist policies, or in any other dogma of the like can often lead to complicity and silence with regard to violence and crime.

In the final act of irony in the text, the authorities who cannot and will not arrest the perpetrators of the femicides detain Kama for public scandal and threatening authority. Comically, Kama paints a vivid picture of this and the other contradictions found at the border:

...Y sólo conseguí regresar a El Paso en la burlera de la Policía judicial, esposada; detenida por escándalo público y amenazas a la autoridad. Me llevaban con la sirena puesta cruzando Juárez a depositarme al otro lado: dejábamos atrás el paisaje de maquiladoras, y casas y modernos edificios, y bloques, lotes baldíos y grafítos de narcobunkers en desuso, y shanty towns que diría mi alumna texana, poblados más que pobres formados de palés y casetas de Mirinda, y vi a una muchachita bajando la loma y protegiéndose del sol con un paraguas, y nudos de cables, y orillas de ríos fronterizos, y fronteras de hojalata, y traficantes lanzando sus paquetes de un lado a otro, y calles con night clubs. Y pensé que no me importaba que me sacaran del país, que al día siguiente volvería a estar allí, porque todos debíamos estar allí...

Through this bustling image of Ciudad Juárez, Kama describes not only the ugliness, but also the beauty of this border city. This description of rapidly crossing to the other side in a police car passing these varied portraits and landscapes creates a sense of pride for the dynamic area. The young girl coming down the hill protecting herself from the sun with an umbrella immediately calls to mind the image of the woman with the parasol from the hotel painting. Instead of the peaceful ocean view behind her, this young girl walks around amidst a postmodern backdrop of drug traffickers, shanty towns, cables, modern homes, and night clubs. In an allusion to the Coatlicue dyad while simultaneously condemning this environment of crime and poverty, Kama seems to also appreciate the active energy and possibility that Ciudad Juárez still offers. Her vow to keep returning only solidifies this perception and helps give the text a prevailing message of hope despite all of the horrific events that it has explored.
2.3 The Power of Sisterhood, Indigenous Traditions, and a Maternal Lineage of Knowledge in *If I Die in Juárez* by Stella Pope Duarte.

Stella Pope Duarte’s *If I Die in Juárez* shares many of the same themes and approaches as the previous two novels about the femicides. Like her cohorts, Pope Duarte relied on personal experiences and ethnographic research on the border to bring her book to life. On her personal website, Pope Duarte explains that:

Several trips to Ciudad Juárez were completed, to write *If I Die In Juárez*, which included visiting actual sites in the city where women’s bodies have been uncovered, walking the streets of the red-light districts of the city, touring “las colonias” where the poor reside, interviewing mothers whose daughters have been murdered, and meeting with activists, investigators, and those who work with women’s organizations in Juárez and El Paso. I also visited a maquiladora, and interviewed a young woman who worked there, to secure more in-depth information. Additional information was gained through Amnesty International, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, which included hundreds of reports documenting the Juárez murders. (1)

Pope Duarte’s story, however, is not as closely linked plot-wise as the other two. The novel alternates third person narrated episodes to tell the stories of three females: Evita, a street child, Petra, her cousin the *maquila* worker, and Mayela, a Tarahumara Indian girl who has close ties to Petra and her family from their time spent together in the village of Montenegro in rural Mexico before venturing to Juárez. The most important spiritual connection for Petra is her bond with Abuela Teodora who represents the center of the matriarchal community of knowledge in the text. As we will see throughout the analysis, Abuela Teodora emphasizes a maternal lineage of knowledge by passing her wisdom on to her daughter and granddaughter.

The tale begins in 1995 with Evita whose life is constantly complicated by her mother Brisa’s drinking and abuse. When she is kicked out of her house for flirting with Brisa’s then boyfriend, Evita goes to stay with Isidora who is a prescription drug trafficker and a pimp to Cristal and Anabel who also reside in her home. Whereas Evita dreams of peace and becoming a butterfly to escape Juárez, the adults around her continue to fail her. When Brisa sends
policemen to apprehend Evita on the street, one of the men exposes himself to her in the back of the police car. He instructs Evita to tell no one since next time it will be worse for her if she does. Unfortunately, the sexual abuse in Evita’s life does not start there. She recounts the time one of her neighbors’ brothers, Chano, had once pulled her underwear down as she was coming home from school.

When Evita returns home to Brisa’s, the cycle of abuse continues. To make matters worse, Evita’s sister Lety moves back in, pregnant, with her two kids, Joselito and Milito, and her husband Julio who beats her regularly. Once more Evita decides that she cannot bear to live in this environment and briefly stays with her madrina Ofelia since she can only keep her for a few weeks pending the arrival of Petra and her family to Juárez. In many ways, Evita’s life is marked by women who live very traditionally gender stratified lives. One only needs to look at her mother and sister who are constantly used and abused by men. Throughout the novel we will see these same sort of contradictions contrasted to the spirit of activism among the three young women who work together to save Petra in the end.

Through Petra’s story we discover that her father, Estevan, must travel to Juárez for life saving medical treatment that he cannot receive in Montenegro. Without any intention of doing so, Evita tells Ofelia that she is going back home, but instead heads back to Isidora’s. At this point in the novel we learn more about Petra de la Rosa’s background. An essential component to Pope Duarte’s text is the direct emphasis on indigenous populations and their cultural roots. Here we meet Abuela Teodora who still sings to Petra in the Tarahumara language, and stays behind when the family travels to Juárez to save Estevan. We discover that Estevan had migrated to Montenegro from Oaxaca to work in the silver mines there. To make ends meet after Estevan fell ill, Flor, Petra’s mother, and Abuela Teodora sold their wares at the market.
This is where our other protagonist ties into the relationship among the three girls. Abuela Teodora helped deliver Mayela when she was born, and her mother, Chavela Sabina, would still buy corn from them. Chavela became a widow and single mother when her husband was killed in a fight with another man.

Back in Juárez, Evita is distraught after a man violently takes Anabel away from Isidora’s house. She goes to church to pray and tells a woman there that she wants to go to school. The woman, Licha, recommends the orphanage, Niños Huérfanos. This is important because it will prove to be the avenue by which Evita and Mayela eventually cross paths. Later, when Evita is running some of Isidora’s errands, Evita encounters Brisa’s ex-boyfriend, Ricardo, the one with whom she had been accused of flirting. Like the rest of the adults in her life, Ricardo ends up buying her food and then violating her; this time sexually. In an attempt to escape from the hotel room after the sex act, Evita stabs herself in the arm with his knife. He helps her clean it up, but then disappears. She goes back to Isidora’s where he returns some days later bearing gifts. Since Isidora informs her that she should never have sex without payment, Ricardo begins paying Evita for sex. Here, we see how Evita represents the figure of the prostitute in the puta/virgen dichotomy that Gaspar de Alba mentioned previously. Although we observe this binary throughout the text, the ending sees the women overcome it to use their creative and destructive Coatlicue forces for the betterment of their families and communities. Around this same time, Petra and her family arrive at Ofelia’s and learn that due to space constraints, she and her brother will have to go stay at Brisa’s. When they show up with Tío Alvaro, who had helped them travel to the city, Brisa flirts and feigns kindness. Upon his departure, she begins verbally abusing the children for their slow-paced and ignorant rancho ways.
In the following chapter, 12 year old Mayela arrives in Ciudad Juárez with her sister Cina and her children, Isi and Nabor. They are escaping Cina’s husband who had already tried to kill her three times. Her mother had arranged for Mayela to go to school and to take care of the children while Cina worked. The poorest of the girls, relatively speaking, Mayela and Cina live with Tía Concha in Tres Magos in abject poverty. The plans, however, abruptly change when Cina meets Sebastian. A man from the Yucatan who speaks Nahuatl, Sebastian is characterized as an outlandish and irrational fool who believes in “El Imán” that guides his destiny in life. Tía Concha, whose husband left for the other side 15 years ago and never returned, believes that “Sebastian’s a bird of prey, and Cina is his next victim” (118). Mesmerized by his power over her, Cina gives all their money to this crazy man who carries around a machete with human hair in it. Now that they are once again almost destitute since Sebastian gets all of the food and money, the family goes to the market to sell food and some things that they had pulled out of the local dump. At this point, Mayela has been deathly ill for days, complaining of stomach pains and lack of appetite. Tía Concha’s cousin, Licha, who cleans for the church and who we also met through Evita previously, tells them that she is dying and must go to the hospital at once. Suffering from meningitis, Mayela spends two weeks in the hospital. Upon recommendation from the doctor, Tía Concha takes Mayela to Niños Huérfanos, since she should not return to Tres Magos if they wish that she stay healthy.

At the orphanage, Mayela meets the American doctor, Sylvia Huddleston, who is researching the effects of poverty on indigenous children. More than that, however, she takes Mayela under her wing and discovers her talent for art. This affords Mayela the nickname, *La Niñita Frida*, as her paintings decorate the walls for the wealthy Americans to admire, and to ideally inspire monetary donations. Although the commodification of Mayela’s talents for the
advancement of the orphanage is at last a selfish act by part of the director, Señora Juana del Pilar, it does bring good to the institution and helps to unite the three protagonists of our story. When Evita sees Mayela painting in the city center, she is attracted to one of her works. Evita introduces herself and Mayela mentions Montenegro. Evita tells Mayela about her cousin, Petra de la Rosa, who is from Montenegro now living in Juárez. Mayela, wanting to go back to her mother there, pleads with Evita to contact Petra to come to the orphanage and promises to save the painting for her if she comes through. Mayela also meets employee Narciso Odin who is from the Huichol tribe, which is a neighbor of the Tarahumaras. He begins as a father figure for Mayela, but their relationship ends when he brings her to his home for Christmas hoping to make her one of his many brides. Narciso kisses Mayela at the party and she runs away, only to be threatened by one of his wives to never tell the orphanage or they will get even.

At Isidora’s Cristal teaches Evita how to be a prostitute and Josefina, nicknamed Fina, moves in to replace Anabel. Evita also finds out that she is pregnant with Ricardo’s baby, and although she wants to keep it, is persuaded to go see “Doctor Juárez” who gives discount illegal abortions. After Evita ultimately miscarries the child, Cristal attacks Fina for flirting with her older boyfriend Maclovio. When Isidora comforts Fina, Cristal packs up and leaves, taking Evita with her. The girls get their own place living off of Cristal’s job at El Club Exótica and her extra income from party rentals. When money gets tighter, Evita must go with Cristal to entertain for a party in Villa de las Rosas, one of the riches areas of the city. At the party Evita is drugged and raped. Before the party incident, while her father is in the hospital needing surgery for a tumor on his kidney, Petra and Flor see Evita on the streets with Cristal on the way to work at the maquila. Petra’s beauty is immediately noticed by the higher ups like Humberto Ornelas and Gustavo Ríos, who had recruited them to Western Electronics in the first place in Montenegro.
Petra makes a friend at the factory in Lola Sesma, but others, including Amapola Nieto, constantly make up rumors about her affairs with the married superiors. This gossip is exacerbated when Gustavo Ríos offers Petra a promotion and trains her to work in his office after only two months of work at the factory. At the same time, Petra’s brother Nico is being threatened by El Cucuy, leader of Los Rebeldes, one of the worst gangs in Juárez. The neighbor, Luis Ledezma, who is in love with Petra, offers the family money to help them relocate to another colonia, Nuevo León, to get Nico out of harm’s way. This inevitably backfires when Nico gets involved with the gold trinket-wearing gang there, Los Trinquetes.

Blind to what is really going on with the men in power at the maquila who just want to control her; Petra begins to enjoy her new higher position in the company, as well as her new English classes. In this way, Petra represents the agency that maquiladora workers possess to the extent that they leave traditional community and familial structures to achieve independence in the urban public sphere. At work she meets the “friend” who betrays her and leads to her eventual abduction, Vina Salcido, whose father has ties to Gustavo Ríos and his boss Agustín Miramontes Guzmán. Despite the risks of her job, Petra is thankful to have the potential to earn the money to pay her father’s 100,000 peso hospital bill. She is also extremely happy when Antonio comes up for Christmas and asks her to marry him. Although he exhibits some problems reconciling Petra’s new lifestyle with his traditional machista viewpoints, Antonio loves her more than ever. Their first disagreement, however, is when Petra wants Antonio to go with her to a party at Guzmán’s house. We learn later that this is the same home where Evita was raped. The links among the events at this house related to Guzmán and his pregnant French wife, Gabriela LaFarge, are what aid in Petra’s rescue in the end. More specifically, a picture of Gabriela in an intricate white gown she gives Mayela to paint provides the essential piece to the
mystery surrounding Petra’s disappearance from a Saturday meeting with Guzmán at the maquiladora.

After Evita’s recovery in the clinic she moves back in with her sister Lety, who is pregnant with baby Evelina, and begins working at a flower shop. This decision proves to be advantageous because it is there where she meets American soldier, Harry Hughes, who is stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso. Before this happy event, however, she again crosses paths with Ricardo. Jorge, a soccer player at the nearby Prepa and Ricardo’s son, becomes enamored with Evita and visits her at work constantly. While walking together, Jorge and Evita run into Ricardo and his mom. As is to be expected, Ricardo later returns to the shop to threaten Evita to never see his son again. As the narrator illustrates, “El Cadet would be a protection for her from other men” (244). This is just in time since Ricardo was planning to sic El Cucuy on Evita to teach her a lesson. The presence of the American soldier incites fear in the bad men of Juárez throughout the rest of the text. Next, Evita, Harry, Petra, and Luis go to visit Mayela at the orphanage, and this represents the first time in the novel where all three girls are finally united. This is where Evita makes the connection between the white dress worn by a young girl she saw with Agustín Miramontes Guzmán and the one in Mayela’s painting. Here too we find out that with Antonio back in Montenegro, Petra has developed an attraction to Guzmán and the magic radiating from his powerful persona.

In an obvious attempt to maintain control over Petra, he sends her a brand new 1996 Honda Accord, which he calls a gift to both her and her sick father, something he can empathize with. Believing that his intentions are pure, Petra ignores advice from Luis Ledezma that Guzmán is extremely dangerous and most likely closely connected to the cartels. Later, during a business meeting in El Paso, Petra is slated to travel to Buenos Aires to train the personnel of the
maquiladora there. Now in debt to Guzmán for his good fortune toward her, Petra is basically forced to meet Guzmán on Saturday at the maquila in Juárez, a venture that will result in her capture. Around this same time, the cover of El Diario reports the murder of Anita Barbara Ozuna, and neighbors Cruz and her daughter Denise rush to Petra’s place to warn Flor and her family. Evita is there and keeps it to herself that she recognizes Anita Barbara as the beautiful girl on the arm of Guzmán at the private party where she had been assaulted and raped. In an action that would prove to be extremely elemental related to Petra’s rescue, Evita gives Petra the phone number at the flower shop in case of any kind of emergency.

On that fateful Saturday, Petra meets Agustín at the maquiladora, and then accompanies him in his Jaguar to ride to a restaurant, El Arco Iris, in Villa de las Rosas for what he calls a private business meeting. They discuss the six weeks she is supposed to spend in Buenos Aires. Cryptically as he drops her back off at Western Electronics, he tells Petra: “Before you know it we’ll be together again” (289). As Petra happily drives away fantasizing about her accomplishments thus far and what is to come, she peers in her rearview mirror and sees Agustín’s security detail following her. They stop Petra and tell her that Guzmán had forgotten to tell her something and that she should go with them in their sedan. They lure her by promising that Vina Salcido would also be there. At that moment Petra realizes that “[e]verything that she had been warned about was happening to her” (290). The man driving the car is Hilo and the man in the backseat with Petra turns out to be El Cucuy, two of Guzmán’s henchmen. When she is forced into Guzmán’s house, he makes Petra wear the white dress that the now deceased Anita Barbara wore because he says that it reminds him of virgins.
Hauntingly, he plays the same song that he requested at the restaurant, “Gema.” Petra realizes that everything had been a setup from the promotions to her relationship with Guzmán and Vína Salcido who helped them orchestrate Petra’s capture since she wanted to be the one to go to Buenos Aires. Petra is drugged, sexually assaulted, tortured, and hanging on to life while her mother calls the police to report her missing.

Expectedly, following the blame-the-victim discourse, the police begin by blaming Petra, her way of dress, and probable double life, and by refusing to investigate until after 24 hours. This reaction by the conservatives and the political establishment in Juárez adds another layer to the complicit objective violence against women. Once again, legal institutions are systematically taking no initiative to stop the crimes, since from the start they automatically view the “promiscuous” public working women as the guilty party. When authorities finally do arrive at the house the next day, they want to waste precious time by contacting Antonio in Montenegro. Fortunately, Flor finds the telephone number that Evita had left and informs her of Petra’s disappearance. When Evita confirms with Mayela that the woman in the white dress from her painting is Gabriela LaFarge, Evita knows that Petra is with her husband Agustín. She enlists the help of Luis Ledezma, whose drug addict brother Chano leads them to Villa de las Rosas, and her boyfriend Harry Hughes. Noteworthy here as well is the fact that it is the beginning of Holy Week. In the end we see Petra’s resurrection as an analogy to Easter Sunday. Upon learning of Petra’s disappearance her father wills his own coma, and Antonio and Tío Alvaro rush from Montenegro to Juárez. Journalist Rita Canchola brings media attention to the incident, and Harry, the American soldier, alerts the El Paso Times. Fearing an international incident, Harry’s

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63 This seems to be a reference to Javier Solís, a popular Mexican ranchero singer in the fifties and sixties. As the title suggests, the lyrics compare a beautiful woman to a precious stone and divine jewel that the man possesses to enhance his worth. This alludes to the theme of women as possessions and commodities that has been discussed in this analysis.
Army superiors want to transfer him to a base in Georgia, while Beltrán, Agustín’s uncle in Mexico City, fears the same and tells him that he must let Petra go and flee to France to be with his wife and newborn son.

At midnight Gustavo Ríos is found dead lying in a pool of his own blood at Western Electronics. The official story is that he shot himself because he was in love with Petra and caused her disappearance and probable death. At this juncture, Petra is dying in the trunk of her Honda and Hilo and Cucuy have plans to mutilate her body and finish the job. When they see Luis Ledezma’s truck approaching with his brother Chano and Nico, Petra’s brother, the thugs flee the scene. Furthering the Passion allusion, they find Petra’s brutally tortured body sprawled out in the shape of a cross. She spends three weeks in the hospital where we learn that Antonio left Ciudad Juárez broken hearted and that her father had died—luckily after finding out that Petra had been rescued.

The Epilogue of the novel serves to show what happened to the protagonists after we last saw them in the narrative. Petra, who had since married Luis Ledezma, founded Mujeres Unidas de Juárez. The organization’s art and mission statement reflected Mayela’s work and their mutual indigenous roots. We discover that Guzmán’s driver, Benito Salas’, otherwise known as Hilo, whereabouts were unknown. Agustín Miramontes Guzmán was assassinated in France, and El Cucuy had been killed in prison. We also learn that Evita married Harry, Abuela Teodora died and was buried next to Estevan in Montenegro whose famous line “If I die in Juárez, bury me in Montenegro,” inspired the title of the novel. Petra’s only true friend from the maquiladora, Lola Sesma, had become director of one of the group’s women’s shelters. As an explicit message for government officials to take swift and meaningful action against the femicides, Senator García, in the presence of other prominent politicians, announces that he has
arranged a Senate committee in Washington, D.C. to hear testimony from Mujeres Unidas de Juárez and others on the murders.

In her review of Stella Pope Duarte’s novel, Michele Serros affirms that “las muertas de Juárez haunt three destitute girls” (1). The selection of the term “haunt” accurately captures the overall feeling of If I Die in Juárez. More so than Desert Blood and Ciudad final, the present text evokes a physical response of fear from the reader. In other words, Pope Duarte’s narrative effectively complements the other two novels involving tireless female investigators with its plentiful scary and shocking moments, most notably provided through Agustín Miramontes Guzmán’s character. Further, If I Die in Juárez actually takes us inside the maquiladoras and their environment that breeds at best disrespect and at worst brutality for the women employed there. We bear witness to the dehumanizing treatment of the women and how their bodies are gradually abused from the start of their employment period to the end of their lives.

Likewise, the novel takes on more commonplace instances of the commodification of human bodies when it deals with Mayela’s artwork for the orphanage. Even at this seemingly innocent level, the institution of the orphanage is commodifying Mayela, the indigenous Niñita Frida, in order to promote and ensure its financial survival. This is further exhibited through the American doctor, Sylvia Huddleston, who is intrigued by Mayela and sees her as the perfect “object” for her study on the “welfare of children who lived in third world conditions” (165). Despite the fact that she is one of the most caring and tender people toward Mayela in the novel and her intentions seem pure, she is still gazing at the “other” from a position of dominance and authority. The prostitutes like Fina and Cristal are also obviously commoditized. The narrator explains that “[s]he [Cristal] was a commodity, a product men bought to spice up
their celebrations. The men who rented Cristal were very happy with her services, and she quickly became a favorite in their circles” (179-180). Similarly, Gustavo Ríos objectifies Petra:

He was proud to introduce Petra to everyone, feeling as though he owned her, since he was the one who had found her in Montenegro. It looked good for him that she was so beautiful, and intelligent besides. Other men congratulated him about finding a diamond among the rocks and filth of Montenegro. (267)

This attitude of female possession helps us understand the motives behind why men convert women into easily disposable objects. This quote also illustrates the devaluation of the rural poor, which we also see through Agustín who believes that anyone that does not know elegance does not deserve to live.

Following this line of investigation into the systematic commodification of bodies, abuse is also widespread in the novel. It spreads from inside the homes and ideologies of the characters into the streets and society. Although in the majority of cases the abuse is carried out by the male figure against the female, the book also highlights some instances where there is a lack of sisterhood among the women. Emotions like jealousy and envy are cited throughout the book when women do not get along or sabotage one another’s progress. After Flor complains that the other girls at the maquiladora denigrate Petra, he tells her, ‘that’s the way it is, señora. Women envy other women who are beautiful and intelligent like Petra’ (203). In this sense, since many of these negative interactions take place between the female workers in the maquiladora, it seems that this intensely gender-stratified environment leads to more tension as women are internalizing the gender violence used against them by men.

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64 bell hooks discusses the value of Sisterhood to the feminist movement. She explains that “[i]n recent years Sisterhood as slogan, motto, rallying cry no longer evokes the spirit of power in unity. Some feminists now seem to feel that unity between women is impossible given our differences. Abandoning the idea of Sisterhood as an expression of political solidarity weakens and diminishes the feminist movement. Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle. There can be no mass-based feminist movement to end sexist oppression without a united front—women must take the initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity” (127).
Simultaneously, the envy is also a product of the competition among women to please their bosses and points to biological origins for the possession of the male partner.

From the perspective of the majority of the male characters in the novel, women are disposable objects who are incapable of working together to build something productive. Ultimately, however, sisterhood prevails through the relationship between the three protagonists and their teamwork to rescue Petra and continue the mission to help all women in Juárez through the activist organization. One of the first examples of this sort of conflict is when a waitress calls Brisa to report that she witnesses Evita flirting with Ricardo in her restaurant. Her mother, who has a history of beating and berating Evita when she gets stressed out or drunk, kicks her 13 year old daughter out of her home, calling her a “shameless whore” (9). Evita also observes her brother-in-law, Julio, abuse her sister Lety. The narrator describes a scene where “Julio came by in a nasty mood and beat up Lety, pushing her down on the ground and making her bleed from between her legs. He ran off and left her hurt, screaming for help” (29). Since Evita has just recently returned home from her first stint at Isidora’s, and Brisa unknowingly sent vulgar, corrupt, and sexually abusive police officers to retrieve Evita on the street, she urges Lety not to call the authorities. Evita knows first-hand that it will do no good.

Domestic violence also affects Ofelia and her husband Prospero. Not to mention the fact that he is obviously drunk when Petra and her family first arrive to Juárez, at one point he throws an iron at his wife because his clothes are not pressed and ready (93). Moreover, this type of abuse is also the reason cited for Cina, her children, and Mayela’s departure from Chitlitipin:

Her husband, Zocotl, had already tried to kill her three times, and she bore a scar on her throat from his last attempt. His jealous rages had cost his first wife her life, Cina told Chavela that she either escaped from Chitlitipin or Chavela would be burying her dead body. (108)
Unfortunately, as we have seen, the cycle repeats itself and Cina eventually leaves Juárez for fear that her new lover, Sebastian will also kill her. Also, on a separate occasion Sebastian threatens to kill Mayela for watching him have sex with Cina (118). Similarly, especially with the case of Isidora’s prostitutes, they are continually abused by men, but also abuse each other. For example, Cristal pounces on Fina when she is flirting with her boyfriend Maclovio. This incident leads Cristal and Evita to continue the private dancing and parties on their own, which results in Evita’s rape and beating at the hands of powerful men (137).

As an exotic dancer and prostitute, Cristal has witnessed the many layers of violence within their society. In an attempt to preserve a modicum of Evita’s innocence:

Cristal didn’t have the courage to tell Evita about the dangerous men, the ones who pulled out a knife and subjected women to all kinds of violence. The ones who refused to wear a condom and ended up telling the woman they were infected with AIDS, when they knew it was too late for her to do anything about it. She didn’t tell her the story of a friend who was murdered by a man who turned on her and slit her from her vagina up to her throat. (131)

Through this possible allusion to the infamous serial killer Jack the Ripper, who often mutilated the bodies of poor prostitutes, we see outward subjective and biological violence, rage, and the randomness of crime. Later, when Ricardo threatens Evita because of his son’s crush, he tells her:

You won’t play with me, Evita, like you’re playing with my son. There are women’s bodies being found in Juárez, thrown out like so much trash—what’s one more body? Who will believe that you didn’t return to the streets and were killed by some narco traficante, or a crazed maniac? You will do what I say, or you’ll live to regret it!’ (240)

Here, Ricardo captures the essence of the accumulation of bodies in Juárez. If the killers are sure that they will not be prosecuted for their crimes, what’s one more body that the authorities
won’t even notice? When areas like Las Lomas de Poleo have become famous as dumping grounds for the victims of femicide, Ricardo’s comments ring true.

The men in the story also offer up a dozen reasons how women can prevent what is happening to them in Juárez. Women need to control themselves and be controlled. When Evita’s brother, Reynaldo, pays a taxista to get her off of the streets, the driver expresses this idea:

You’re too young to be out on the streets like a prostitute. It’s girls like you who end up dead in el Lote Bravo. If you were my daughter, I would beat you and make you stay home. That’s what women need. They need to be beaten and kept at home for their own safety. (21)

This sentiment is echoed as Julio tells Lety what Reynaldo should have done to Evita before taking her to the clinic after her sexual assault. He says, ‘[y]our brother is too kind; he should have beaten her until she couldn’t get up. That’s the way to stop a woman who wants to run around like a whore’ (229).

Additionally, it is important to consider that If I Die in Juárez romanticizes rural Mexico and indigenous traditions. While this is at first glance considerably stereotypical, upon further review we notice that this is an essential element to the development of a maternal lineage of information, or a female-centered knowledge, like the kind we saw in the previous two novels. The juxtaposition of the two areas, Montenegro and Ciudad Juárez, supports this idealization of the country, its indigenous traditions, and fantastical elements. Petra views Juárez as a veritable city of the dead and “…was proud when she lived in Montenegro, and before she left for Ciudad Juárez, which was to become for her the inferno Abuela Teodora has told her about, a dwelling place of the dead from where no news comes, where the doors are left-handed and there are no roads leading out” (38). This description recalls a reversal of Juan Rulfo’s haunted pueblo Comala in the sense that it is the prosperous city that constitutes the ghost town—full of the
spirits of dead and disappeared young women. Montenegro, on the other hand, is depicted as a scenic place where traditions and female knowledge are valued and treasured.

The following portrayal of the native people’s cosmovision relates back to the discussion of Coatlicue and Mesoamerican thought, and supports a maternal lineage of knowledge passed on through the women in society:

The primitive people had marked the passing of time by the movements of the sun. There were five suns, each ending in destruction. The first was destroyed by tigers, the second by a hurricane, the third by fire, the fourth by a great flood, and the last, el Quinto Sol, the era of the Fifth Sun, would end by earthquakes. Petra learned these things from Abuela Teodora Santos de Texcoco, a tiny bony woman who held her granddaughter’s heart in the palm of her hand. Abuela Teodora was a descendant of the tribe of people who had come before the Aztecs, possibly the Toltecs. Eventually, one of her great-grandmothers had married a Tarahumara, and her family had migrated to Chihuahua. The old woman could speak Rarámuri, the language of the Tarahumaras, chanting prayers that had lulled the infant Petra to sleep. (37)

Abuela Teodora passes the traditions and knowledge of her community to Flor and Petra. She represents a unifying force in their lives that reminds them of the good in humankind. In fact, when Abuela Teodora comes to visit them in Juárez, “Flor hugged her mother joyfully, crying and pressing her close. Already she felt lighter, as if a huge burden had been lifted and her power as a woman had returned now that her mother was close by” (202). This female power is what the male killers intend to vanquish with their violent acts and negative discourse. Thus, Abuela Teodora and Montenegro come to symbolize a divine space where female energies are respected and enriched (certainly in spite of traditional rural machista tendencies). On the other hand people like Gustavo Ríos, the man who recruits Petra and Flor in Montenegro serves as a masculine force to squelch female energy. Petra’s thoughts articulate his commanding and threatening presence well: “Petra and her mother stood up to shake his hand. Petra sensed an energy around him that repulsed and frightened her, making her feel as if his power would somehow swallow her up” (145).
Additionally, Montenegro illustrates the devastation caused by NAFTA and the development of multinational factories like the *maquiladoras*. In her introduction to the volume *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, Claudia Sadowski-Smith discusses the paradox of free-moving goods and the restricted movement of people at the border. She explains that NAFTA is creating “…a common North American territory where goods and services can move freely but where borders continue to intrude on the everyday lives of various groups of people” (1). According to Sharon A. Navarro:

> For tens of thousands of displaced workers, the ongoing deep economic restructuring marked by NAFTA has not ushered in the new dawn of prosperity hailed by North American political leaders. The explosive growth of low paying export manufacturing jobs in the *maquiladora* sector in Mexico has been offset by an immense loss of jobs in the domestic manufacturing sector in the U.S. and Canada. (184)

Part of this economic restructuring left agrarian laborers with no ways to compete with corporations. Thus, families like the one Petra’s represents were forced to take drastic measures to support themselves. Not to mention Petra’s father’s health, they had to relocate to Juárez to survive economically and physically.

Similar to what we will see in Agustín Miramontes Guzmán’s character as a descendent of Hernán Cortés, the people of Montenegro liken this 21st century colonization to the conquest and other similar attempts to control the “primitive” populations in Mexico. We learn that:

> Every day there was talk that the wells would run dry and the people of Montenegro would die. Everyone hated the rich Spanish landowner who had built a dam many years ago, so many that no one could remember exactly when. He had forced the water from el Río Gris to flow into his land alone, to his hacienda, to water his crops and fatten his cattle, but the river broke loose and spilled its water wherever it willed, on the land and on the people of Montenegro. There were great floods. Then it dried up as a last act of vengeance, and the people of Montenegro cheered the river’s wrath and said they possessed the same power to resist the proud and the arrogant. (37)

As we saw through the description of the destruction of the Five Suns, and this one regarding the revenge of the river, it seems that the Montenegro community’s salvation and strength are
linked closely to the power of nature. Further, this citation illustrates the conditions that drive
decisions to leave for work in Juárez. Sadly, since no news from the big city tends to travel
outward, or inward for that matter, families like Petra’s and Mayela’s unknowingly walked into
similar dire situations in the poor colonias of Juárez. Petra’s father, Estevan, is the most vocal
opponent to the Juárez move. We recall that he is the inspiration behind the title of the novel as
he tells his family, “If I die in Juárez, bury me in Montenegro.” He often says that he would
rather die than leave his home for medical care. His voice also serves as a critique of Mexican
government policies that look out for foreign interests instead of the poor at home. Estevan

...blamed the American government for supporting NAFTA in 1992, which caused
thousands of villagers to lose their farmlands and granted big corporations the right to
establish themselves in foreign countries, making huge profits off the sweat of the poor.
The Mexican government was as greedy as los Estados Unidos in allowing factories to
take advantage of Mexico’s low wages, paying Mexican employees a fraction of what
Americans made for the same work. Both countries were interested in reaping billions
by building industrial factories—las maquiladoras—along the border between the
United States and Mexico; and thus the rich remained rich, and the poor got poorer. Life
for the poor in Mexico took a turn for the worse. Thousands immigrated to the cities to
start from the ground up, hoping to get jobs in the maquiladoras, or as taxi cab drivers,
or cleaning houses, digging ditches, doing anything and everything they could to
survive—even joining in the illegal trade of people and drugs across the border. (39)

The discussion of the Mexican and U.S. governments’ exploitation and commodification of the
Mexican workers is not new to our analysis. While we have already likened Juárez to Comala
through its haunting properties, here we can also see how the same sort of movement that we
had with the Revolution is occurring. That is, as their residents move to cities at the border and
beyond65, places like Montenegro could become ghost towns like the one from Rulfo’s
acclaimed work of literature.

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65 In their economic study on migration, labor, and capital, Scott E. Atkinson and Marilyn Ibarra discuss
how internal migration patterns have evolved since the industrialization of the border beginning in the
1960s. They illustrate how in the 1990s a new migration pattern developed in Mexico “...which
represented a pattern of urban-to-urban migration. In previous decades, the migration phenomenon had
Further, with regard to female power and maternal lineages of knowledge, in Montenegro, and Juárez for that matter, the women are the ones who lead the families and make ends meet whether this is done at the market or at the maquililla. They also make the important decisions regarding the health and wellness of their families. Abuela Teodora is the partera and Doña Lorena is the curandera in Montenegro. Abuela Teodora consults Doña Lorena concerning Estevan’s illness who explains that he has kidney disease, the matter is urgent, and that all treatments thus far have failed. This leads Flor to make the ultimate decision that her family will venture to Juárez to save Estevan’s life through more advanced medical care. Apart from the obvious problems that will arise from this decision, it also shows one of the positive aspects of the large city, which possesses a higher concentration of services when compared to what is available in the countryside. While, like Coatlicue, the city has been villainized for being synonymous with death and destruction, it is also a place where healing through medical technology can defy the odds—something not available to the villagers in Montenegro.

Moreover, Petra’s bond with her grandmother is intensified through the song they sing in Rarámuri. Even when Petra is near death following her capture by Guzmán, she hears her grandmother saying, “[s]ing, Petra, sing to the morning” (56). The narrator explains that:

been one of rural-to-urban migration,” a pattern which we observe in Pope Duarte’s novel (4). Atkinson and Ibarra further assert that the Mexican government began discouraging “…certain types of investment in the large metropolitan areas in an effort to shift the focus of potential migrants away from highly congested metropolitan areas. Reasons for discouraging migration to the urban areas include the high cost of providing public services to new urban residents, mounting rates of unemployment and underemployment, and increased crime rates” (4)

66 The curandera has become a motif in Chicano literature, which seems to support the romanticization and exoticization of the culture south-of-the-border. Although this is similar to the way that Hollywood exoticizes the Other, her it seems to be carried out in a more positive manner. This is evidenced by such works as Rudolfo Anaya’s novel Bless Me, Ultima (1972), where Ultima, the curandera, guides and protects the protagonist, Antonio Márez y Luna in his coming-of-age story.
according to legend, each man and woman is a key that fits perfectly into one of heaven’s doors. Petra imagined the doors for her and Abuela Teodora would be side by side, and they’d fit their keys perfectly into keyholes and live as neighbors for all of eternity. The words of their song sank deeply into mountains and rocks, sky and desert sand. The song was old, primitive. (56)

What is more, the song feels out of place when they are together in Juárez. In fact, Abuela

Teodora “…didn’t invite her granddaughter to sing to the morning with her any longer, as she

knew that in Juárez the ancient traditions of Montenegro didn’t exist” (263).

While the fear of female power and energy is one reason as to why independent women

are disappearing and dying in Juárez, it is also important to consider the smaller-scale societal

views that persist to create an attitude of women representing a threat to masculinity. We

observe this in many of Antonio’s comments and actions. The narrator affirms that Petra

...seemed to have a strange power over him when she spoke English. It was as if he was uncouth and primitive next to her because he knew only Spanish. He was unsure how to deal with Petra as a woman who was now working and making a life in Juárez for herself apart from him, a woman feeling for the first time her own independence...While the world held new promise for Petra, Antonio wasn’t sure what it held for him. (205)

Antonio’s fear is not abnormal and seems to be quite genuine. His character demonstrates the

point that these feelings of being threatened as a result of country women like Petra leading

their own lives are normal and to be expected in a machista culture. The commoditizing,

denigrating, and acting out violently against women is not an accepted reaction, however.

The fantastical elements that appear in the book, namely when Evita and Mayela dream

of and imagine their dead siblings flying in heaven, and Petra presages an ominous presence

waiting for her in Juárez, liken the narrative to magical realism and the creative energies of

Coatlicue. Nevertheless, Mayela’s art, and Evita’s drawing of the butterfly in the beginning of the

text, also serve a cathartic function for survival. This mirrors the message that Pope Duarte
communicates through her creation of a fictional novel about the femicides. To express her love for her twin brother who had died at birth, Mayela painted an orange glow surrounding him, a warm heavenly glow that took over the entire paper. Her twin was a tiny blue baby flying in the orange glow with pink wings and bright yellow toenails. Doctora Sylvia saw it and told Mayela that it was the most beautiful of all her paintings. She told Señora Juana del Pilar that the painting was in the style of the greatest Mexican artists of magical realism, but Mayela didn’t know what she was talking about. She named her twin brother Popo, like the famous lover of Ixtla, in the ancient story of the young couple whose love was so great it became two fiery volcanos that can be seen to this day in the Valley of Mexico. (177)

In addition to remembering her brother, Mayela’s art helps her preserve indigenous tradition and legend.

Pope Duarte is unafraid to take us inside of the maquiladora. These descriptions add an important dimension to the narrative. They tell the stories of the monotony, fatigue, and abuse experienced by the women in the factories. The narrator describes the scene when Petra and Flor see the maquiladora for the first time:

On their way out, Petra saw the inside of the massive building and people working at stations, each busy at a task as they stood or sat on stools at long counters and worked on one part of a moving display. Some were doing their jobs like puppets on a string; others were talking, some joking and laughing. The aisles were numbered, and there were colors to identify different stations. The place was spacious, clean, and busy, with men carting away boxes of finished products in forklifts. Petra had never seen a place so big and with so many people working together. As the small group of new applicants was taken back to the front office, the other workers watched them. Men looked closely at Petra and whispered to each other about her, hoping she would be assigned a job at their workstations. (147)

Here we see the many different sides of the factory. While it is a place of puppet-like menial labor, it is also a place for socialization—especially for women who come to Juárez alone or in small groups. It also possesses the air of accomplishment in that the people are all working together to create something or do something productive in the end. The quote also
foreshadows the reputation that Petra will have there: The men would fawn over her while the women gossip about her sexual encounters.

In later scenes we see the fatigue taking over Petra’s body. This is before she is promoted to work with Ríos and Guzmán:

She repeated the same movement over and over until her mind seemed to go blank and her arms and shoulders shook with fatigue. By the end of the day, she wanted to drop down on the floor to spare her aching legs...Every day Petra watched the men and women working around her...She noticed that they didn’t pay much attention to their work. They did it as if in a trance while they talked to each other or looked away or dreamed about some place else they’d like to be. Some women, like her friend Lola, had small children at home and couldn’t call them to find out how they were doing, as they were unable to afford a telephone. One of the women told Petra she locked her three children at home alone, as she had no one to watch them and no money to pay for their care67. (152)

We can see how the mistreatment of human bodies in the name of neoliberal capitalism happens long before women turn up dead. Long hours, short or no breaks, and no peace of mind that their children are safe combine to make hazardous working conditions for their minds and bodies. Among other occupational hazards and diseases, Fuentes and Ehrenreich assert that even “[b]ladder problems are common because women cannot use the toilets or drink water freely” (31). Again citing former maquiladora working turned activist, María Torres, Langewiesche shares a story of how she washed her assembly parts in methylene chloride with her bare hands and no one ever told her that it was poisonous, nor did they give her any safety equipment (703).

Like the previous novels, *If I Die in Juárez* criticizes the silence and corruption of the police and other officials. After Evita is first assaulted by the policemen she decides not to tell her mother since it would do no good, and “[e]veryone knew they had the power to beat

67 We recall that in his short story, “Malintzin de las Maquilas,” from *La frontera de cristal* (1995), Carlos Fuentes deals with this same theme as one of the maquila worker’s children dies when he is left home alone.
people, imprison them, make false charges, even kill them” (27). Here, too, Evita ponders how this incident has changed who she is. It is the first time when she mentions the dark spikes within her that “...seemed to be gathering strength, reclaiming their power over her” (27).

Similarly, Tío Alvaro and Brisa discuss the corruption of the rich and the way that drugs rule the world. Tío Alvaro remarks that ‘[w]e need another Benito Juárez...[w]e need a revolution to rid ourselves of the rich once and for all. The soul, you know, does not feed on money, not at all. It lives on truth and hope, faith and love’ (94-95). This brief conversation reveals the many conditions that come together to make the violence in Juárez, and other places, possible. It also shows how drugs and the corruption of the rich are not just Mexico’s problem to solve. It is a global issue involving a myriad of factors.

The horrible conditions of the poorest colonias in Juárez, most of them home to the *maquiladora* workers, illustrate the disparate gaps between the rich and the poor. Los Tres Magos, where Tía Concha lives showcases a community that lives

...in tents and in houses made of cardboard, old tires, and pieces of metal and rusty pipes. They were like rats living in hovels, dirt all around, with no running water and no electricity. Long ago the government of Mexico had promised the poor that they would give them land if they voted for its political cause, but the leaders never bothered to tell them that the land they would possess could be worthless. (109)

This reform promised by the Revolution and the PRI has never come to full fruition for the poor. This failed Revolution, in many respects, combined with the current political climate of NAFTA and neoliberal capitalist interests continues to doubly marginalize a large majority of Mexican workers and poor. These undesirable conditions are just the beginning when we also consider
the pollution and toxins that affect those who live in Los Tres Magos and other destitute colonias like it.

Similarly, Petra’s uncle Prospero tells Flor that although the maquiladoras are making a fortune in Juárez, most of the money is flowing back out to the American foreigners that own them. He explains that:

The money paid out for wages to our people is nothing compared to what the companies make. In fact, it’s crumbs. Just like always, nothing for Mexico unless it’s all going to the government, which doesn’t care if the poor live or die. Some people say our problems will end when las maquiladoras leave Juárez, but then what will the people do? They’ve come to depend on wages from las maquilas—and if there’s no work, the people will starve and more disaster will fall upon us. I tell you, there are no answers for the poor, only more problems. (148)

In this passage, Prospero brings up one of the most fundamental points that the novels in this chapter emphasize. That is, shutting down the maquilas and getting the women away from the city, or worse locking them up like children for their own safety do not represent viable solutions. Society and its conditions must change so that this type of violent behavior toward women finds no support in societal structure.

The blame-the-victim discourse is also rampant in the narrative in a similar way to what we witnessed with police and other official reactions to the disappeared women in the other two novels. Many of the members of Petra’s family hold traditional views regarding the comportment of women. Tía Ofelia, who has worked in a maquiladora successfully for years thinks that “…it’s girls who run on the streets at night who get killed,” and “…decent girls are safe” (33; 92). When Antonio comes to visit, he is astonished at the ways of the people in the

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68 A tall chimney is visible from Tía Concha’s shack: “The structure was owned by ASARCO, an American copper company from El Paso, and was built in a manner that allowed the billows of noxious black smoke to drift downhill into la colonia Los Tres Magos. The black smoke, laden with chemicals and toxins, covered everything in Los Tres Magos like a black mesh entrapping the land, primitive dwellings, and the people” (110).
city and remarks: ‘No wonder there are murders in Juárez! Look at the way these women dress. I hope I never catch you dressing like that...’ (207). The police also share this belief and defend their own inaction by saying that the girls who were killed lived double lives and “...were known to frequent bars and dance halls, acting more like prostitutes than honest hardworking girls” (255). To counter this official narrative, parents of the murdered spoke out through the media, telling different stories about each one of their daughters. Even when Flor calls the police to alert them of Petra’s disappearance, the dispatcher scolds her: ‘It’s not my fault that your daughter leads a double life and has your family fooled’ (301).

Because of these pervasive attitudes against women and the persistent state of endangerment, Evita often wishes for death because she thinks that it is the only thing that will bring her peace. Her negative thoughts are often coupled with the physical response of the spikes inside of her body. The first time Ricardo violates her in the motel, Evita stabs herself in the wrist with his knife. The narrator informs that:

The spikes that drilled in her from the inside showed up on her body again, huge red blotches of pain, and disappeared only when she thought about hurting herself—running into the street to be hit by a car, or buying a knife to stab herself again. She wasn’t afraid of the stories of the girls found dead, their breasts bitten off, their heads, arms, or legs chopped off. Some of the bodies were burned beyond recognition, or left in the desert so long they were only skeletons when they were found. She didn’t think she’d be one of them, and if she was, maybe that would end her misery. (86)

It is easy to forget in our denouncement of the femicides that, for some of these women, death seems more appealing than life. Or to the other extreme, maybe inaction toward the femicides helps to contain other people’s fears. That is, since the femicides are happening to the brown Mexican other, she is being sacrificed in the place of other women, so these other women can sleep soundly at night. When we consider the notion of who constitutes a grievable death,
silence and impunity point to the fact that the murder of poor Mexican women is wrongly
deemed less worthy of mourning than a rich one’s or an American’s.

Petra, on the other hand, was beginning to believe that her life was changing for the
better. With her promotions and polite interactions with the men in charge of the factory, she
started to think that maybe she was getting by on her merits and not her looks. During a private
dinner with Agustín:

Petra felt lightheaded from the wine, relaxed and with a sense that maybe she was
wasting her time feeling threatened by Agustín. He was spending money on her and
treating her like a queen. Members of the cartels were ruthless men who committed
murders, rapes, and tortures and controlled the police and government officials. (288)

Agustín does not fit the description of the criminal that the media portrays as a flashy and rough
around the edges gang member. His dealings are more subtle and refined, which causes Petra
not to notice since she is impressed by Agustín’s behavior as a distinguished businessman. This
image contrasts starkly from the one Petra sees after Agustín captures her. Here, he invokes his
kin, Hernán Cortés, in order to exert his dominance over her:

‘And look over here.’ He pulled on her hair and spun her around to face a fireplace with
an elaborate mantelpiece. Over the mantelpiece was a fancy coat of arms with his
family name etched in silver and gold: CORTÉS MIRAMONTES GUZMÁN. ‘He was my
grandfather, el conquistador himself. Who knows which one of his bastard sons I am! Do
you like it? I’m a conqueror—there’s nothing you can do but submit, again and again
and again!’ He yanked her hair as hard as he could, and Petra screamed in pain, feeling
blood oozing from her scalp. He shook strands of her hair off his hand, as if it meant
nothing to him. (295)

For Agustín, Petra’s body is just another space for him to colonize and control. By dissolving her
female energy, paying special attention to electrically shocking its source, her womb69, Agustín
draws power from the destruction of her body, soul, and mind. Similarly, earlier when Evita and

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69 El conquistador, he told them, the bastard child of Cortés. He violated them as often as he liked, cursed
them, relieved himself on them, and forced electrical wires deep into their bodies, sending electrical
currents to destroy their wombs, where he said were conceived the most despicable forms of life, clots of
blood that must be destroyed...(307).
Cristal entertained the men at the party at Agustín’s house, they noticed “…the ceiling [that] formed a huge curving dome, elaborately decorated with a mural that showed scenes from the Mexican Revolution” (189). The symbolism here is worth noting because it creates an air of violence, power, and dominance.

The allusions to the colonial conquest are widespread during Petra’s detainment. In the same way that I am uniting seemingly distant historical periods through the links between women and violence over time, Pope Duarte alludes to the colonial period to highlight the continued domination of the white body over la chingada morena—a description still pertinent in current discussions of the border and U.S.-Mexico relations. In the following quote we observe how torture at the hands of Guzmán and his associates are correlated with ancient times:

...El Cucuy couldn’t be trusted with the filming. He got too excited about cutting up the women’s bodies. He wanted to see blood and guts, gouge out their eyes, cut off their ears, their breasts, their arms and legs, split them open, and carve out their hearts. He would hold their hearts still pumping, in his hand, then lift them over his head as if they were trophies. He wanted to wear their skin like the priests of the ancient god of war, Huitzilopochtli, who donned their victims’ skin and danced exuberant, feasting on their blood. (307)

Once again, we witness how the act of murdering women becomes a ritual killing designed to nourish male dominance and power. El Cucuy’s lust for destroying female bodies is so great that he cannot even contain himself to film the abuse and torture for his boss. At the same time, Petra uses indigenous mythology in order to interpret and survive the traumatic experience with Agustín. Here, the narrator describes her nightmare:

...el tsahuatsan, the huge serpent with seven heads that roamed the mountains of Montenegro looking for prey. Thunderbolts chased it, making sharp ragged waves of electricity appear in the sky. She heard a whistling sound, and when the serpent fell, lakes of blood were formed. The hideous heads of el tsahuatsan all bore the face of Agustín Miramontes Guzmán. When Petra felt Agustín’s body over hers, inflicting new pain, his howls and shrieks in her ears, she became like one of the crouching figures on
the mountains of Montenegro and danced silent and exuberant within herself. Sometimes she climbed up the dark chandelier and perched there, hidden among its shiny globes. And when he told her she would submit, and submit and submit, Petra resisted and became el Río Gris, fighting the pride and arrogance of the ancient conquistador. She became, once more, el mestizo rising, and she lived for another day. (308)

In order to survive, Petra had to will herself to have out-of-body experiences. She drew strength from her indigenous upbringing with Abuela Teordora in Montenegro in a magical and mythical fashion. When she was undergoing horrific tortures, she became nature incarnate—a figure on the mountain, the river itself. The idea of the indigenous populations represented as human beings with the closest bonds to nature is also highlighted here. Petra is *el mestizo rising* because she is able to invoke the powers of nature, *Coatlicue*, tradition, and her grandmother to save herself from the evil man. While, once again, this can be conceived of as a romanticism of the rural countryside in Mexico, it still serves as a reference to maternal and nontraditional lineages of knowledge and mythology.

In the end, Petra is rescued by Luis Ledezma and her brother Nico. Rita Canchola, the reporter who tells Petra’s story then and ten years later,

...listened to him [Luis] tell her how he and Nico had discovered Petra in las Lomas de Poleo, singing as Abuela Teodora had taught her to do. Las Lomas, she thought, the sinister desert, the bodies hidden in shallow graves, the mummified faces she had seen in photographs. Rita closed her eyes and sighed. She should leave now, let someone else write up the story. Last year one of the reporters had been assassinated, writing on something much less important than what she was now facing. (321)

Abuela Teodora’s song is the link that keeps Petra connected to her family as they prayed and searched for her return. The fact that it is what identified Petra to her now husband and brother takes on special meaning. When her body was battered and beaten beyond normal recognition, her traditional song about singing to the morning gave the men the exact information that would reveal her whereabouts and identity.
The epilogue to the novel provides the most hope and reveals the need for continued activism in speaking out against and preventing femicide. The idea that a woman like Petra, who was so horrendously violated and scarred, could transform her trauma into something good through her organization, Mujeres Unidas de Juárez, transmits the message that anyone could, and should, do the same. The incorporation of Abuela Teodora’s song in Rarámuri and Evita’s butterfly, presumably painted by Mayela, on the organization’s banner shows how Petra is continuing the traditions from her past in Juárez. Furthermore, journalist Rita Canchola is also an important source of matriarchal knowing. When her husband urges her not to go back to Juárez to continue writing about Petra, Rita tells him that she is doing it all for their daughter, Dulce. She explains:

‘She’ll grow up and have to face fear, and I don’t ever want her to run. If we stand together, we’ll become stronger; if we do nothing, we become weaker. I want her to be as brave as Petra de la Rosa. Just like that. Facing a firing squad if she has to and not running, and best of all, living to tell about it!’ (323-324)

Rita also highlights the value of solidarity; especially sisterhood. Women must stand together like the three protagonists from the novel in order to combat the continued efforts of corrupt men who relentlessly try to silence their voices and suppress their spirits. Petra de la Rosa becomes a model to follow because of her survival and strength, something she possessed long before Agustín and the other men connected to the maquiladora industry tried to take it away from her. Perhaps this is the most essential message to take away from Pope Duarte’s narrative. That is, we should appreciate the worth, strength, courage, independence, and hope of all of the poor women who seek work and a better life in Juárez. Their bodies must be valued from the moment they arrive, instead of only being noticed when they are abandoned in the desert.
Like the novel, which serves as a way to mourn the deaths of the victims of femicide, Rita Canchola understands the need to grieve the lives lost that she witnesses everyday through her journalism. She reminds us that we must take the time to mourn each individual body:

She ran from one story to the next, without any time to do her own mourning for the deaths she was encountering. At times, she had been days ahead of the police, often discovering clear evidence as to who had committed the crimes and having to put up with botched police investigations, sealed with silence by mordidas that filled the palms of corrupt police officials who had lost their soul to the devil. She was only a reporter, she was told, nothing more. Her testimony could be discounted by the police. She had a role to play, one step in Hell and one step in sanity she had created for herself, a world where she lived with one hope—that someday it would all end: the pain, the darkness, the memory of so many wounded hearts...Joy would yet come to chase the darkness away, and Rita Canchola was determined not to miss it. (325)

This reiterates the fact that one of the essential problems with reporting crimes that all sound and look the same is the politics of no-information. In other words, the seemingly incessant listing of crimes with no human stories behind them contributes to a void of information. As Corona, Gaspar de Alba, and others have so aptly pointed out, quite literally the more information we acquire, the less we seem to know—or the less we are moved emotionally. This is precisely why fiction is a vital piece in helping to grieve, celebrate lives, tell stories, imagine solutions, and hope for better outcomes in the future. It recalls the importance of imagination and divergent thinking when it comes to transforming people and society.

On the other hand, Kathleen Staudt also recognizes the limitations of fiction. Mentioning such novels as Desert Blood, and J.A. Jance’s Day of the Dead. She affirms that:

With a whole genre of novels like these, the image of the border and its demons on both sides—fiction or nonfiction—affects the consciousness of readers. Perhaps the activism, then dramatic performance, and spread into popular culture have made a deeper impression in popular perceptions than business campaigns to clean up the city’s image; but fiction’s agenda encompasses the entertainment of fear rather than institutional reform. (111)
While pointing out the shortcomings of fiction, Staudt also calls attention to its greatest strength, the ability to affect the consciousness of the reader. While the authors in my study certainly entertain us with fear, corruption, unsolved crime, and drama, they also try to tell us what to do with our emotional reactions in the end. Each novel concludes with a call to action that asks us to publicly mourn these lives and stand in solidarity for justice.

Since the femicide epidemic is in many ways tied to the illicit crimes of the ongoing drug war, in the next chapter, we will explore the criminal violence related to drug trafficking, and the legal and illegal economies that continue to provide chaotic conditions for cruelty and impunity to thrive. We will turn our direct attention away from the activists and investigators in order to examine female participation within the drug trade, as well as look at the roles of women directly affected by its influence and outcomes. We will soon discover how, despite the fact that their aims are distinct from the women tirelessly dedicated to the femicide cause, the female criminals and other actors in *narconovelas* exhibit some of the same creative and independent agencies. They differ, however, as they fully embody the barbarity of the destructive side of the ancient goddess *Coatlicue*. 
Chapter 3: The Effects of Criminal Violence through the Drug War

3.1 Introduction.

As a result of the surge in violence caused by the Mexican Drug War declared by President Felipe Calderón by the end of 2006, the representation of the Mexican drug trafficker and otherwise violent perpetrator has experienced a fresh articulation in audiovisual and textual forms alike on both sides of the border and beyond. The drug cartels’ turf wars, the Calderón administration’s anti-drug trafficking offensive, and official corruption have contributed to a rich thematic that writers and producers from an array of artistic mediums draw from to add captivating drama and criminal intrigue to their works. This advanced criminal network closely linked to the unlawful trafficking of illegal substances and more is commanding greater attention in a number of academic disciplines. Thus, after exploring this increased interest in all things narco, I will take a closer look at how women’s roles are portrayed within drug-related fiction.

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70 González-Rodríguez reminds us that the drug war is more than just Mexico’s problem since “[b]etween 2002 and 2006, the drug trafficking problem became shared national emergencies. Hence, Mexico’s big war on trafficking in 2006 was based on US national security policy” (66).
In their Winter 2011 issue of Emisférica, New York University’s Hemispheric Institute examines what they call, in a Deleuzian fashion, the “narco-machine.” Coined by Rossana Reguillo, the term refers to “…all of the processes by which the boundaries between the licit/illicit and legitimate/illegitimate are established and sustained,” and it “encompasses the relations between the state, traffic in illicit substances, and the border (geographical, ideological, social) created and disturbed by their deadly embrace” (Godoy-Anativa and Lane, Editorial Remarks). For Reguillo, the narco-machine is a “ubiquitous, elusive, and phantasmagoric” system occupying a “de-localized” space. It is always everywhere and nowhere simultaneously exerting its pervasive influence on society (1).

Similarly, in his comprehensive account on drug-related violence in Mexico, El Narco: Inside Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency, British journalist Ioan Grillo exposes drug trafficking as a global movement and industry. After more than eleven years reporting on crime and violence in Latin America, Grillo defines El Narco as a criminal insurgency. Like Reguillo, Grillo acknowledges the omnipresence of the narco-machine:

…El Narco is the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room. But most people can’t put much of a face on that gorilla. On the streets of where El Narco reigns, being in the drug underworld is referred to as being in ‘the movement.’ That word gives a sense of the broad meaning of organized crime on the ground; it is a whole way of life for a segment of society. Gangsters have even begotten their own genre of music, narcocorridos, lead their own fashion style, buchones, and nurture their own religious sects. These songs, styles, and sermons all build up an image of the drug lords as iconic heroes…[and]…rebels who have the guts to beat back the army and the DEA. El Narco has entrenched itself in these communities for over a century. By following its development as a movement—rather than just sketching the police stories of the drug

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71 In A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define the war machine as a concept “exterior to the State apparatus,” and “outside its sovereignty and prior to its law” (351-352). The notion of the narco-machine as a ubiquitous and phantasmagoric system recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas that “[t]he problem is that the exteriority of the war machine in relation to the State apparatus is everywhere apparent but remains difficult to conceptualize” (354).

72 In Sinaloa, according to W.Radio.com.mx, buchones derives from the incorrect pronunciation of Buchanan Whiskey by wealthy young drug traffickers who visit bars and clubs in the city.
As Grillo points out, this criminal way of life is shaping an alternative to mainstream culture complete with its own products, symbols, and customs. Namely, the permeating narco-machine, or El Narco, has generated narcocorridos, narcomoda, narcoreligión, narcoarquitectura, narcocine, narcopolítica and narconovelas, among a host of other categories bearing the same prefix. In this chapter, I will examine the narconovela, which I define as any fictional novel somehow related to the criminal drug trafficking movement. Although the term has been considered polemic because it represents an attempt to classify a literary subgenre of drug fiction, it beneficially serves to unify and promote the academic study of those fictional texts that seek to explore the narco-machine in all of its intricate profundity, as well as expose its ghastly effects on society that include “[b]lood, death, threats, exploitation, weapons, [and] unlimited profits” (Rodríguez González 50).

Diana Palaversich traces the emergence and prevalence of the narconovela through her research on northern Mexican narratives. In her article, “The Politics of Drug Trafficking in Mexican and Mexico-Related Narconovelas,” she recognizes the need to further explore this potential subgenre, especially since academic studies of the narcocorrido are “practically exhausted” (87). She explains that:

...the emergence of the narconovela in Mexican letters has yet to receive similar attention. While both the Mexican literary establishment and non-native Mexicanists have ignored this newcomer on the literary scene, the Mexican media noted the appearance of this new genre in the early 1990s and baptized it the narconovela or narcoliteratura. (87)

Assuming that narcoliteratura constitutes its own subgenre, I intend to unpack the most noteworthy elements from drug fiction in order to assess its function as an additional space,
complementing journalism\(^{73}\) and other mediums, for articulating, recreating, questioning, critiquing, denouncing, re-imagining, and feeling the effects of this latest wave of violence at the border and elsewhere. Like Palaversich, I also hypothesize that in many cases *narconovelas* serve as anti-idealizations of crime since “[t]he variety of positions taken refutes the tendency of the Mexican mainstream media to define all narconarratives as sympathetic to drug trafficking” (85). Despite the fact that some *narconovelas* accentuate and aggrandize the riches and glamour inside the narco-machine for obvious fictional enhancement, they concurrently juxtapose this with less than alluring representations of devastation, solitude, and tragic death.

Essayist and literary critic, Rafael Lemus, also tackled the subject of *narconovelas* in 2005 through his opinion piece, “Balas de Salva: Notas sobre el narco y la narrativa mexicana,” for *Letras libres*. He discusses the problematic nature of Mexican writers who treat reality and fiction as if they were the same. Describing many of them as “los hijos bastardos de Rulfo,” Lemus criticizes authors like Élmer Mendoza\(^{74}\) who he contends adhere to realism and *costumbrismo* so strictly that they forget to employ imagination and its transformative and fantastical properties. The didactic nature of “*novelas sobre el narco,*” as Lemus calls them, combined with their prescriptive formula of reproducing colloquial language, local customs, plastic violence, politics, and drug trafficking, produces a realistic literature designed so that the reader sees a reflection of himself through the text. Instead of merely imitating reality, Lemus maintains that writers should seek to reinvent it. He argues that literature abandons its natural

\(^{73}\) We recall from my previous chapter that where realistic journalism fails in capturing, describing, and questioning the violence (generally by no fault of the journalists), fiction becomes a safe haven for exploring those same aspects. We remember that Ignacio Corona defines this as “the politics of no-information,” where the media neutralizes and reproduces violence and death at the border in a voyeuristic manner, and thus generates a knowledge void (117).

\(^{74}\) Mendoza is considered the father of the *narconovela* because of his extensive work with drug trafficking and criminal themes in *Un asesino solitario* (1999), *El amante de Janis Joplin* (2003), and additional works. He inspired Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s *La reina del sur* (2002) and is mentioned various times in the narrative as a character.
imprecision and loses its essence when it divides into subgenres like “literatura de ciencia ficción, de detectives, de vampiros,” etc (1). When literature begins to fit within the confines of an in vogue or sellable mold—that is, when the narconovela is written for the sole purpose of becoming a narconovela—it seems to lose its best innovative and rebellious qualities. For Lemus, in the case of most northern Mexican writers, “[s]e dice retratar al narco y se hace otra cosa: se lo recrea en tonos pastel” (1). Thus, Lemus rejects narconovelas that take el narco and attempt to tame and domesticate it by folding it neatly and comfortably within the plot. As his title suggests, the act of fictionalizing el narco is shooting blanks by watering down the violence and trying to restrain the uncontrollable.

Lemus is overcritical of both narcoliteratura and northern Mexican narratives as a whole (to him they are one in the same). However, his proposal of an anti-novela, or in this case an anti-narconovela, is extremely promising with regard to achieving a full appreciation of drug fiction and its efforts to articulate el narco, which for Lemus is suitably defined as “el puto caos.” Thusly, similar to our definition of coatlicuensidad, the true narconovela would present competing narratives and truths, disturb instead of console, respect complexity by not simplifying, and extend the darkness rather than illuminate it. In the following passage, he imagines this anti-novela:

Llevar el realismo hasta el extremo: no copiar una realidad, volverse ella. Sólo se capturará al narcotráfico si se remeda formalmente su violencia. Una prosa brutal, destazada, incoherente. Una estructura delirante, tan tajada como la existencia. Una narrativa homicida, con vocación de suicidio. El narco —ruído, absurdo, nada— no es novelable; para recrearlo, se necesitan antinovelas…[El narco es]…un elemento anárquico, desequilibrante, destructor…Sus lecciones son las del nihilismo: el dominio de la violencia, la futilidad de la vida, la victoria de la muerte. Ésas y esta otra: la incoherencia. No hay justicia ni armonía en su imperio. Se muere porque sí, se mata por

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75 In the introduction to their volume on violence in the Hispanic world, Ulises Juan Zevallos-Aguilar and José Antonio Giménez Micó allude to the same idea of the incomprehensibility of violence by emphasizing “la conflictiva y potencialmente infinita pluralidad de imaginarios de la violencia” (7).
lo mismo. Las causas y las consecuencias no están trenzadas. Hay un balazo y después otro. Sólo eso: actos, acción sin argumento. Todo, incluso el poder, sobre todo el poder, es efímero: nada se consolida, nada permanece. Impera la irracionalidad, el vacío. (1)

Paul L. Goldberg also references Lemus’ aforementioned comments as he proves that there is more beyond the surface of *narconovelas* in his article, “Narcos, Globalistas, and the Aesthetics of Deterritorialization in Luis Felipe G. Lomeli’s *Todos Santos De California*.” He affirms that these novels have often been erroneously reduced to a small geographical area:

Explicit in the analysis of narcoliterature is its narrow association with only a handful of northern Mexican states despite the fact that drug trafficking occurs as part of a complex system of supply and demand that involves multiple countries on two continents. This regional association has been reinforced in large part by the increased presence of narco-related themes in popular music, especially within the corrido genre. (50)

In this sense, we cannot render all *narconovelas* as simple depictions of the realities of drug trafficking as Lemus suggests. Instead we must further explore how they articulate this phenomenon in a fictional context.

Additionally, Goldberg contrasts Lemus’ views against *narconovelas* with Monterrey-bred author Eduardo Antonio Parra’s rebuttal76 and defense of *literatura norteña* as writing consisting of an assortment of diverse voices and styles not limited to narco-related themes (51). Taking both of these views into account, Goldberg presents a rather simple, yet poignant observation:

One could accept both Lemus’ and Parra’s claims together by simply concluding that narcoliteratura features a rich diversity of narrative components that merely rise to the level of *costumbrismo* as defined by Lemus. In taking up this debate, I would argue that what is missing from both analyses is a close reading of any of the texts in question. (51)

My own close reading of four works of *narcoliteratura* will both support Lemus’ ideas concerning pastel tones and *anti-novelas*, as well as contest his dismissal of the subgenre as a

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76 See Parra’s article, “Norte, narcotráfico y literatura,” also in *Letras libres* from October 2005.
mere reflection of reality. Before we write narconovelas off as fleeting depictions of current events, we ought to explore them more profoundly. Like Goldberg, I am advocating for a closer look at these fictional texts and the ideas and concerns that they yield. Specifically, I will analyze how Mexican female protagonists—from queenpins and criminals to journalists and victims—perceive, experience, and enact violence within the narconovelas. While fiction may lack the capacity to solve practical problems on the ground, it certainly serves as a cathartic and interrogative force especially in environments where journalists are forced to self-censor for their own protection against competing drug cartels and other violent forces. Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, Tijuana’s consummate border narrator, and author of his own recent and compelling narconovela, which I will also explore in this chapter, has expressed that writing novels is his protection from the world of el narco.

While the more highbrow and critically acclaimed novel La reina del sur by Arturo Pérez-Reverte, which traces the twelve year trajectory of Teresa Mendoza from money changer on the streets of Culiacán to queenpin on the Andalucian coast of Spain, presents an early and thorough introduction to the transnational narconovela, its only brief allusions to lurid violence denote a diluted version of today’s narco climate. With its rather seamless series of analepses and prolepses that narrate Teresa Mendoza’s life, Pérez-Reverte’s novel does not resemble Lemus’ anti-novela and is decidedly more “pastel.” In fact, literary scholar Antonio Gómez López-Quiñones criticizes the neatened version of European violence in the novel by explaining that:

Mientras que en Europa la violencia está, en gran medida, circunscrita, severamente reglamentada y alejada de gran parte del cuerpo social, en México circula como una

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77 At the Feria del Libro de Guadalajara (FIL) in 2010, prominent northern Mexican authors Élmer Mendoza and Luis Humberto Crosthwaite discussed their narco-related fiction and the recent surge in interest in “la novela del narcotráfico” with Prensa Libre.
moneda de libre cambio, de la que nadie se extraña y a la que nadie, en principio, renuncia. En México la violencia es entendida, de acuerdo con las aclaraciones del narrador, como norma y como práctica social aceptada. (46-47)

That said, whereas in my estimation the novel lacks a significant amount of overt scenes of violence and bloodshed, its epic adventure style and global representation of the connections between vast criminal networks is invaluable to the study of narconovelas. 

In sum, the present chapter intends to explore the distinct shades of narconovelas from the pastel hues of Spanish author Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s, La reina del sur, to the sanguine tones of Orfa Alarcón’s near anti-novela, Perra brava, and others in between. My objectives are to show how traces of the drug war manifest themselves in the fictional texts, and to uncover how female characters both enact and experience violence within this narcosphere. As we have seen in the previous chapters, women are both protagonists and victims within violent and dominant structures of power. Since an increasing number of women are becoming leaders in the drug trade, female participation in this realm is drawing more attention to their compelling subjectivities. Like the narconovela as a subgenre, female protagonism in drug fiction warrants further examination. Here, we will explore the fictional lives of Mexican female protagonists and their complex interventions within the narconovela.

Arturo Santamaría Gómez, political scientist from the Autonomous University of the State of Sinaloa, has written extensively about how women are taking over after the murders of

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78 Although published ten years ago in 2002, La reina del sur’s protagonist, Teresa Mendoza, is still captivating audiences in different countries. In 2011 television channel Antena 3 in Spain and the United States’ Telemundo network, simultaneously broadcasted the telenovela adaptation of the novel. Telemundo’s 63 episodes constituted the most expensive show ever produced by the network, with the finale becoming Telemundo’s highest rated broadcast ever.

79 A member of the Real Academia Española since 2003, Pérez-Reverte is considered the best-selling author in Spain and the best-selling Spanish author in the world (IMDb.com). With more than 800,000 copies sold in Spain and Mexico since its publication in 2002 (El Siglo de Torreón), La reina del sur is a testament to the sellability of themes related to the drug world and the fascination with the women involved.
their drug trafficking fathers, brothers, and other male loved ones in his books *El culto a las reinas de Sinaloa y el poder de la belleza* (1997) and *Las jefas del narco* (2012). The latter is a collection of interviews with women currently or formerly in power within the Mexican drug cartels. In his article on the website Insight, “As Men Fall in Mexico’s ‘Drug War,’ Women Step Up,” Geoffrey Ramsey points out that in 2010, INMUJERES, Mexico’s National Women’s Institute, reported that women’s convictions related to the drug trade has risen 400 percent since 2007. Ramsey says that “[w]omen are increasingly working as plaza chiefs, hit squad bosses and kidnapping ring leaders, and some have even attracted the attention of anti-drug officials in the United States because of their work” (1). Ramsey also believes that although female involvement in the drug-trade is nothing new, Professor Santamaría’s findings are indeed innovative because he attributes the growing female leadership positions in the cartels to Mexico’s security policy that targets men. This illustrates how gender and violence are inextricably linked. Historian Joan Landes has long discussed how the gendering of the public sphere, a space predominantly shaped by the exclusion of women, operates as a mechanism of violence.

In an interview with Pablo Pérez of Agence France-Presse, Santamaría explains that since the majority of the drug traffickers and violent perpetrators killed are men, this provokes obligatory rank changes, which eventually trickle down to the women involved in the cartels. Santamaría also believes that the advent of female leaders in the drug trade could make cartels even more elusive to the authorities. He believes that these women’s newfound roles will strengthen the narco-machine and make it more difficult to combat since it seems that women “...lo está haciendo con más inteligencia...” than their male counterparts (1). Ramsey somewhat

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80 Landes examines the public sphere from a feminist perspective in *Women and the Public Sphere in The Age of the French Revolution* (1988).
disagrees, reminding us that women within these criminal networks have to face the same
issues and challenges as male leaders, including large-scale distribution and turf wars. He affirms
that:

...while the rise of women in Mexico’s criminal underworld is sociologically significant..., [attempts]...to portray Mexico’s drug trade as anything but a ‘man’s game’ are inaccurate. The vast majority of cartel members, foot soldiers and leaders alike, remain male. Even the tiny minority at the top of these organizations, like the so-called ‘Queen of the Pacific,’ Sandra Ávila Beltran, and the Tijuana Cartel’s Enedina Arellano Félix, owe much of their influence to romantic relationships with powerful men and family ties. The former was the love interest of two dominant figures in the Sinaloa Cartel, and the latter became more involved in the drug trade after her brothers were all arrested or slain. (1)

While there is little doubt that the so-called narco queens are mythologized, aggrandized, and
dramatized because of the news, movies, and television, we cannot completely disregard the
increasing number of females linked to the criminal movement that is el narco, no matter how
small their participation may be perceived by those on the outside. Similarly, while they defy
certain patriarchal norms by participating within this historically masculine environment, they
still have much ground to cover in terms of not perpetuating other traditional ideas of their
gender stratified subjectivities.

Anthropologist Howard Campbell has studied how drug trafficking affects women’s
position in society, as well as their relationships to men. Through fifty accounts of women in
some way involved with the Juárez Cartel who were smuggling drugs at the U.S.-Mexico border,
Campbell seeks to dispel stereotypes and describe the complexity of these women’s lives. He
found that while drug smuggling leads to female victimization especially in low and mid-level
positions in the drug trade, high-end positions have the potential to promote female
empowerment (233-234). One of Campbell’s high-level informants, “Zulema,” aptly summarizes
this empowerment as liberation from men and the entire social patriarchal order when she
simply states: “Here or in China or Rome, I do whatever I want...I was in love with money and I am still in love with money, it is my friend, spouse and lover” (245). While the case of the powerful queenpin may be unique, it is essential to understand how her involvement within the narco-machine can lead to an independence infrequently possible in the “real world.” Campbell further explains that:

...[Zulema] defiantly forged her own career as a woman, mother and, at times, significant other to men. As a tough-minded ‘macha,’ Zulema violated traditional gender roles for Mexican women, but her gender identity neither simply mimics male narcotraficante models nor fits neat images of politically-conscious feminist heroines. Rather, following Butler’s (1990) innovative analysis that destabilized gender identities, Zulema blended aspects of femininity and masculinity in her life and career as a smuggler. (248)

Whether we agree that women’s roles in the criminal underworld in Mexico and other parts of the globe are statistically insignificant or represent a major shift and more intelligent, cunning, and calculating violent force, it becomes impossible to completely ignore this female presence.

Returning to Melissa W. Wright’s notion of the Mexican government’s public woman discourse that shaped the politics surrounding the femicides discussed in the previous chapter, we see that she extends this idea to show how it also applies to drug-related murders. Utilizing Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics, the subjugation of life to the power of death, Wright examines “…how the wars over the political meaning of death in relation both to femicide and to the events called drug violence unfold through a gendering of space, violence, and of subjectivity” (709). Wright convincingly shows how any comprehensive study of narco-violence cannot ignore the gendering of spaces and subjects. She asserts that:

[the government’s discourse of drug violence rests on the blame-the-victim strategy that, like the discourse of public women, relies on the gendering of the public sphere to tell the following tale: Drug violence is an outcome of the disputes internal to the drug trade that emerge when competition over markets, resources, alliances, and political protection develops. The violence, therefore, is perpetrated by businessmen involved in
an illegal business. Even though these businessmen are criminals, they demonstrate the masculine traits of competition, rationality, and violence. (719)

Here we see the dichotomy of rational men doing what is necessary for their businesses and irrational women who left the normal order of the home to inhabit the public sphere. Once again, the government, military, male criminals, etc. experience impunity, while public women even receive the blame for the crimes and violence perpetrated against them. Thus, similar to the discourse that private women need not worry about their safety, the government reassures the innocent people through “...the purported rationality of narco businessmen,” and communicate the message that the drug traffickers “...may be criminals, but they are still good patriarchs” (721). Here we see a bit of Coatlicue in the drug traffickers in the sense that they are nurturing fathers of their businesses and families, but also necropoliticians through the ways that they appropriate the right to kill others. This right is justified through the perceived sovereignty of their familial and economic units in a microcosmic relationship to the larger Mexican State. Wright also points out that since more innocent people continue to be killed in Mexico, the government has had to adjust this discourse a bit. The current trend is to explain that more violence on the streets is proof that the government military offensive is actually working effectively.

Wright encourages feminist scholars to expose these discourses of public women and rational male actors:

Despite the many similarities linking the blame-the-victim discourses about public women and drug gangs, current protestors face an uphill struggle to subvert governmental efforts to represent the dead bodies as evidence of state success in disrupting the drug business. Antifemicide activists have made many strides in weakening the discourse of public women as they successfully organized a transnational social justice movement that led to legal reforms within Mexico and international pressure on its government, but they have a long fight ahead if they are to succeed in dismantling the story of drug violence as perpetrated by criminals against one another. Feminist scholars can help in this endeavor by exposing how discourses of a rational
masculinity contribute to violence, to the silencing of citizens, and to state-sanctioned impunity. Just as feminist scholars provided the term femicide, which has proven so valuable to activists in northern Mexico, feminists could help subvert the logic that depicts drug violence as a productive development. (726)

The narconovelas in my study provide many textual examples of the symbiotic relationship between this public woman discourse and male criminal rationality. While exploring the narconovela as a subgenre and focusing on gender violence in the narcosphere, we will see how fiction can play a part in exposing discourses that complicitly exacerbate the violence.

3.2 Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s *La reina del sur*: A Pastel Adventure Story.

Since its publication in 2002, Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s novel, *La reina del sur*, has received worldwide critical acclaim. To date his work is still capturing captivated audiences, and is even more relevant given the escalation in violence in Mexico and other areas connected to the criminal drug trade. The widespread success of both the novel and telenovela illustrate how a growing public continues to be intrigued by the struggles and triumphs of the powerful, yet violent, cold, and calculating protagonist, Teresa Mendoza, “la Mexicana.”

Perhaps what most attracts us to Pérez-Reverte’s novel is the prospect of reading an adventure story about a poor Mexican girl from Culiácan, Sinaloa who metamorphoses into a rich, powerful, sexy, dynamic, and hardened cartel leader in southern Spain. While some argue that this marriage of two worlds enriches the text, others like Antonio Gómez López-Quiñones caution us to be aware of the pervading Mexican stereotypes. In his article, “La reinención de ‘México’ en *La reina del sur* de Arturo Pérez Reverte: violencia y agravismo en la otra orilla,” he argues that the novel casts Mexico in a stereotypical light as perceived by the European and Spanish imaginary. Moreover, through European writers like Valle-Inclán, Aldous Huxley and Pérez Reverte, among others, Gómez López-Quiñones states that “se puede aprender más de los apriorismos, intereses y prejucios de los propios escritores que de la realidad política, social y
cultural de México” (43). While I agree that Pérez-Reverte’s novel reads a bit forced with the sheer quantity of *mexicanismos* he tries to clumsily infiltrate the text, I think it is also important to recognize his fondness for Mexican authors, like Élmer Mendoza whom he mentions on various occasions in the novel, as well as his appreciation for the *corrido* and the important themes of the *narconovela*.

Even though her trajectory is not without a multitude of struggles and dramatic goodbyes, in many instances Teresa Mendoza is living the proverbial dream in a luxurious world of expensive homes, amenities, cars, boats, and so on. At the same time, however, the intense atmosphere of terror and solitude surrounding her clouds this lavish lifestyle and emphasizes how this type of happiness can only ever be fleeting. Thus, while on the one hand we are often mesmerized by the glamorous life of drug lords, on the other we are disgusted by violence, vulgarity, and ruthlessness. This mixing of maximum pleasure juxtaposed with intense suffering in the novel aids in depicting the complexity and chaos of the narco-machine. As a result of its neatly delivered adventure story plot, however, it fails to meet the standards of the unruly anti-novel as outlined by Lemus.

In her article, “Narcopolis Noir: Traffic in *La Reina del Sur* by Arturo Pérez-Reverte,” Claudia Routon juxtaposes the metropolis of *noir* fiction with the post-metropolis of narco fiction. She uses the “elastic, fractured, and post-metropolitan” space constructed in Pérez Reverte’s novel as an example of Edward W. Soja’s concept of Exopolis. This term refers to Soja’s description of Los Angeles as a post-metropolitan cityscape that facilitates global network connections (Routon 298). Routon describes the *noir* detective as one who “…knows the city:

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81 Postmodern political geographer and urban planner, Edward Soja, defined this concept of Exopolis in his book, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000). He studies Los Angeles as an Exopolis, which refers to a city that no longer conveys the traditional qualities of cityness. He explains:
its streets, corners, centres, and peripheries,” and whose “…city structures discourse, action, and even [his own] psychology... (290). Routon offers this description to highlight the differences between the *noir* detective and his metropolis and the *narconovela* and her post-metropolis.

Further, in her discussion of *La reina del sur*, she explains that:

> Illegal traffic has an impact on economic structures, political alliances, immigration, and contraband, positing a drug-commerce metaphor as a method of subversion and space for personal reinvention. Not only is the detective-reporter-narrator simultaneously unraveling and reconstructing Teresa Mendoza’s story, he is travelling the world to do so. What he discovers is a Mexican-born woman who has forged a self that accommodates postmodern instability by constant transformation. She is both present and absent, substantial and dissolving. She is woman, immigrant, mestiza, and as other, she participates in the body-politic of the Exopolis by feeding it the narcotic it demands. (289)

> In our analysis of the text we will observe how global criminal networking generates new and innovative forms of extreme violence. Thus, just as “postmodern instability” leads Teresa Mendoza to “constant transformation,” the narco-machine is forced to reinvent itself incessantly. While both Mendoza and the writer-narrator set off on a journey through “La reina del sur’s” history, the interworkings of the drug trade are untangled to reveal an entire world of corruption and violence.

Routon also sees Teresa Mendoza as the colonized subject. She asserts that:

> The irony of an underprivileged immigrant Mexican woman finding the means through the Mediterranean Exopolis to invent herself as a queen, a nomenclature she never appropriated, invites review of her heritage as exploited, colonized subject: it is in the elastic space of the Exopolis that Teresa can use the tools of exploitation to protect herself, not only by disrupting the discourse of late capitalism, but by ensuring its self-cannibalization. (295)

“The new geography of post-metropolitan urbanism is thus seen as the product of both a decentering and a recentering, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, continuing sprawl and intensified urban nucleation, increasing homogeneity and heterogeneity, socio-spatial integration and disintegration, and more. The composite Exopolis can be metaphorically described as ‘the city turned inside out,’ as in the urbanization of the Outer City. But it also represents the ‘the city turned outside in,’ a globalization of the Inner City that brings all the world’s peripheries into the center...” (250)
Despite the fact that the global drug trade is a dark and criminal industry, it is important to recognize how Teresa uses the “elastic space of the Exopolis” to combat her own personal exploitation. While it seems that Routon may be disproportionately overvaluing the drug underworld in comparison to Soja’s Los Angeles as the example *par excellence* of the Exopolis, we do see how Teresa uses her business savvy and nautical knowledge to become the most successful drug transporter in southern Spain.

*La reina del sur* begins when Teresa Mendoza’s emergency cell phone rings. She does not need to answer because she knows what the tone means. Her boyfriend, Raimundo “El Güero” Dávila, a pilot for the Juárez Cartel, told her that if the cell phone should ever sound, that would indicate that he was dead and that she would need to run away fast. Told from a series of flash-forwards and flashbacks, the basic premise of the novel is that a Spanish reporter, who now writes literature, is tracing the story of Teresa Mendoza in order to write a book about her life. The narration, then, oscillates between the perspectives of the journalist-novelist and the omniscient narrator who gives us insight into Teresa’s thoughts and actions. Throughout the text, the writer, who resembles Pérez-Reverte who also happens to be a war correspondent turned literato, meets with Teresa’s former associates and friends in order to piece together her twelve-year journey from money changer on the streets of Culiácan to queen of the narcos on the Andalucian coast.

Early on, we learn that the Spanish writer gets to speak to Mendoza herself to finish his work. Here, we flash forward to the end when she has returned to Culiácan after those twelve years on the run. While both are inside her house in Culiácan discussing the elements of Mendoza’s life unknown to the former reporter, police and federal agents have the place surrounded. While in the beginning of the novel it seems that these agents are poised to
capture “La reina del sur,” in the end we discover that they are Teresa’s protection from striking an immunity deal with the U.S. and Mexican governments upon leaving Spain to testify against her former Sinaloan ally, don Epifanio Vargas. The fact that Teresa is able to return to Culiácan and then disappear would be highly unlikely in a real scenario. Regardless of an immunity pact, someone linked to the drug trade would eliminate her. Thus, Pérez-Reverte’s text loses some of its strength and verisimilitude when in the end someone like Teresa Mendoza can disappear into the night relatively unscathed.

Through the rather seamless temporal switches in the narrative, we learn that Teresa Mendoza trades El Güero’s book of contacts and secret information to his godfather, Epifanio Vargas, in order to save her own life. Vargas, who is a high-ranking member of the cartel, leads her to his contacts in Spain. This eventually helps her land a job in Melilla, Andalucia on the coast near northern Africa, with Dris Larbi, owner of club Yamila and underground criminal in his own right. After escaping the world of a narco’s girlfriend in Culiácan, Teresa returns to that same lifestyle through new Galician boyfriend, Santiago Fisterra. In this way she reinforces the gender stereotype that women must depend on men for their positions in lucrative businesses such as the drug trade. Similar to Dávila who piloted airplanes, Fisterra is a talented speedboat driver. Santiago Fisterra ultimately meets the same fate as Dávila, albeit in a different way. On a trip to obtain drugs to offload from mother ships to smaller fishing boats, Santiago’s and Teresa’s boat crashes into León Rock while Spanish authorities are chasing them by air and sea. When their boat shatters into tiny little pieces, Fisterra dies instantly and Mendoza only survives because she is thrown overboard.

After Fisterra’s death, Teresa is subsequently apprehended and spends a year incarcerated, during which time she becomes close with another inmate, Patricia O’Farrell. From
a wealthy Spanish-Irish family, Lieutenant O’Farrell, as she is known in El Puerto de Santa María women’s prison, takes Teresa under her wing and seems romantically interested in “La Mexicana.” It is through this relationship that Teresa Mendoza begins trafficking with the Russian Mafia in Spain. When they are both eventually released, Patricia shows Teresa the cocaine her deceased ex-boyfriend had hidden away from the Russians he had worked under, and both women negotiate a business deal with Russian drug trafficker Oleg Yasikov. Teresa, with Patricia as her partner, would meticulously coordinate the movement of cocaine and hashish through their business front, Transer Naga. Basically, the company would move the narcotics from the Moroccan coast to its intended destination on some Spanish beach or boat.

Although Teresa’s past is never far behind her as a result of her nostalgia for Sinaloa and the girl she once was, her first real threat from home comes when Epifanio Vargas sends two gangsters, Potemkin Gálvez and Gato Fierros to track her down and kill her. In the beginning of the novel, Teresa narrowly escapes them the first time when she flees Culiácan. Gato Fierros had tried to rape and kill her while Potemkin, or Pote, insisted that they murder her honorably since, after all, she was El Güero’s morra. This actually came in quite handy for Pote, since when Oleg Yasikov eventually captures the two while they are pursuing Teresa in Spain, she spares him his life and makes him her bodyguard. Gato Fierros, on the other hand, is forever buried in the cement of a newly constructed home’s basement.

As the Transer Naga transport business grows and Teresa becomes more distant from her friend, Patricia O’Farrel falls deeper into her own addictions to cocaine and alcohol. Although Teresa refuses to think, let alone talk, about it, the reader realizes that Pati, as she is often called, is clearly in love with Teresa. Three days after a distraught and disheveled Pati is almost killed in a car accident, and confronts Teresa on how she has turned into a distant hija de
*puta*, the former Lieutenant O’Farrell commits suicide. Soon after, we learn that Teresa Mendoza is pregnant with Teo Aljarafe’s baby. While, as we will soon see, this plot development demonstrates Teresa’s indifference to life and death, it also seems to portray Teresa as *la chingada*. Just as the women of the *maquiladora* are dismissed when they invoke the goddess power of the womb within the global economy, Teresa’s role as the ruthless businesswoman is put into question through this threat of maternity. A former boyfriend of Pati’s, this is the man who had been acting as Teresa’s lawyer, financial expert, and occasional lover. This is where we see Spanish authorities gaining on Teresa, and it becomes plausible that she may need to flee her adopted country in the near future.

Thus, when it turns out that Teo Aljarafe has been informing the Spanish authorities of her drug transport operations with Transer Naga, Teresa decides to have Aljarafe killed, as well as accept the immunity offered to her by the Mexican government and the Drug Enforcement Agency of the United States. Through a conversation with Guillermo “Willy” Rangel, a DEA agent who has travelled to Spain to offer the deal to Teresa, we find out that Raimundo “El Güero” Dávila was a former narco working for the DEA by infiltrating the Juárez Cartel, which was made up of some of his former associates. More importantly, we learn that Teresa Mendoza has known this all along, and that it was the only reason that Epifanio Vargas let her escape to Spain in the first place. Even though swearing that she did not read “El Güero’s” book of contacts was her ticket to freedom, it was also a boldface lie. It was Epifanio Vargas who had ordered his hitman, “Batman” Güemes, to kill Dávila without informing his henchman of the real reason why. Güemes thought that he had killed Dávila because he was trying to sell drugs for himself on the side. In all actuality, however, Vargas had discovered Dávila’s relation to the DEA through a corrupted U.S. customs agent who had sold the information to the cartel for 80,000 dollars.
U.S. agent Willy Rangel, in conjunction with the Spanish, Mexican, and United States governments, offers Teresa immunity in exchange for her cooperation in testifying against Epifanio Vargas in Sinaloa. Since she was an eyewitness to the cartel’s dealings at that time when “El Güero” was killed, they see her as an asset to bringing down Vargas’ already blossoming yet decidedly corrupt political career. The Spanish government agrees to suspend all current investigations against her, while Mexico and the U.S. offer her a ticket to anywhere she wants to go after her appearance at trial. Teresa Mendoza decides to return to Culiácan where she must be heavily protected at all times—which leads us to the scene when the novel began.

After surviving an attack against her, presumably organized by Epifanio Vargas’ allies, where Pote is killed, Teresa testifies against the crooked politician and former cartel leader, which eventually lands him in the maximum security federal prison Almoloya in Mexico state. The writer-narrator describes what became of some of his book’s most prominent characters, and tells us that he has never learned what happened to Teresa Mendoza. He has no idea where she went, if she had that baby, or if she may have changed her identity. And after signing off from La Navata, Spain, in May of 2002, the same year the actual novel itself was published, the writer thanks his contributors and informants, adding to the metafictional quality of the text where we read a novel about a writer penning Teresa Mendoza’s biography. Although, as we have observed thus far, the plot of La reina del sur is complex and extremely well crafted, it falls flat in reimagining the menacing drug world. With all of its smooth edges and neatly tied loose ends, Pérez-Reverte’s novel exudes plastic violence and portraits of el narco in pastel. Nevertheless, it still contributes to a creative look into the intricate world of a powerful drug queenpin and her international connections.
Throughout the novel there are countless references to the existence of multiple Teresa Mendozas, which express her embodiment of the multifaceted and dynamic Nahua goddess Coatlicue. In many cases this refers to different aspects of the drug queen’s personality and behavior. In others, the mythical “Reina del sur” is juxtaposed to the “real” Teresa Mendoza.

Before analyzing our protagonist’s various subjectivities, it is useful to call to mind what a “real-life reina” has said about the same topic. In an interview with Julio Scherer García, even Sandra Ávila Beltrán aka “La Reina del Pacífico” recognizes how the Mexican government and other sources use her mythical identity to perpetuate their own political discourse. She explains that she grew up inside the narco-machine and does not deny that she belongs to that world. However, she rejects the now infamous nickname, “La Reina del Pacífico,” since the media and the government imposed it upon her. She explains: ‘Fui capturada y los medios me exhibieron con todo su poder. Narcotraficante, peligrosa, es lo menos que han dicho de mí en su gritería. A su vez, el gobierno me ha utilizado para hacerse propaganda, necesitado como está de mostrar cartas de triunfo ante un pueblo que le retira su confianza’ (García Scherer 41).

Whether what Sandra Ávila Beltrán says is true or not is debatable. However, what is most relevant is her recognition of how public discourse can be manipulated by the State. As we see in the fictional case of “La Reina del Sur,” Teresa Mendoza is also well aware that outside observers were creating an entirely different image of her than what she perceived. When she was captured, Ávila Beltrán claims that Mexican President Felipe Calderón began to denigrate her, and she says that “[l]legó a decir que soy una de las delincuentes más peligrosas de América Latina y en su ignorancia me llamó la Reina del Pacífico o del Sur, así literalmente, una u otra. Cualquiera sabe que la Reina del Sur es un personaje de ficción del escritor Pérez-Reverte y yo de ficción nada tengo, que de carne y hueso soy...” (García Scherer 45). Once again, validity
aside, this provides another illustration on how literary discourse can be powerful in
mythologizing and manipulating the dissemination of information. It is amazing, too, how fiction
and reality mixed together in this alleged exchange. Given that Pérez-Reverte’s novel is so
detailed with its descriptions of transactions, business dealings, transportation, and Teresa’s
movements, it is no wonder that it could be mistaken for a true biography about an existing
woman. In fact, these elements combined with the various metafictional references contribute
to the overall perceived veracity of the text.

Like Sandra Ávila Beltrán, and perhaps even Coatlicue, our Teresa Mendoza comments
on the way the public has turned her identity into an exaggerated myth. Toward the end of the
novel, after the Russian Mafia leader, Oleg Yasikov, tells Teresa that he admires her and respects
her for never hesitating when it comes to life and freedom, she tells him that Teresa Mendoza is
an image that others have created. She explains:

No tienes la menor idea. Yo soy la otra morra que tú no conoces. La que me mira, o ésa
a la que miro; ya no estoy segura ni de mí. La única certeza es que soy cobarde, sin nada
de lo que hay que tener. Fijate: tanto miedo tengo, tan débil me siento, tan indecisa,
que gasto mis energías y mi voluntad, las quemo todas hasta el último gramo, en
ocultarlo. No puedes imaginar el esfuerzo. Porque yo nunca elegí, y la letra me la
escribieron todo el tiempo otros. Tú. Pati. Ellos. Figúrate lo pendeja. No me gusta la vida
en general, ni la mía en particular. Ni siquiera me gusta la vida parásita, minúscula, que
ahora llevo dentro. Estoy enferma de algo que hace tiempo renuncié a comprender, y ni
siquiera soy honrada, porque me lo callo. Son doce años que los que llevo así. Todo el
tiempo disimulo y callo. (481-482)

While others paint her as a brave, powerful, and fearless drug lordess, Teresa exhausts herself
by trying to hide her fears, weaknesses, and indecision. She goes as far as to brand herself a
coward who does not even like living, let alone carrying out the narco life that she has created
around her.

The writer of Teresa’s story also recognizes the role that he plays in creating her image.

He says:
Yo sabía que la mujer que estaba delante de mí ya nunca sería la verdadera Teresa Mendoza, sino otra que la suplantaba, en parte creada por mí: aquella cuya historia había reconstruido tras rescatarla pieza a pieza, incompleta y contradictoria, de entre quienes la conocieron, odian o quisieron. (16)

The notion that Teresa’s story will always be inherently incomplete and contradictory plays into her solitude and secrecy, which she is obliged to keep in order to protect her life and the lives of her associates in the drug trade.

In another passage, “La Mexicana” considers the historical, geographical, and psychological distance between what she names the three Teresa’s:

...[A] veces se quedaba mirando la foto donde habían estado ella y el Güero, mientras daba al mismo tiempo ojeadas al espejo, interrogándose sobre la distancia cada vez mayor entre aquellas tres mujeres: la joven con ojos asombrados del papel fotográfico, la Teresa que ahora vivía a este lado de la vida y del paso del tiempo, la desconocida que las observaba a las dos desde su.—cada vez más inexacto—reflejo. (135)

The woman on the other side of the Atlantic was now a far cry from the doe-eyed young girl forced to flee from Culiácan. Teresa refers to her reflection as an unknown stranger looking at them both in order to convey the idea that she barely recognizes the woman she has now become.

Furthermore, in the novel much of the violence in Culiácan is treated as if it were inherent to the city’s culture:

En aquella ciudad, donde a menudo lo ilegal es convención social y forma de vida—es herencia de familia, dice un corrido famoso, trabajar contra la ley—, Teresa Mendoza fue durante algún tiempo una de esas jóvenes, hasta que cierta ranchera Bronco negra se detuvo a su lado, y Raimundo Dávila Parra bajó el cristal tintado de la ventanilla y se la quedó mirando desde el asiento conductor. Entonces su vida cambió para siempre. (28)

Violence is so engrained in every sociopolitical and cultural process that it becomes nearly impossible to divorce it from daily life. Where we cannot condone narco violence as perpetuated by people like Sandra Ávila Beltrán, we can acknowledge her perspective that she grew up surrounded by all aspects of that world—a world in which she learned how to survive
through the drug business of her male relatives. In Teresa’s case, she is attributing her current life in Spain to the fateful day she met “El Güero” while she was changing money, as well as acknowledging that narcoculture and violence has simply become the norm in places like Culiácan. To wit, Teresa reflects upon the fact that, in Culiácan, “…hace tiempo que el narcotráfico dejó de ser clandestino para convertirse en hecho social objetivo…” (45).

Near the start of the text, when Gato Fierros and Potemkin Gálvez try to kill Teresa before she escapes to Spain, she references the extreme violence in Sinaloa, emphasizing the commodification of human life and Mbembe’s conception of necropolitics as “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (1). Teresa’s thoughts in this passage illustrate the ways in which the drug cartels in Sinaloa appear to have taken this sovereign power and capacity away from the official Mexican State:

Había perdido la cuenta de los hombres y mujeres que aseguraron no saber nada antes de que los matara rápido o despacio, según las circunstancias, en una tierra donde morir con violencia era morir de muerte natural—veinte mil pesos un muerto común, cien mil un policía o un juez, gratis si se trataba de ayudar a un compadre. (35)

The idea that dying a violent death in Sinaloa is no longer shocking speaks volumes to the fact that people have resigned themselves to the imminent existence and sovereign control of the narco-machine and its unyielding violence. Further, the distinction between a violent and natural death is also significant here. Mbembe places state sovereignty somewhere in the middle of these two options since governments have devised civilized ways of killing, and have attempted to attribute rational objectives to the act of killing (23). The drug cartels’ increasingly torturous methods of murder that are captured daily in the news exemplify an almost barbaric

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82 Dris Larbi, owner of Yamila club in Melilla where Teresa worked at the bar, who dabbled in illegal immigration trafficking, also mentions that Teresa came from a world where being killed was just as natural a way to die as any other: “…en el mundo del que ella procedía, que te mataran era una forma de irse tan natural como otra cualquiera” (107).
sovereignty in its ruthless execution. These extremely violent paramilitary forces are part of what Mbembe terms the contemporary wars of the globalization era. In his estimation, these new wars cannot “…be understood through earlier theories of ‘contractual violence’ or typologies of ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ wars…” (30). Instead, “wars of the globalization era therefore aim to force the enemy into submission regardless of the immediate consequences, side effects, and ‘collateral damage’ of the military actions” (31).

Our writer-narrator also discusses the code of violence that operates within the narco machine. He mentions Sinaloans, author Élmer Mendoza, and municipal culture director Julio Bernal, who taught him that:

En Sinaloa todo resulta cuestión de confianza: en un mundo duro y complejo como ése, las reglas son simples y no hay lugar para equivocos. Uno es presentado a alguien por un amigo en quien ese alguien confía, y ese alguien confía en ti porque confía en quien te avala. Después, si algo se tuerce, el avalista responde con su vida, y tú con la tuya. Bang, bang. Los cementerios del noroeste mejicano están llenos de lápidas con nombres de gente de la que alguien se fió una vez. (45)

We see that even Teresa, who resided in Spain for twelve eventful years, internalized this code of rules from the tough Sinaloan world with no room for errors. Even after she has been granted immunity in exchange for her testimony against Epifanio Vargas, she still meets with him at the Jesús Malverde\(^83\) shrine in Culiacán to face the man who had wronged both her and El Güero. She feels the need to testify against him in order to settle the score. He owes her the debt of having El Güero killed, and sending Pote and Gato Fierros to kill her in Spain.

Further contributing to the notion of the inherited culture of violence in Sinaloa, Teresa also explains that everyone there knows how to use a gun. Here, too, is one instance where we

\(^83\) Jesús Malverde is considered a “narco-saint” and folklore hero in Sinaloa. Although not recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church, he is worshipped by many drug traffickers and other criminals in Mexico and the United States.
see Teresa’s anxiety in holding a firearm. In addition to El Güero’s book of contacts, Teresa finds his Colt Doble Águila in the closet:

Al Güero no le gustaban las armas y nunca cargaba encima escuadra ni revólver... pero guardaba aquélla como precaución para emergencias... Tampoco a Teresa le gustaban; pero como casi todo hombre, mujer o niño sinaloense sabía manejarlas. Y puestos a imaginar emergencias, el caso era exactamente aquél. De modo que comprobó que la Doble Águila tenía el cargador lleno, echó atrás el carro, y al soltarlo una bala del calibre 45 se introdujo en la recámara con chasquido sonoro y siniestro. Le temblaban las manos de ansiedad cuando lo metió todo en la bolsa... (32)

Throughout the course of the novel we see this anxiety dissipate as “La reina del sur” becomes more notorious and violent. By the story’s end, “La Mexicana,” is unfazed when firing her own gun amidst the continuous bursts of AK-47 fire around her as she and Pote fight off Epifanio Vargas’ henchmen who seek to kill her, the woman set to testify against him.

One example that we often see in the news when there is talk about the colossal task of defeating the narco-machine is the problem of corrupted officials, as well as those who cede their power to the narcos to protect themselves and their families. In the novel there are various references to this fact. In one instance we see that the local police are paid by narcos:

Muchos agentes locales estaban a sueldo del narco, como los de la Judicial del Estado y los federales y tantos otros, con su grapa de perico en la cartera y su copa gratis en las cantinas, que hacían trabajos de protección para los principales chacás de la mafia o ejercían el sano principio de vive, cobra tu mordida y deja vivir si no quieres dejar de vivir. (30)

Much like widespread violence seems to be just another part of life in Culiácan, fraudulent and nefarious police officers, soldiers, and other officials have become the standard rather than the exception.

Additionally, the characters often reference a mythical golden age of drug trafficking. This describes an alleged era when narcos used to kill each other and not the general public. Or, it refers to the time when drug traffickers only did what was necessary to protect their...
businesses. This plays into Wright’s notion of the criminal defined as a rational male actor. Here, the Mexican government discourse about the male criminal is designed to reduce panic among citizens. Thus, they believe that by stating that the drug cartels operate rationally according to set regulations and standards, fears of random attacks will diminish. In the text, don Epifanio Vargas is heralded as a representative of the golden years of trafficking between Colombia, Sinaloa, and the U.S. He is described as a good godfather, a man of his word, and a real professional. This is the perfect example of where the criminal is deemed a rational male actor for his character and deference in furthering his business pursuits. Here we read a description extolling his positive attributes:

Era un lindo tipo, don Epifanio. Había trabajado con Amado Carrillo en los años dorados de puentes aéreos entre Colombia, Sinaloa y la Unión Americana, y siempre fue buen padrino para el Güero, muy cabal y cumplidor, hasta que invirió en otros negocios y entró en la política, dejó de necesitar avionetas y el piloto cambió de patrones. (33)

The golden days of drug trafficking are also nostalgically described as a moment where powerful people worked together to keep the corruption going and the drugs flowing. In a reference to the narco-machine in Mexico, we read about the happier times when “…transportaban en un solo viaje de ocho a doce toneladas con la complicidad de la policía, el ministerio de Defensa y la propia presidencia del Gobierno mejicano. Eran los tiempos felices de Carlos Salinas de Gortari, con los narcos traficando a la sombra de Los Pinos…” (51).

Moreover, in the old days there was also supposedly some grand respect for women and children. It is alleged that back then the narcos used to pay with their lives and not those of their family members:

Para los hombres de la generación de don Epifanio…aquel fue el tiempo lejano de las grandes aventuras, los grandes riesgos y las grandes riquezas hechas de la noche a la mañana: una operación con suerte, una buena cosecha, un cargamento afortunado. Años de peligro y dinero jalando una vida que en la sierra no habría sido más que existencia miserable. Vida intensa y a menudo corta; porque sólo los más duros de esos
hombres lograron sobrevivir, establecer y delimitar el territorio de los grandes cárteles de la droga. Años en los que todo estaba por definirse. Cuando nadie ocupaba un lugar sin empujar a otros, y el error o el fracaso se pagaban al contado. Pero se pagaba con la mera vida. Ni menos, ni más. (63-64)

In this particular passage we observe overwhelming allusions to great adventures. It’s as if we were talking about brave knights and sword battles instead of a bunch of gun-toting narcos. When we read about the defining of territories and turfs, we get the impression that the drug traffickers are heroes conquering some new world with their relentless bravery. Pérez-Reverte is said to have partially based his novel on Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, so it comes as no surprise that *La reina del sur* also adopts the adventurous, criminal and vengeful nature of the classic text.

However, whether intentional or not on Pérez-Reverte’s part, equating narcos to some loyal code of honor or golden age simply does not apply, and certainly does not make his text any more faithful to the precarious nature of the true anti-narconovela, especially in our current era of accelerating violence and devious drug-related crimes. Mbembe reminds us that in this modern age of globalized warfare, “...the new technologies of destruction are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the maximal economy now represented by the ‘massacre.’” (34) Needless to say, epic sword and gun battles between narco opponents in the streets have given way to chaotic turf wars that depend on the unfortunate massacre of sometimes upwards of seventy people to instill fear in both the innocent and the criminal. This type of adventure story description frequently resonates in *La reina del sur* and is what makes Pérez-Reverte’s text fall short when compared to more recent novels related to similar narco themes. Perhaps this has more to do with his “civilized” European setting than anything else. Nevertheless, as we will see
in my forthcoming analysis of *Perra brava*, Orfa Alarcón’s text is bolder and braver. It pushes the limits of violence, which makes it more akin to the actual goings-on within the narco-machine.

Arturo Gómez López-Quiñones’ aforementioned comments referring to the juxtaposition of a logical and understandable violence in Europe with an explosive and unpredictable violence relates closely to Wright’s notion of the discourse surrounding the rational male criminal. While eruptive and unpredictable violence is presented as a normal way of life in Mexico, Europe endures an understandable and logical violence (45). In this geographical relationship, Spain represents the rational male criminal and Mexico is the irrational female subjecting herself to such heinous violence. As a symbol of her homeland, Teresa also represents this discourse of the public woman until she is taught, cultured, and refined by her Spanish associates. Thus, when she returns to Culiácan at the end of the novel, she too is portrayed more closely to fit the profile of a logical male drug lord. Finally, Gómez López-Quiñones develops this dichotomy further when he explains that Teresa Mendoza is:

…un personaje escindido entre un territorio exótico en donde rigen tanto unas fuerzas atávicas como una violencia irreprimible, y el territorio de la razón civilizadora. En este último territorio Teresa deja de ser un ‘diamante en bruto’ para convertirse en un ‘diamante pulido’ El agrafismo y la violencia incontrolada dan paso a un proceso de formación, que es también una reeducación estético-sentimental…La lógica de la novela es clara a este respecto: de la periferia al centro, de la violencia caótica a la violencia racionalizada, del primitivismo a la civilización, del agrafismo a la literatura, de la pobreza a la abundancia, del instinto a la cultura, y de la subalteridad al ejercicio de un determinado poder. (48)

Additionally, this notion of a golden period of drug trafficking alludes to what Mbembe has said regarding the distinction between past wars and wars of the globalization era. Once again we note that in many contexts there no longer exists a clearly defined set of warfare rules. Or, to put it another way, the only rule seems to be one of unadulterated chaos. Mbembe’s ideas combined with the conception of the narco-machine as a visibly violent yet shockingly
phantom criminal movement call to mind Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and their definition of “war machines.” Mbembe explains that according to the French philosophers:

War machines are made up of segments of armed men that split up or merger with one another depending on the tasks to be carried out and the circumstances. Polymorphous and diffuse organizations, war machines are characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis. Their relationship to space is mobile...War machines function by borrowing from regular armies while incorporating new elements well adapted to the principle of segmentation and deterritorialization...War machines (in this case militias or rebel movements) rapidly become highly organized mechanisms of predation, taxing the territories and the population they occupy and drawing on a range of transnational networks and diasporas that provide both material and financial support. (32-34)

In reading Pérez-Reverte we must remember that his novel was written before the overt drug cartel explosion in Mexico after President Felipe Calderón launched his offensive against the gang violence. While this only partly explains why he chose to portray drug traffickers like Mendoza as almost heroic figures, we can see why in many cases he chooses to simply allude to the societal violence and inner workings of the narco-machine, rather than portray the astonishing images explicitly. There is some merit to his allusions since Pérez-Reverte’s novel deals more with Žižek’s conception of objective violence. Instead of a series of traumatic gory scenes of subjective violence, Pérez-Reverte opts for a quieter description of corruption and objective violence through his characters’ dealings. This way, the symbolic violence embodied in language and its forms, and the systemic violence that fuels smooth functioning economic and political systems come into greater focus through Pérez-Reverte’s narrative.

As I have mentioned in my analysis of other fictional female protagonists in narconovelas we will witness more of the violence directly. That said, we can still observe Deleuze and Guattari’s “war machines” at work in Pérez-Reverte’s novel. First, it is easy to see that Teresa forms part of the narco criminal web and thusly emphasizes its mobile and metamorphosing nature. Second, the transnational elements of the text that bring Teresa from
the U.S.-Mexico border to the Spain-Africa frontier and back, and force her to interact (both directly and indirectly) with the Russians, Colombians, and Galicians, contribute to a greater understanding of how the narco-machine functions by way of the sum of its individual, often deterritorialized and mobile parts.

For an opportunity to discuss Teresa’s role in the deterritorialized narco-machine, our writer speaks with Nino Juárez, former head of the group against organized crime in the Costa del Sol, DOCS (Delincuencia Organizada de la Costa del Sol). He paints a transnational picture of Teresa Mendoza’s operation when he brings up the Colombian, Pablo Escobar and cocaine connection. We observe that Pati’s boyfriend did indeed have half a ton of cocaine that he got from the Russian Mafia:

Nieve de muy buena calidad, con muy poco corte. Trajinada por la mafia rusa, que por esa época empezaba a instalarse en la Costa del Sol y a mantener sus primeros contactos con los narcos de Sudamérica. Aquélla había sido la primera operación de importancia, y su fracaso bloqueó la conexión colombiana con Rusia durante algún tiempo...Todos daban por perdida la media tonelada, y los sudacas se carcajeaban de los ruskis por haberse cargado éstos al novio de la O’Farrell y a los dos socios sin hacerlos hablar primero...No montó más negocios con aficionados, cuentan que dijo Pablo Escobar al enterarse de los detalles. Y resulta que, de pronto, la Mejicana y la otra se sacaron los quinientos kilos de la manga. (268)

Although a seemingly minor detail, this cocaine hidden by O’Farrell’s boyfriend is what launches Teresa into her career as a serious drug transporter. If it hadn’t been for this supply and Pati’s ideas, Teresa never would have possessed the leverage to get Oleg Yasikov to take the women on as business associates. Thus, Teresa Mendoza would have never become the infamous Queen of the South without this influence.

Returning to this supposed golden age of the narcos, it is also implied that during this time a special type of masculine subjectivity was valued and regarded. For example, in Spain
former parliamentary delegate Manolo Céspedes tells the writer-narrator about the old days when the narcos constituted a different class of men:

...comprendí que, además de viejos tiempos, el antiguo delegado gubernativo añoraba a cierta clase de hombres. –El caso—concluyó—es que cuando Santiago Fisterra apareció por Melilla, el Estrecho [Gibraltar] estaba en todo lo suyo. Edad golden age, que dirían los llanitos...Cada noche era un juego del gato y el ratón entre traficantes por una parte y aduaneros, policías y guardias civiles por la otra...A veces se ganaba y a veces se perdía...Y ahí, huyendo de la sartén para caer en las brasas, es donde fue a meterse Teresa Mendoza. (121-122)

When the narrator describes Céspedes as longing for this era gone by, it truly captures the romantic notion that drug trafficking, criminals, and otherwise corrupt individuals worked together in harmony and had at least some set of moral codes. This passage also implies that this type of man with his narco code of honor no longer exists, and perhaps—even worse—there are powerful women, like Teresa Mendoza, rupturing the entire patriarchal narco system.

This part of the text seeks to exemplify the fact that Teresa Mendoza fled one male-dominated world in Mexico, just to enter another in Spain. In the same vein, many of the men with whom our writer speaks refer to Teresa as a woman “with balls,” and praise her non-female-like qualities. Once again, they are alluding to her power and dominance only in relation to her male counterparts, which tends to reproduce traditional gender roles within the narco-machine. One of the writer’s informants, Spanish reporter Óscar Lobato, talks about Teresa’s relationship with Santiago Fisterra. He asserts that she earned respect on the street because she never backed down and always went “shoulder to shoulder with her man.” He also reports that many people, including customs agents and the Guardia Civil, thought Teresa’s role in the nautical drug-trafficking operation was a joke. Nevertheless, in time people grew increasingly impressed with her skills and sailing abilities on the boat with Fisterra. In fact, a large portion of the textual descriptions of Teresa during this period in her life involve her navigating and
working on boats, as well as organizing drug shipments on multiple vessels at a time. Before his conversation with our writer ends, Óscar Lobato is also sure to add that Teresa had the same balls as any man (163). Here again we see how Teresa’s abilities are contextualized in relation to the men who perform the same jobs and duties as her in the drug trafficking world. Despite this comparison, Teresa’s own intelligence and talents support her position as a queenpin and thus contribute to her overall agency.

In the same way, Teresa is often defined, and ultimately brought down, by her romantic relationships. At one point Teresa recalls that El Güero told her that she could never be on her own:

Allá, en Culiacán, el Güero Dávila le había dicho muchas veces que no valía para vivir sola. Ni modo, negaba. No eres esa clase de morra. Lo tuyo es un hombre que lleve la rienda y que te jale. Y tú, pues nomás así, como eres: dulcita y tierna. Requetelinda. Suave. A ti se te tiene como a una reina, o no se te tiene. (89)

The idea that, in the end, Teresa achieves independence through her solitude plays out in the text from her transformation from someone whose success is always linked to another person to someone who maintains her power and riches on her own. At first, Teresa Mendoza appears to be a character that, without fail, is vulnerably affected by those around her. In turn, she is also one who only gets ahead based on to whom she is most recently connected. However, at the same time we witness the fact that she does appropriate what she learns from others to better her position in life. In that way, then, her associates and friends could be looked at more like teachers or mentors, rather than those who carry Teresa’s burdens and problems for her.

This vacillating agency and movement between rupturing and sustaining traditional gender roles is part of Teresa’s compelling allure as a fictional character and embodiment of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue. While on the one hand she has confessed to Oleg Kasikov that she is a scared farce, on the other she has acted as a fearless violent perpetrator. Perhaps she is not
weak in the slightest, and uses the staged vulnerability to get to where she needs to be—thus
fooling the writer-narrator and the readers alike—and disappearing into complete solitude and
anonymity at the end of the novel. Routon affirms Teresa’s survival skills and agency when she
explains that:

Teresa Mendoza appropriates these tools of underworld power and wrests her way to
the top. In spite of seemingly insuperable difficulties, she survives the male-dominated
regional and global crime networks that would have her destroyed. Her transformations
and rise to power ultimately equip her with the means to make the choice to disappear
and leave a world that served as a constant reminder of her losses and former
powerlessness. (292)

With regard to Teresa’s mentors and teachers, Patricia O’Farrell also becomes the
stereotypical maternal figure that truly educates her. She cultures the less refined “Mexicana”
through teaching her to read the literary classics, as well as how to comport herself when
rubbing elbows with the upper echelon of society. This image of the cultured Spaniard teaching
the uncivilized Mexican contributes to the Eurocentric feeling communicated through Pérez-
Reverte’s text. Although this does not negate the fact that Teresa indubitably learned essential
nautical information from her experiences with Santiago Fisterra:

Gracias a su compañera de celda, Mendoza descubrió la utilidad de la instrucción. Ésa
fue la parte positiva del influjo; le inspiró deseos de superarse, de cambiar. Leyó.
Estudió. Descubrió que no hace falta depender de un hombre. Tenía facilidad para las
matemáticas y el cálculo, y encontró oportunidad para desarrollarlas en los programas
de educación para reclusas, que entonces permitían redimir día por día de condena. En
sólo un año se graduó en un curso de matemáticas elementales, en otro de lengua y
ortografía, y mejoró mucho en inglés. Se convirtió en lectora voraz, y al final lo mismo la
encontrabas con una novela de Agatha Christie que con un libro de viajes o de
divulgación científica. Y fue O’Farrell quien la animó a todo eso. (214-215)

Teresa’s experiences with O’Farrell lead to her liberation as a strong, intelligent, refined, and
poised businesswoman and mark a turning point in her development. This is where she no
longer depends in such an extreme degree on the men in her life to launch her career forward.
Through another woman and a somewhat typical reference to a lesbian relationship, Teresa begins to achieve her maximum agency and power within the text.

Likewise, the theme of Teresa’s increasing solitude becomes all the more apparent as the plot advances. In this passage, Teresa reflects upon her former state of dependency on others versus her newfound isolation:

Pati era una compañera, pero no una solución. Quedaba en todo aquello, acabara como acabase, un largo trecho que Teresa tendría que recorrer sola. Nadie iba a aliviarle pasitos del camino. Y poco a poco, sin que ella misma pudiera establecer cómo, la dependencia que había sentido hasta entonces, de todo y de todos, o más bien su creencia tenaz en esa dependencia—era cómoda de llevar, y al otro lado sólo creía encontrar la nada—, iba transformándose en una certeza que era al mismo tiempo de orfandad madura y de consuelo. (262)

In order to carry on in her profession of choice as a narco queen, she realizes the need to detach from others to protect her personal assets and herself. Like the infant’s eventual detachment from the mother, Teresa distances herself from Pati who has come to represent a matriarchal line of knowledge and culture in the novel through her teachings.

As Teresa’s detachment and solitude increases, her violent nature escalates. Because she has removed herself from Pati’s care, Teresa is free to become more solitary, brutal, and figuratively masculine. In this particular instance, Teresa and Santiago hit one another. This marks the first time in the novel that Teresa enacts violence on another person, apart from situations of self-defense. During their sexual encounter Teresa is enjoying the nothingness of clearing her mind. Santiago Fisterra looks at her, which grabs her attention, and proceeds to question her about the past and El Güero Dávila. Teresa’s anger peaks when Fisterra asks her why she is with him. It is also worth noting that this seems to be the last moment when Teresa actually shows a more innocent and naïve love for another man (or woman if we consider Patricia O’Farrell). Beginning with El Güero’s death, we see Teresa grow ever colder to her
relationships as time marches forward. She irately answers Santiago Fisterra’s question and the stage for domestic violence is set:

Estoy contigo porque no tengo mejor sitio adonde ir, o porque aprendí que no sé vivir sola, sin un hombre que se parezca a otro, y ya me vale madres por qué me eligió o elegí al primero. E incorporándose, desnuda, todavía no liberada de él, le dio una bofetada fuerte, un golpe que hizo a Santiago volver a un lado la cara. Y quiso pegarle otra pero entonces fue él quien lo hizo, arrodillado encima, devolviendo el bofetón con una violencia tranquila y seca, sin furia, sorprendida tal vez; luego se la quedó mirando así como estaba, de rodillas, sin moverse, mientras ella lloraba y lloraba lágrimas que no salían de los ojos sino del pecho y la garganta...Y eso fue todo, y aquella fue la única vez. No volvieron a levantarse la mano el uno al otro. Tampoco hubo, nunca, más preguntas. (169)

Teresa’s sobs seem to indicate that although solitude and emotional isolation are necessary for her survival, she acknowledges her overwhelming desire for companionship. Also, when Santiago defends himself, it reinforces the idea that the two are equals as lovers, just as they are in the narco arena of transporting drugs on the high seas. Through this incident, Teresa and Santiago define the boundaries of their relationship, which will progress no deeper than a physical companionship and a business partnership. As we observe in the last line, while there will be no more violence between them, neither will there be any further questions about the past. Here, Teresa utilizes her newly developed “macha” qualities in order to establish equality in her relationship with Santiago.

Continuing with Teresa’s growing independence, chapter nine is aptly titled: “También las mujeres pueden.” In this section Teresa takes the figurative and literal helm of the ship and becomes the leader of her own drug transportation business alongside Patricia O’Farrell who does little except stand by and observe, spend money, and sample the product. Here, Teresa remembers what Santiago Fisterra taught her:

Quería que sus recuerdos fuesen experiencia útil y no lastre de un pasado del que sólo necesitaba retener los conocimientos técnicos imprescindibles...Teresa encendió el
motor a la primera, con un tirón seco y rápido del cordón de arranque. El ruido de los quince caballos le alegró el corazón. Otra vez aquí, pensó. Para lo bueno y lo malo. (261)

In a sense Teresa is back to where she left off in the sea; however, this time she is doing it her own way. She is the undisputed captain of the Transer Naga drug transport efforts. Her nautical knowledge is also showcased here and it illustrates how she has learned to utilize what she gains from others to her own advantage. This builds the case for her increased detachment, solitude, agency, and power.

We see more of Teresa’s violent side emerging when she poses a thinly veiled threat to Eddie Álvarez her current lawyer, and Santiago Fisterra’s former one. Here, there is an additional reference to the many Teresa’s, which highlights the myriad of identities she seems to have acquired after all of her risky thug and drug life experiences:

Hubo más Teresas que afloraron por aquel tiempo: mujeres desconocidas que habían estado allí siempre, sin que ella lo sospechara, y otras nuevas que se incorporaban a los espejos y a los amaneceres grises y a los silencios...Aquel abogado gibraltareño, Eddie Álvarez, el que estuvo manejando el dinero de Santiago Fisterra y luego apenas se ocupó de la defensa legal de Teresa, tuvo ocasión de enfrentarse a alguna de esas mujeres...Teresa, que seguía sentada, lo informaba despacio y con detalle del motivo de su visita. Lo hizo con su suave acento mejicano y aquel aire de chica tímida que parecía estar en todo por casualidad. Nada de reproches, ni preguntas por las inversiones en cuadros o el dinero desaparecido. Ni una sola mención al año y medio pasado en la cárcel, ni a como el gibraltareño se lavó las manos en la defensa...Por eso estoy aquí, Eddie. Para impresionarte...Quiero impresionarte, repitió, segura de que el abogado ya lo estaba desde hacía una semana, cuando los diarios publicaron que al sargento Iván Velasco le habían pegado seis navajazos en el aparcamiento de una discoteca...lo que de veras afectaba a Eddie Álvarez era que la defunción del sargento Velasco se registró exactamente tres días después de que otro conocido suyo, el hombre de confianza Antonio Martínez Romero, alias Antonio Cañabota, o Cañabota a secas, apareciese boca abajo y desnudo excepto los calcetines, las manos atadas a la espalda, estrangulado en una pensión de Torremolinos, al parecer por un chapero que se le acercó en la calle una hora antes del óbito. (294)

In this scene, Eddie Álvarez is confronted by one of the many Teresa’s from the dark side.

Although she appears calm, she coldly and calculatedly confronts the lawyer on the money that remains unaccounted for. Teresa is wielding her lada coaltlicuense and power to scare him and
to give the impression that it would be best for him not to meddle in her lucrative business affairs. She is certain that Álvarez has already heard about the deaths of his acquaintances, including Sergeant Iván Velasco. Here, despite the lack of a direct confirmation, it is implied that Teresa ordered these deaths for the wrongs against her. Álvarez reminds Teresa that he had nothing to do with the Punto Castor affair—this is when Santiago Fisterra died when the boat he and Teresa had been riding in crashed into León Rock. We remember that Velasco was part of the Civil Guardsmen pursuing the pair that night. Later, Captain Víctor Castro of the Guardia Civil tells the writer that Velasco’s death coincides with Teresa’s release from prison, which alludes to her involvement (322-323). Despite the fact that she wants to give Álvarez a good scare, she has to be careful since she still needs his help with her counterfeit corporations and bank accounts. She capitalizes on one of the “new Teresa’s” powers in order to successfully threaten her longtime associate.

Captain Víctor Castro of the Guardia Civil tells the writer that Teresa had become a legend in the narco world:

Su ascenso en aquel mundo tan peligroso fue una sorpresa para todos. Corrió riesgos y tuvo suerte...De esa mujer que acompañaba a su novio en la planeadora hasta la que yo conocí, hay mucho camino. Usted ha visto los reportajes de prensa, supongo. Las fotos en el ¡Hola! y demás. Se refinó mucho, obtuvo unos modales y una cultura. Y se hizo poderosa. Una leyenda, dicen. La Reina del Sur. Los periodistas la apodaron así...Para nosotros siempre fue la Mejicana. (325)

When Castro emphasizes that it was a surprise that Teresa Mendoza rose to power from a drug trafficker’s girlfriend and sidekick to a bona fide queen in the dangerous narco world, it can be assumed that he is referring to the fact that she is a woman—an unlikely leader in the masculine criminal underworld. As we have seen before, much of her refinement and air of culture can be attributed to her relationship with Pati O’Farrell who has become a symbol of Teresa’s re-education.
Likewise, Cucha Malaspina who works for the magazine ¡Hola! also discusses how Teresa thrives in a world of dangerous men where she astonishingly built her empire in a mere two to three years:

Mejicana multimillonaria y discreta, oscuro pasado, turbio presente. Bella y enigmática, era el pie de la única imagen tomada de cerca: Teresa con gafas oscuras, austera y elegante, bajando de un coche rodeada de guardaespaldas, en Málaga, para declarar ante una comisión judicial sobre narcotráfico donde no pudo probársele absolutamente nada. Por aquel tiempo su blindaje jurídico y fiscal ya era perfecto y la reina del narcotráfico en el Estrecho, la zarina de la droga—así la describió El País--, había comprado tantos apoyos políticos y policiales que era prácticamente invulnerable: hasta el punto de que el ministerio del Interior infiltró su dossier a la prensa, en un intento por difundir, en forma de rumor e información periodística, lo que no podía probarse judicialmente. Pero el tiro salió por la culata. Aquel reportaje convirtió a Teresa en leyenda: una mujer en un mundo de hombres duros. (363)

Malaspina’s quote also illustrates the fact that Teresa kept both her business and herself heavily guarded. In fact, only when Spanish authorities begin to inch closer to her through Teo Aljarafe’s betrayal does she decide to accept immunity and go back to Culiácan to testify against Epifanio Vargas. We note also that Teresa used corruption to her advantage through monetarily averting the eyes of police officers and politicians alike. Any rumor about her life and business pursuits only fueled the fire of her legendary persona.

With regard to corruption, it is also necessary to consider how it is represented in Teresa’s Mexican homeland. Frequently she has referred to her bodyguard, Pote, as her only remaining link to Mexico. When the two discuss the idea of someday returning to Culiácan, Teresa asks Pote what he would do if she were to go back, but quickly tells him to forget about it. Through their discussion we see a critique of Mexican government corruption and U.S. imperialism:

—Olvidalo—Teresa movía la cabeza entre el humo de un cigarillo—. No quiero pasar el resto de mi vida atrincherada en la colonia Chapultepec, mirando por encima del hombro. —No pués. Pero qué lástima, oiga. Aquélla no es una mala tierra. —Órale. —Es el Gobierno, patrona. Si no hubiera Gobierno, ni políticos, ni gringos arriba del Bravo, allí
se viviría a toda madre...No haría falta ni la pinche mota ni nada de eso, ¿verdad?...Con purititos tomates nos arreglábamos. (416)

The last line can also be an allusion to NAFTA and other problems caused by neoliberalism and global trade. Pote is referencing the argument that Mexican farmers would grow tomatoes if the crop still provided a decent living, thus implying that many turn to the narco-machine in order to support themselves and their families. This brief conversation brings forth many of the polemics that augment the debates related to the drug trade and further socio-economic change among rural workers and the poor.

When Teresa has a meeting with the Galicians about the gangs in northwest Spain with their own contacts in Colombia, she faces some disrespect related to her gender. The gist of the meeting is that the Galicians are extending to the south—toward the Mediterranean and North Africa. So, as long as Teresa’s Transer Naga transported hashish on the Andalucian coastline, there would be no problems. However, with cocaine Teresa’s trafficking posed a threat of competition. During this meeting she speaks with Siso Pernas, a member of one of the Galician gangs, and is irritated by the fact that he addresses her lawyer, Teo Aljarafe instead of her directly. He proposes that Transer Naga work with the cocaine that comes through Casablanca and Agadir and that goes to the Eastern Mediterranean and out of Spain, while the Gallegos deal with Spain and the rest of Europe.

Teresa tells Pernas that there is no point in threatening her because she is just as tough as he and, to boot, personally has nothing to lose. She knows that the authorities have infiltrated the Galician operations and sees no point in having them put a price on or tax her movements outside of her jurisdiction. She does not concede to Pernas’ proposal:

Espero no regar el mole, pensó. Y dijo cómo lo veía ella. Lo hizo muy claro y separando bien cada frase, con las pausas adecuadas para que todos captaran los matices. Tengo el máximo respeto por lo que hacen en Galicia, empezó. Raza pesada y demás, muy padre.
Pero eso no me impide saber que están fichados por la policía, bajo estrecha vigilancia y sometidos a procedimientos judiciales...Todo bien gacho, que decimos en Sinaloa. Y resulta que si en algo se basa mi negocio es en extremar la seguridad, con una forma de trabajar que impide, hasta el límite de lo razonable, las fugas de información. Poca gente, y la mayor parte no se conoce entre sí...Me llevó tiempo crear esa estructura, y no estoy dispuesta, uno, a dejarla oxidarse, y dos, a ponerla en peligro con operaciones que no puedo controlar. Ustedes piden que me ponga en sus manos a cambio de un porcentaje o de qué sé yo. O sea: que me cruce de brazos y les deje el monopolio. No veo qué puedo sacar de eso, ni en qué me conviene. Excepto que me estén amenazando...[Y]o sigo siendo una. Con mi gente, pero una. Mi negocio es voluntariamente limitado. Todos saben que no manejo carga propia. Sólo transporto. Eso disminuye mis daños potenciales. Y mis ambiciones. Ustedes, sin embargo, tienen muchas puertas y ventanas por donde entrarles. Hay donde elegir, si alguien quiere golpear...Usted tiene familia, por ejemplo. Una mujer muy bonita, dicen...Un hijo...En Sinaloa tenemos un dicho: Voy a matar a toda su familia, y luego desentierro a sus abuelos, les meto unos tiros y los vuelvo a enterrar... (381-384)

Here again we witness Teresa using her power and confidence to threaten the men who both disrespect her and attempt to stand up to her. She carefully explains how she controls every aspect of her business from the heightened security to the few people involved who largely do not know each other. Teresa more or less laughs at Pernas’ threat from the Galician gangs and refuses to put control in anyone else’s hands, especially those of criminal groups already being monitored by Spanish authorities. Further, much like she did with her lawyer Eddie Álvarez, Teresa wants to give Pernas a good scare, citing his son and wife as reasons why he should refrain from meddling in her business. As if to remind him that she has nothing to lose and that she comes from a place far more violent than Europe, she shares the final refrain about killing an entire family and then digging up the grandparents to re-kill them all over again.

Similar to the Nahua goddess Coatlicue, as Teresa becomes more violent her ability to take and give life is juxtaposed. When she is the undisputed narco queen in southern Spain she is the necropolitician in her circle. When she speaks about her pregnancy we observe how she has internalized this power:
al principio creyó que pronto empezaría a tener sensaciones, conciencia física de la vida que empezaba a desarrollarse en su interior. Pero no sentía nada. Sólo la certeza y las reflexiones a que ésta la llevaba. Quizá el pecho le había aumentado un poco, y también desaparecieron los dolores de cabeza; pero sólo se sentía encinta cuando meditaba sobre ello, leía otra vez el parte médico, o comprobaba las dos faltas marcadas en el calendario. Sin embargo—pensaba en ese instante, oyendo la conversación banal de Teo Aljarafe--, aquí estoy. Preñada como una vulgar maruja, que dicen en España. Con algo, o alguien, de camino, y todavía sin decidir qué voy a hacer con mi perrona vida, con la de esa criatura que aún no es nada pero será si lo consiento—miró atenta a Teo, como al acecho de una señal decisiva--. O con la vida de él. (476)

This part highlights Teresa’s growing detachment and emotional unfeeling since she remarks that she did not feel the sensations in her womb that would tell her that her body was indeed preparing to give life. This indifference toward her female power, represented physically by the womb, which as we saw with the femicides poses a threat to neoliberalism and machismo, illustrates her transformation closer to a rational masculine criminal. Also, when she refers to her offspring as a creature that will only exist if she allows it, and applies that same logic to both her own life and the baby’s father’s, Teresa is exercising her sovereign necropolitical power to decide who lives and who dies. Interestingly enough, shortly after she tells Oleg Yasikov that she is indeed going to have the baby, but as readers we are only left to speculate its future existence.

In perhaps one of her most violent and vengeful scenes, Teresa confronts Teo Aljarafe as a rat and explains that the boat Luz Angelita was a decoy. Since she knew that he was covertly betraying her with Spanish authorities, Teresa wanted to see if he would tip off customs officers. Sure enough they boarded the boat that same night:

Hay algo que no sabes—explicó Teresa--. El Luz Angelita viene limpio. Lo más ilegal que van a encontrar en él, cuando lo desguacen, serán un par de botellas de whiskey que no pagaron impuestos...¿Y sabes por qué no te informé antes de que ese barco era un señuelo?...Porque necesitaba que, cuando pasaras la información a la gente para la que haces de madrina, todos lo creyeran igual que lo creiste tú. (495)
This instance represents a confirmation that Teresa has developed quite the ruthless side.

Perhaps motivated by her sexual relationship with Teo that resulted in her unwanted pregnancy, Teresa wants the father of her child to know exactly who is in control of his life and demise.

Teresa’s indifference when she orders Pote to kill Teo also contributes to the aforementioned. Teresa shows no remorse as Teo begs to survive for his daughters:

Era todo tan singular, reflexionó Teresa, asombrada. Tus hijas son hermanas de mi hijo, concluyó en sus adentros, o lo serán tal vez, si cuando pasen siete meses todavía respiro. Y mira qué carajo me importa lo mío. Qué me importa eso mismo que también es tuyo y que te vas sin saber siquiera, y maldita la falta que te hace saberlo. No experimentaba piedad, ni tristeza, ni temor. Sólo la misma indiferencia que sentía hacia lo que cargaba en el vientre; el deseo de acabar con aquella escena del mismo modo que quien solventa un trámite molesto. (499)

For Teresa deciding to kill someone was just like any other of the multitude of decisions made on any given day. Her indifference proves to be another example that violence is becoming an integral and automatic part of her daily existence.

After twelve years in Spain, as Teresa is finally planning her voyage back home to Sinaloa, we learn of her plans to deal with the widespread corruption in northern Mexico. Since it is clear that it is increasingly difficult to determine if transit police and judiciales had been infiltrated by the cartels, Teresa’s security detail would come from the capital. The Ninth District of the military took charge of general security and the federales worked on the inside (504). We see a similar commentary regarding the blurred lines between protectors and perpetrators when Pote and Teresa imagine how much someone would get for taking out “La reina del sur.” Pote explains that they would kill him for free and that she would go for a much higher price, maybe no less than full retirement pay for life. When Teresa asks him if he thinks that it would be one of the security escorts or someone from the outside who would kill her, he says he thinks...
that it would come from the outside, but also reminds her that narcos and the police are often the same thing (508-509).

During one of the final scenes of the novel, Teresa re-enters the Malverde Chapel a changed woman in order to meet with don Epifanio Vargas against the advisement of her security team. The narrator highlights the changes in Teresa that she herself may not even entirely recognize:

La última vez que estuvo allí había otra mujer mirándola desde las sombras. Ahora la buscaba sin hallarla. A menos, resolvió, que yo sea la otra mujer, o la tenga dentro, y la morra de ojos asustados, la chavita que huía con una bolsa y una Doble Águila en las manos, se haya convertido en uno de esos espectros que vagan a mi espalda, mirándome con ojos acusadores, o tristes, o indiferentes. Quizá la vida sea eso, y una respire, camine, se mueva sólo para un día mirar atrás y verse allí. Para reconocerse en las sucesivas muertes propias y ajenas a las que te condena cada uno de tus pasos. (515)

Here we also see how memory is tied to this place where Teresa was freed from the Sinaloan gangsters trailing her with the help of Vargas. Teresa, the Queen of the South, looks for the scared young girl that she used to be within those same walls. We observe Teresa looking back and reflecting on her history as she concludes that perhaps we recognize ourselves in our’s and others’ deaths, in every sense of the word. These deaths and losses are what have shaped Teresa into the seemingly intrepid woman standing before Epifanio Vargas in the chapel.

In a dramatic turn of events, it is now don Epifanio Vargas who wants to be freed by his former protégé, Teresa Mendoza. He begs her to tell him what she will gain from testifying against him and ruining his financial and political empire:

¿Qué ganas con perjudicarme? ¿Ayudar a esos gringos que consumen la mitad de las drogas del mundo mientras deciden, según les conviene, cuándo el narco es bueno y cuándo es malo? ¿A los que financiaban con droga a las guerrillas anticomunistas del Vietnam, y luego vinieron a pedírnosla a los mejicanos para pagar las armas de la contra en Nicaragua?...Oye, Teresita: esos que ahora te utilizan me hicieron ganar un chingo de dólares con Norteña de Aviación, ayudándome además a lavarlos en Panamá...Dime qué te ofrecen ahora los cabrones...¿Inmunidad?...¿Dinero? (519-520)
Through the voice of Epifanio Vargas, Pérez-Reverte illustrates one of the many contradictions and paradoxes of the entire underground narco criminal movement. This is the idea that the United States causes the majority of the problem, yet almost exclusively blames Mexico for it. It represents the relationship between supply and demand. Vargas attempts to persuade Teresa to consider the real enemy. For all of the international and worldly experience that she has gained through her enterprise in Spain, in a way Teresa still behaves like a “true Sinaloan” as somewhat stereotypically represented by Pérez-Reverte in the novel through his cultural references to Mexico. In this sense, Vargas is elevated to a position characterized by a more profound understanding of global interactions and the narco trade, while Teresa plays by the traditional rules of the “old drug world.” Once again, the male trafficker is depicted as more rational and logical than his female counterpart.

In this light, Teresa explains that Vargas never did anything bad except for killing El Güero and sending Pote and Gato to attempt to kill her in Spain. This seems to suggest that she too has internalized the rational male criminal discourse. Although she still seems to regard her former mentor in at least some way, Teresa is firm in her dealings to settle the score with her testimony in front of the court. Vargas calls her crazy and she says no, “lo que estoy es muerta. Su Teresita Mendoza murió hace doce años, y vine a enterrarla” (521-522). This sets the stage for Teresa to finally leave her past behind and disappear into the future where no one can find her.

In addition, this part calls to mind the moment in prison when Teresa Mendoza references Pedro Páramo and that everyone in the story is unaware that they are dead. Here she is alluding to her own situation in the world of the narcotics:

Despertó esa misma noche, estremecida en la oscuridad, porque acababa de averiguar al fin, en sueños, lo que pasaba en la novelita mejicana de Juan Rulfo que ella nunca
conseguiía comprender del todo por más que la agarraba. *Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre.* Hijole. Los personajes de aquella historia estaban todos muertos, y no lo sabían. (244)

With no family to speak of and no personal or professional attachments that she can keep long-term, Teresa is, for all intents and purposes, emotionally dead. She goes through the motions of her life and still fights for her basic human survival, but grows significantly more indifferent throughout the course of the novel. Also, even if she and her cohorts live on, death is always right around the corner by virtue of their shared profession within the narco-machine.

In the writer-narrator’s afterward he explains that his biographical “*corrido*” about the life of Teresa Mendoza is vastly longer than the traditional folksongs of the genre:

> En cuanto a mí, ese último día ante mi botella de cerveza en La Ballena, Culiacán, escuchando canciones de la rockola entre parroquianos bigotudos y silenciosos, lamenté carecer de talento para resumirlo todo en tres minutos de música y palabras. El mío iba a ser, que remedio, un corrido de papel impreso y más de quinientas páginas. Cada uno hace lo que puede. Pero tenía la certeza de que en cualquier sitio, cerca de allí, alguien estaría componiendo ya la canción que pronto iba a rodar por Sinaloa y todo México, cantada por los Tigres, o los Tucanes, o algún grupo de leyenda...La historia de la Reina del Sur. El corrido de Teresa Mendoza. (542)

In comparing his extensive novel to the *corrido*, the writer seeks to give his work a more authentic feel than that of traditional biographies and other works of literature. Likewise, he wants to capture the style of a legend that is passed on for generations.

While some critics view Teresa as a heroic and mythological woman in the end, I see her as an individual acting out of necessity and intense sadness. Although I agree that she completely transformed herself into a powerful businesswoman feared by many, which exemplifies how she used her plight in life to cultivate her agency, I struggle with seeing her in a more positive light. My uneasiness originates in comments like this one from Routon:

> On her inevitable return to Mexico she becomes a deadly pathogen: Teresa Mendoza alone survives the Armageddon gun battle; a warrior phoenix, pregnant with the child of the lover she was forced to have killed, she is poised to transform herself yet again. The
cycles of exploitation end at last: she overcomes the forces of extreme poverty and violence set in motion in her childhood and reinforced by the men in her life. Finally, she is able to sever the ties and strike the death blow, freeing herself from the devouring Exopolis. (295)

We must remember here that she is not fighting alone in the end battle scene against don Epifanio Vargas’ associates. Her bodyguard Pote is by her side until his demise at the hands of their enemies. He ultimately helps her get away by positioning himself in the line of fire to pass her a gun. It is difficult to look at her as a sage mother and bearer of life since she herself has expressed such indifference to her offspring and their future in general. Since we are only left to speculate the rest of her existence at the end of the novel, we cannot definitively say that her exploitation ended the day of the battle. While there is no doubt that this part also represents a symbolic battle against her former vulnerable subjectivity, I find it difficult to believe that she has been freed from much at all. Although the men in her life first took her down a path of violence, we recall that she too internalizes and enacts it throughout the novel. In that sense then, it may be that she frees herself from vulnerability and, consequently, turns to violence. Finally, unless she is presumed dead instead of disappeared, I do not see much evidence of Teresa escaping the Exopolis—whether that be in the form of the drug underworld or the above ground neoliberal capitalist world to which Routon has referred.

Even though I have disagreed with Routon in her heroic depictions of our violent narco queen, it is essential to recognize her agency as an intelligent businesswoman, as well as appreciate the literary value of Teresa Mendoza’s global transactions and experiences. In other words, even though the novel tries to tame and domesticate el narco, and masculinize Teresa, its greatest attribute is the ability to connect a variety of universal spaces and people. Here, then, I would also like to mention Docinda García-Alvite who discusses La reina del sur as a global and transcultural text. Corresponding to the writer-narrator’s allusions to the corrido,
García-Alvite reminds us that Pérez-Reverte’s novel was originally inspired by a Mexican *corrido* by Los Tigres del Norte, and later itself inspired the same group to write another *corrido* about the fictional Teresa Mendoza: “La reina del sur.” García-Alvite also points out that the 17 chapters included in the text are titled in the style of the now (in)famous Mexican *corridos*.

While the novel highlights both the positive—mixing of cultures, business and earning potential, travel opportunities—and negative—violence, criminal threats, and increased border vigilance—aspects of globalization, García-Alvite proposes an additional alternative: That the text can be considered a literary work that affirms the creative force behind cultural multiplicity. She explains:

> En [la obra], se crea un nuevo discurso, lo que María Teresa McKenna denomina ‘una semiótica de la frontera’ (*Migrant Song* 107) que se basa en la articulación de repertorios múltiples, y en la que la frontera se transforma en un espacio definitorio de la riqueza de posibilidades de construcción del nuevo sujeto. De modo paralelo, y coincidiendo con lo que Gloria Anzaldúa expone en *Borderlands/La Frontera*, en la obra se desarrolla una conciencia de la frontera y de la eliminación de fronteras, es decir una conciencia de mestizaje, en el que se mezclan, entre otras, cuestiones de raza, clase, lengua y también, géneros artísticos... Reconociendo las propias letras de las canciones de los Tigres como fuente de inspiración, y usando sus notas de investigación de 29 meses en el mundo de las drogas mexicano y el español, *La reina del sur*, es un producto transcultural e histórico que muestra la capacidad de invención que la globalización puede alimentar. (85)

Like García-Alvite, I wholeheartedly agree that globalization can nurture a multitude of new creative inventions, as well as represent dynamically mixed subjectivities. And, if we look past many of the Mexican stereotypes in Pérez-Reverte’s novel, we could even consider it too as a part of this “new discourse.” At the same time, however, the first step should be to point out the negative aspects that come with this globalization and the underground drug world. After

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84 The corrido that inspired Pérez-Reverte was titled: “Contrabando y traición.” Also, as can be seen in the actual text of the novel, the Spanish author is also in debt to the example set forth by Sinaloan author, Élmer Mendoza, who is aptly considered the father of the narconovela in Mexico. Los Tigres del Norte’s “La reina del sur” was remade by another group, Los Cuates de Sinaloa, for the introduction to the telenovela adaptations that premiered in 2011.
all, we are reading a text about a woman so criminal that she eventually exploits or kills most of the people around her.

At the same time, García-Alvite recognizes how Teresa’s violent side contributes to her perceived heroism:

...[L]a violencia afecta a la protagonista muy directamente, tal como se indica en la primera frase de la novela que establece el tono dominante ‘sonó el teléfono y supo que la iban a matar’ (11), además de las frecuentes descripciones de chalecos antibalas, pistolas, Aká 47, balazos, disparos, fogonazos y modos de atacarse y morir ‘al estilo sinaloense,’ que apuntan al uso de violencia física como una manifestación de heroísmo y coraje en el mundo referido. De hecho, el uso de la violencia parece ser uno de los elementos contribuyentes a la representación positiva de la protagonista, enriqueciendo la calidad de heroicidad de la persona, tal como refleja la frase que un observador lanza a ‘la reina del sur’ cuando ella lucha para no ser apresada por sus enemigos ni la policía: ‘¡Órale, mi narca!...¡Enséñele cómo se muere una sinaloense! (536), al final de la narración. (88-89)

García-Alvite reminds us that where Teresa Mendoza comes from violence is the same as heroism. While this may be an exaggerated stereotype perpetuated through mass communications, it is imperative to put our protagonist’s position into perspective. Thus, to those who listen to corridos and extol an alternative sovereign force to the national government in the form of the drug cartels, Teresa Mendoza is indeed a genuine hero. García-Alvite also goes on to qualify the idea of Teresa as a heroine by stating that she becomes a role model in the sense that she is “...una mujer rebelde que rompe con los códigos sociales que condicionan su libertad, y al oponerse a esas limitaciones se convierte en una heroína y un modelo a seguir” (91). This whole idea relates back to our discussion on violence and how it has been deemed inherent to the culture especially in northern Mexico in places like Sinaloa. Further, as the real “La reina del Pacífico” has illustrated, growing up inside the narco-machine can yield few future alternatives.
Additionally, García-Alvite takes what I would consider a big leap when equating Teresa Mendoza with the traditional Mexican migrant. However, I recognize the significance of this type of female protagonist and some of the more positive underlying aspects of her character. García-Alvite explains that La reina del sur puts an important part of globalization on display—that of the contemporary movement of women who cross borders in order to defy and restructure economic and social conditions (92). Most importantly, however, and frankly more valuable to my own study is the fact that, regardless of their individual situations, these women are active and participatory in their own relocations and dislocations: “…son agentes, personas que sufren la radicalización de los procesos globalizantes, pero que no se dejan transformar en víctimas, sino que ofrecen resistencia y acción consciente…” (García-Avite 92). And, while we can debate the vulnerable, weak, and even evil elements of Teresa Mendoza’s character, as we have seen through the textual analysis, there is no denying her agency, power, strength, and motivation.

3.3 Toward a Sanguine Anti-narconovela: Perra brava by Orfa Alarcón, La reina del Pacífico y otras mujeres del narco by Víctor Ronquillo, and Tijuana: Crimen y olvido by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite.

We discover a visibly violent and intense narconovela in Orfa Alarcón’s Perra brava, published in 2010. Categorically edgier and more daring than La reina del sur, Alarcón’s first novel uses the ubiquitous violence chronicled in journalism as a foundation for her dynamic narrative. In her column with Milenio, acclaimed Mexican author and two-time winner of the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz award, Cristina Rivera Garza praises Orfa Alarcón and her text affirming that she is “…sin duda, la narradora que he estado esperando por mucho tiempo: valiente, certera, irreverente, muy ella misma. A Orfa no le tiembla la mano ni se le agüita el temple” (1). Born in Veracruz in 1979, Alarcón is a regiomontana at heart, and utilizes Monterrey, the third-
largest metropolitan area in Mexico, as the backdrop for her novel. Within this setting we witness a unique protagonist—a virtually pathetic and entitled cartel leader’s girlfriend.

Alarcón’s Fernanda Salas does not resemble the more famously mythologized popular culture icons like our fictional Teresa Mendoza or “La reina del pacífico” from Los Tucanes de Tijuana’s narcocorrido of the same name. Rather, she represents a typical university-aged girl who devotes all of her time and love to her boyfriend who is constantly surrounded by members of his gang. Most of the time she comes off as a feeble adolescent who is paralyzed by her fears—her most prominent, ironically enough, being her fear of blood. Once we learn, however, that Fernanda’s father killed her mother in a drunken rage when she was young; we understand how her life’s trajectory has led her to abusive boyfriend and drug trafficker, Julio Cortés.

Further, Fernanda shows the progression from family violence to societal violence. In an interview with blogger, Irene Torres López, Alarcón discusses the development of her protagonist:

Para mí era una chica que vivía una relación de pareja con maltrato; fue difícil trabajar con este personaje porque creo que la problemática de violencia desde afuera se puede ver muy distinta, resulta muy fácil juzgarla...ella [Fernanda] fue la que me dijo que su historia de violencia no era una de las típicas, sino que era una violencia llevada a los extremos; ahí fueron surgiendo el tema del narco y los sicarios. (1)

Perra brava is impactful because it presents a young woman who has experienced so much abuse in her life that she ultimately exercises her own extreme violence in the end. As we follow Fernanda’s journey, we observe how a meek and vulnerable girl turns into the same type of character that has oppressed and controlled her throughout the text. As Julio’s nature almost seems to soften toward the novel’s conclusion, Fernanda becomes increasingly intolerant and violent. Although she contests the notion that women are stereotypically gentler than men, and
thus exert less violence on society, Fernanda simultaneously conforms to patriarchal norms that nourish her role as a pathetic and dependent girlfriend and overall abused woman.

If we adopt Lemus’ characteristics of the “true” narconovela as anti-novela outlined in the introduction—realism driven to extremes, the novel becoming its own reality, brutal, butchered, and incoherent prose, a feverish structure, controlling and powerful violence, a homicidal narrative, the victory of death over the futility of life, impermanence, irrational actions, and a pervasive feeling of emptiness—we see that, when compared to the plots of the narconovelas criticized for being excessively clean, Perra brava retains similar features to the anti-novela without caving in on itself in an entirely anarchical and unreadable fashion. That is, Alarcón’s novel represents one of the closest things to the anti-novela while still clearly articulating the horrors of the narco-machine that violently penetrates even the most private intimate spaces as it simultaneously disturbs society at large.

From the start, violence exerts its relentless power over Fernanda’s entire existence. The harsh and brutal prose combined with the vulgar imagery invoked from the onset makes for a fevered and intense read. During a vividly rough sexual encounter, Fernanda licks Julio’s body and determines that it tastes strange. Unable to process this in the dark, while she washes up in the bathroom, Fernanda realizes that she is covered in his blood:

...me descubrí frente al espejo con la cara llena de sangre. Los senos, las manos, la entrepierna. Grité. Como si viera el fantasma de mi madre...Julio entró en el baño y me abofetéó. ‘Para que te lo sepas, traes encima la sangre de un cabrón con muchos huevos, y con todo y todo se lo cargó la chingada, porque la vida se gana a putazos. Así que no me vuelves a salir con que no puedes freír un pinche bistec porque te da asco. (13)

In this first graphic scene alone, where realism is truly pushed to its crude extreme, we uncover Fernanda’s turbulent relationship with Julio, her fear of blood, even when cooking meat, as well as the death of her mother.

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When Julio frequently disappears, Fernanda spends time with her best friend Dante, her sister Sofia, and her niece Cinthia. These scenes exemplify her capacity for love, just like the soldier in chapter one who can compartmentalize his mission to kill and his duty to protect and care for his loved ones. Sofia and Dante know of Fernanda’s life in Julio’s house with the cartel, but often avoid his presence. While Fernanda’s relationships with her loved ones illustrate her capacity to care, they also feed her delusions of a normal life. When Julio is around, however, Fernanda obeys his orders. During a meeting of the cartels at a bar Fernanda meets Mónica who she thinks is another drug lord’s girlfriend (41). While waiting for Julio, the two women kiss after doing some drugs and drinking. Julio is enraged at this scene and beats Fernanda publicly. This marks the beginning of his two-week hiatus and Fernanda’s multiple breakdowns at the thought of losing her lover. It turns out that Mónica is more than just a criminal’s girlfriend. She is the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel. In addition to exhibiting domestic violence, this incident depicts the hollowness of Fernanda and Julio’s relationship.

Julio’s return is brought on by a series of horrific events beginning when La Coyota, one of Julio’s associates, returns Fernanda’s car to her driveway with the keys still inside. Capitalizing on the chance to find Julio, Fernanda speeds off to catch La Coyota who should know his whereabouts. During her fruitless search, five men in a Suburban follow Fernanda. After trying to lose them on the highway, she finds herself surrounded by the Suburban and a police car. Fernanda ponders both criminal and official corruption in the following passage:

A qué hora empiezan a tirotearse estos cabrones y yo en medio—quería pensar que el pedo era entre ellos, pero no, era conmigo...Este es el gobierno de cambio: si antes los ricos tenían miedo a los secuestros, ahora lo tenemos todos; si antes la policía mordía a la luz del día, ahora mata, y no sólo la policía, también el ejército y hasta la Marina aunque en Monterrey no haya mar. Si antes la lucha era contra los delincuentes, ahora los balazos van de policía al ejército y viceversa. ¿De quién hay que cuidarse?...No sabía si tenerle más miedo a los de la Suburban o a las policías. (69-70)
Beyond the brusque language, Fernanda reveals the absurdity of the chaos and incoherence caused by the narco-machine. Unlike the smooth functioning plots of sterile narconovelas, in Alarcón’s intricate narrative the “enemy” is far too elusive for definition, and like Fernanda we readers know not whom nor what to fear.

After police apprehend Fernanda she finds out that the five men were captured since they were armed and prepared to kidnap her. A member of the police SWAT vehicle, Ramiro Silva finds a black garbage bag in her backseat and “[c]omo si fuera una película de horror, el oficial tomó el contenido de la bolsa y lo exhibió ante todos. De los cabellos, el policía sostenía una cabeza que aún tenía los ojos abiertos” (73). Once again realism remains extreme since Alarcón opts for a graphic portrait rather than a muted secondhand description. Fernanda claims that she killed the man, and is taken into custody. In the following chapter, however, she awakens in a photography studio where she hears a familiar voice from the news, and realizes that it is a prominent politician “…que había utilizado su condición [fingida] de inválido para inspirar lástima, ganar el mayor número de votos y convertirse en alcalde” (80). Further exposing the widespread corruption, the mayor explains to Julio that “[t]odo se trató de un mal entendido, es que no todos los oficiales conocen a tu señora, pero afortunadamente alguien la reconoció a tiempo y por eso la traje a mi casa” (80). Soon after, Julio eliminates el comandante Ramiro Silva, whose bodiless head is found by some children in front of la Policía Federal Preventativa (86). In fictionalizing, and by extension ridiculing, the deeply entrenched corruption among politicians, police forces, and other state institutions, Alarcón offers a critique of el narco. Moreover, the gory details serve to deglamorize and demystify the thug lifestyle.

Up until now Fernanda has largely been portrayed as a victim or witness to the violence in the novel. Her violent transformation, however, begins when she waves a gun at a woman in
an act of road rage (108). When this horrifies her friend Dante, Fernanda insists that she didn’t touch the woman, and that the gun wasn’t even loaded (109). Here, Dante represents the fearful person that Fernanda once was. Later, Julio asks Fernanda to marry him. After convincing Julio that she needs to go on a university-guided trip to Japan before getting married, she spends a secret two weeks in Monterrey partying, having random sex, and contemplating asking Julio to find and kill her father. Fernanda explains: “Me sentía liberada: estaba en mi ciudad pero nadie lo sabía. Era como volver a ser yo. Como recomenzar” (132). Fernanda’s new beginning constitutes a vicious rebirth. When thinking about her father, she reflects upon her inherent evil:

Es que yo fui mala desde niña: cuando Sofía y yo nos quedamos solas, siempre extrañé a mi padre. Lo quería tanto que aún recordaba los buenos momentos con cariño. Por eso tenía que matarlo, para dejar de traicionar a mi familia, convertirme real y definitivamente en otra persona y poder seguir con mi vida. (152)

Like her father and Julio before her, Fernanda sees violence as the only path of redemption leading away from her guilt to a new life. From this moment forward Fernanda’s metamorphosis guides the homicidal narrative to its turbulent culmination.

After internalizing all of the abusive acts against her, Fernanda unknowingly kills her boyfriend Julio’s two-year-old son when she sets his lover’s house on fire. She discovers this woman, Keila, while patrolling a poor neighborhood with Julio’s henchmen. When she sees her clothes drying in Keila’s yard, Fernanda attacks the pregnant woman, but is ultimately restrained by the other cartel members. This incident, combined with finding a love letter in Julio’s drawer, fuels her rage and she is resolved to destroy Keila’s life. Even through her violent plot, Fernanda maintains her fear of blood. She explains:

Mi gusto para la carne asada es tan intenso como mi repulsión por la sangre. Por eso estoy explicando por qué no voy a tocar a la puta barata. Por eso estoy explicando que me causa náuseas esa pinche pendeja, que de mí no merece ni el vómito. No voy a
cortar su piel en tiras, como merece. Yo sólo prenderé el fuego. Él dejará lista su carne para mis dientes. (195)

When Julio discovers that Fernanda has killed his son, he threatens to either shoot her or one of her family members. In the end, however, perhaps since the last thing Fernanda asks for before she is killed is to touch him one more time, he instead shoots himself at point blank range in the head directly in front of her. Before he points the gun on himself though, Julio asks Fernanda: “¿Hace cuánto tiempo se te desangró tu alma, perra?” (204). In the last paragraph of the novel, in circular fashion to the first scene, Fernanda’s violent transformation is complete: “Sobre mí cayó el peso del más hombre...Yo amaba tanto su sangre que comenzé a beberla. Yo tenía su cuerpo sobre mí...Yo tenía piernas para correr, tenía un Ferrari. Tenía a mi padre encerrado en la cajuela” (204). This final image of Fernanda drinking Julio’s blood with her father (or his body) in her trunk completes death’s victory over life in the novel. The tragedy for Fernanda is that her life tragically mimics Julio’s and her father’s. The tragedy and opportunity for the reader is that there is no resolution; only more of “el puto caos.”

Javier Munguía reviewed Perra brava in Revista de Letras from La Vanguardia and explains that the novel exposes the “…impacto que en una sociedad tiene el narcotráfico: dinero, ostentación, mucha sangre, alianzas con el poder político y corrupción en distintos niveles, entre otros factores” (1). Likewise, he concludes that the novel is much more than an exact replication of reality:

Perra brava acierta al no conformarse con retratar un conflicto de actualidad como lo es el narcotráfico entre sus páginas. El libro va más allá: deja al narco como contexto, no como tema, y prefiere indagar en conflictos que trascienden la sociedad recreada: la violencia al interior de la familia, la soledad, la embriaguez del dinero y el poder, y el afloramiento de los instintos más oscuros en un personaje que, sin quererlo ni saberlo, termina por convertirse en aquello que tanto temía. (1)
Through drawing our attention to absurdities and polemics both large and small, *narconovelas* are not simply sheer manifestations of overt illicit violence. The peeling back of their elaborate layers reveals dynamic human experiences, the complicated relationship between fiction and reality, as well as the omnipresence of the narco-machine, among other features. *Perra brava* has shown that a coherent narrative structure complete with colloquialisms and regional pride can still embody the true nature of the anti-novela as described by Rafael Lemus. Alarcón’s novel juxtaposes glamour and freedom with destruction and bloodshed, teaches us without prescribing exactly what we should learn, exposes violence in its most savage forms, reinvents *el narco* through the eyes of an abused young woman, thrives on chaos in a feverish and homicidal narrative, tells a shocking story in its full vulgarity, pushes realism to the limit, scorns police and government corruption, and ultimately showcases death’s victory over life.

In his novel composed of nine distinct stories, *La Reina del Pacífico y otras mujeres del narco*, journalist turned author of fiction, Víctor Ronquillo, seeks to bring marginalized Mexican voices to the forefront. In an interview with Carlos Paul of *La jornada* in 2009, Ronquillo explains that like journalism, literature is a social commitment. Nevertheless, he also believes that “...la literatura tiene una mayor permanencia y permite una comprensión más profunda de los hechos más allá de los discursos políticos y de los medios electrónicos” (1). Thus, similar to Pérez-Reverte and Alarcón, Ronquillo uses his fictional novel that is based on reality in order to explore prevalent themes related to women and their differing ties to the violent business of drug trafficking. In fact, following each of the stories is some sort of news article related to the particular theme of that piece. This gives an air of reality and verisimilitude to the text in order to once again exemplify that the author built his characters around his foundation in journalism.
The first story in the series, “La caída de la Reina,” is based on the real life story of Sandra Ávila Beltrán, “La Reina del Pacífico,” who has appeared at various junctures throughout this chapter. If we remember that the real Sandra Ávila Beltrán explained that drug trafficking was her destiny due to the underground criminal world in which she lived, it is no surprise that Ronquillo’s narrator would also explain this fact. He says that:

La seguridad, el donaire le vienen de su estirpe sinaloense, de su pertenencia a una dinastía de narcos. Y la nobleza de esa dinastía la otorgan la inmensa fortuna y la audacia de haber erigido imperios de la nada. El árbol genealógico de esta Reina bien puede representarse con una frondosa mata de marihuana, cuyas ramas se extienden a lo largo de generaciones en la historia del narcotráfico en México. (14)

The idea that he equates La Reina’s family to a noble dynasty is important when considering el narco as a tradition passed on from generation to generation, rather than simply understanding it as a criminal impulse. On the other hand, however, the quote attributes little agency to La Reina herself since it was said dynasty that allowed her to create her own empire out of nothing. Once again, we observe how the female narco’s success is ascribed in at least some way to the male figures she was fortunate enough to be around.

During the course of the rest of the story, however, we see how La Reina uses her gender and sexuality in order to manipulate other men and women. First, she takes advantage of her position as a beauty shop owner to get closer to the wives of powerful men:

A la Reina le gustaba dar consejos y ser consultada, ayudar a otras mujeres en sus conflictos existenciales; por eso había montado una cadena de clínicas de belleza en las que también se ofrecían servicios de ayuda espiritual. Un buen negocio que, además de representarle nada despreciables ganancias, hacía posible que se relacionara con las esposas y amantes de muchos hombres poderosos. (19-20)

Although not explicitly stated in this instance, these side businesses also function as fronts for the drug trade and a way for La Reina to legitimize and justify her lofty earnings. Through this openly public business venture, La Reina could interact with others as if she were a completely
positively contributing member of society in contrast with her behind-the-scenes gig within the narcotics world.

Secondly, La Reina uses her sexuality to wield power over men:

A la Reina le gustaba despertar el deseo de quienes la miraban. Le gustaba ejercer esa forma de dominio sobre los hombres, a los que consideraba una parvada de seres indefensos ante su sonrisa. Bastaba una palabra suya para provocar ansiedad y hasta temor en muchos de ellos. (27)

This ability to transform herself according to the situation is what gives La Reina power and agency in her life. That is, if her perceived success and infamy is credited to her fathers, brothers, and lovers, she can at least claim her own modes of operation and survival as a queenpin. In this way she must both defy and support the patriarchy for her own well-being and further success in the narco business.

It is also intriguing to see how La Reina herself reproduces patriarchal hierarchies in situations where she is la patrona. For example, she made sure that the women who worked under her used their sexuality to sway the opinions of various men with whom they had to interact through her drug transportation operation:

...montó una agencia de mujeres dedicadas al transporte clandestino de cientos de miles de dólares. Todas fueron seleccionadas por su aspecto, distinguidas, capaces de imponerse con los atributos de su belleza a los agentes aduanales y los policías. Las prefería de más de treinta años, vestidas con ropa fina, enjoyadas, que dieran la impresión de ser esposas de alguien muy importante. (23)

Much like the men in her life, La Reina used women, their relationships, and their femininity and sexuality to get what she wanted.

While the first story is quite straightforward with its fictional bond to the real Sandra Ávila Beltrán, the third story’s plot is unmistakably more intricate. It captures the complex nature of the attempt to categorize innocent victims and violent perpetrators. At each turn it is more difficult to decipher who was attacked or killed and by whom, which more accurately
portrays the tumultuous chaos of the narco-machine. “Intriga en la frontera,” deals with the tragic attack against Diana Hernández, a reporter from XKLN and host of the radio program Red de emergencia, which is known for raising awareness about police corruption in the city through everyday citizens who call in to chronicle their personal experiences with the law.

On the day of her attack, Diana reported on the recent detainment of the hit men who were allegedly responsible for the torture and murder of public security secretary, Fernando Cantú. While brain dead and kept alive through machines at the hospital, the narrator comments on the relative effortlessness it would take for the narcos to “re-kill” her in front of her grieving mother, despite the presence of armed guards, since “[c]ualqui
era podría entrar y salir, cruzar la recepción, tomar el elevador y llegar al séptimo piso...donde Diana Hernández libraba la batalla que según los pronósticos médicos ya tenía perdida” (53). This tragic story is not the disgracefully typical tale of a female journalist murdered at the hands of the drug cartels in the name of a story that they did not like. Instead, without offering a definitive answer, it represents both the notion of Hernández as a victim and perpetrator. While her friends and closest colleagues trust that she is innocent and wrongfully targeted, General Alejandro Ávila and then head of the Policía Federal Preventiva at the border, who is also eventually killed, believes that she was working for the cartels. As he lay dying after his police caravan is attacked, he thinks to himself: “Todo se sabe, Diana Hernández, esa mujer, era la encargada de repartir el dinero y tirar línea a los demás” (70).

However, it may have been Ávila himself who would have wanted to keep Hernández quiet since she and her radio listeners had criticized him explicitly the previous day: “Me despidi
de ustedes con la siguiente reflexión: el general Ávila y sus trescientos policías preventivos vinieron a la ciudad a provocar. Como dice la gente sencilla, como usted y como yo,
nada más vinieron a agitar el avispero” (59). Whether a random victim of cartel violence, a victim of the cartel’s demands that forced her to speak out against Ávila and his police presence in the city, a perpetrator herself, or even a victim at the hands of Ávila and the law, Diana Hernández’s character calls attention to the key and still convoluted question: Who or what are the real enemies in the ceaseless drug wars? Where corruption and violence have blurred the lines separating allies, foes, and those caught in between, it is no wonder that fear permeates as a constant state of being inside the narco-machine. Unfortunately, more often than not, public women victims are blamed for their own demise in the prevailing government discourse.

During a press conference that was organized by Diana Hernández, one of Cantú’s accused hit men, Álvaro López, explains that it was Ávila that ordered the hit on the former public security secretary: “El Siete-cuatro nos dijo que quien ordenaba la muerte de Cantú era el general Alejandro Ávila, por eso todo iba a estar bajo control. Pensé que Ávila iba a ser el nuevo jefe, que el golpe a los de la municipal iba a ser definitivo” (61). Predictably, López was swiftly killed in his jail cell, two days before the attack against Diana Hernández. If we assume that police chief Alejandro Ávila did indeed order a hit on the reporter, it would fit with the discourse that he uses to portray her not as an innocent bystander, but rather as a woman in cahoots with the cartels. As we have discovered in my previous chapters in more detail, this fits in with the blame-the-victim strategy that has been practiced widely with regard to the femicides in Ciudad Juárez. In this case, by demonizing Diana Hernández through an alleged association with the cartels, it is easy for Ávila to explain that she had her attack coming to her. This way, the crime against her could be perceived as a logical next step in the narco underworld of betrayals and retaliations. At the same time, if the cartels are responsible for both the press conference and the attack against Diana and the eventual murders of López and Ávila, we are again forced to
question who the enemies are and where the violence originates. This becomes the unanswerable query that feeds the mayhem that is the narco-machine.

Another journalist from the station, Pedro Díaz, talks about their radio program and how it serves as a catharsis for the people of the city who are constantly faced with widespread corruption and violence. He explains:

Recibíamos docenas de llamadas en la hora que estábamos al aire y luego toda la tarde. La gente no tiene dónde quejarse y nosotros pasábamos sus reclamos con teléfono abierto. Diana tenía siempre información. Sus fuentes eran muy buenas, muchos amigos suyos le pasaban tips. ‘Diana era muy conocida, fue la encargada de comunicación social, la jefa de prensa de la presidencia municipal, por casi diez años. Tenía muchos conocidos y contactos. Esos contactos los aprovechaba, sabía aprovecharlos y nada más.’ (65)

Apart from making a solid case for the importance of truth-seeking journalism, this also helps to put Diana Hernández’s ambiguous character into the spotlight. While at first we do not doubt that she is totally innocent, the more we hear about her contacts and connections, the more feasible Ávila’s hypothesis about her criminal involvement becomes. When we also find out from Díaz that her friend and narco-lawyer Jesús Ríos was murdered prior to the attack against Diana, supposedly from his ties to El cártel del Golfo that “everyone knew about,” we begin to wonder if her connections run deeper than mere journalist reporting the facts as they are made known to her through her associations. Whatever the case may be regarding Diana Hernández’s role in the events surrounding her attack is relatively insignificant when we think about the important issues and questions that this ambiguity raises. It precisely illustrates the problem with the current discourses pervading the drug war that serve to penalize the victim in favor of a rationally organized and logical crime movement. That is, if even for a mere second people consider that Diana Hernández could have been a narcoperiodista working for the cartels by her
own will, the public discourse supports the rational male criminal and the anti-cartel offensive whose success is measured by the dead and the blood in the streets.

“ Extras en el reparto de la vida” references the omnipresence of el narco, and deals with women who are connected to the cartels on a lower level than that of the queenpin. The narrator explains that the narcotraficantes “[s]iempre están ahí, si se tratara de una película serían las extras. Las extras de la vida” (131). This image of the vigilant cartels always watching is relevant since the story opens with a young girl running through the streets of Tepito in Mexico City. With the metaphor that she is being pursued by death itself, we realize that she is running from her former associates whom she allegedly denounced to the police. It seems that she was tied to them through her cocaine usage and relationship with el Panzeco, one of the heads of the base of the Sinaloa Cartel in Tepito.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of this nameless woman’s fugue through the streets is the fact that it demonstrates the dehumanization of the drug violence’s wrath. At one point when the woman realizes that the traffickers are surrounding her and their vehicle is inching closer, she contemplates the mercantilization of life and considers the potential price put on her dead body:

Se pregunta cuánto pagaron por su vida. Conoce la respuesta: ni siquiera le pusieron precio. Le dieron el encargo de su muerte a un sujeto cualquiera decidido a hacer méritos, a subir en el escalafón de los malos, a ganarse la confianza de los jefes demostrándoles que puede hacer cualquier cosa, como matar a una mujer, o darle su merecido a un chivato. (127)

The fact that her life is so horrifically devalued speaks volumes to the discourse of public women regarding their position as young, single, and in the city contributing to their downfall and ultimate death. Much like we see with the femicides, this nameless woman serves as Ronquillo’s critique of a complete disregard for violence against women that furthers the blame the victim
strategy. Finally, it is el Roñas, one of the men who she denounced that got away from police who executes her.

El Roñas’ escape from authorities and capture of “la muchacha” demonstrates police corruption since:

...recibió el aviso de alguien de su confianza en la policía, algún mando de los judiciales, quizá alguien con poder a quien no le convenía que el líder visible de la organización fuera detenido. Iban tras él. Lo sabían todo. Antes de colgar, el Roñas preguntó quién había sido, quién los había delatado. Había sido la muchacha con el pelo teñido de rojo. La flaca con la que se había encaprichado el Panzeco. (130)

Thus, in order to maintain the logical functioning of the criminal underworld, the disposable female body is sacrificed to send a message of fear and terror to anyone else planning to rat out this particular branch of the Sinaloa Cartel. The fact that the woman is only referred to by the color of her hair merits mention here as well because it supports her portrayal as having no real identity. Likewise, she is depicted in a stereotypically weak manner as one of the many women who flock to men like el Panzeco since he represents a strong masculine figure in their lives: “Él es el enorme padre protector del que de seguro las niñas carecieron. Luego un lugar para vivir sin sobresaltos, la comida diaria y todo lo que les haga falta, el vicio, la droga. A las muchachas las encuentra en la calle, sobran las desvalidas, las solitarias que no tienen a dónde ir” (135).

Additionally, this short story exemplifies Mbembe’s ideas regarding the shift from man to man battles to full blown massacres with complete disregard for the inevitable collateral damage. Not only do they kill the young woman, the cartels wish to send an even stronger message through the use of a bomb:

...[I]ban a abandonar el cuerpo en el corazón del barrio. El cadáver debía aparecer dentro del automóvil negro y sin placas con el que habían ‘levantado’ a la muchacha. Lo más importante era la llamada a Locatel para denunciar que en el automóvil estaba el cuerpo de una mujer asesinada y una bomba. (131)
This bombing is also orchestrated so that another woman, Zalma, takes the blame for the explosion. Initially it is unclear whether she is directly linked to the Sinaloa Cartel because “...su teléfono celular le proporcionaría a la policía mucha información: nada menos que la red de sus contactos en el barrio,” and because the narrator explains that she acknowledges, at least to herself, that she held “el paquete” (137). Nevertheless, she first reports that she was on her lunch break on the way to a restaurant when presumably a bomb was detonated.

Shortly after we find out that the alleged calls that she made from her cellular phone, which put her in the heart of the neighborhood where the Tepito based Sinaloa Cartel members trafficked drugs and weapons, are what lead to her apprehension by authorities as the prime suspect in the “terrorist” attack. The narrator returns to this idea of the commodification and dehumanization of bodies, especially marginalized ones, when he affirms that, “[l]a de Zalma es una historia común en las infanterías del narco formadas por desesperados dispuestos a todo, con legiones de vendedores de la calle y sicarios. Todos son deseables, y lo saben” (137). The usage of the term “infantry” to refer to the lower ranks of the drug cartels helps to reinforce the notion of el narco as a paramilitary force.

The setting of “Extrañas en la isla” takes place in the penitentiary establishment of las Islas Marías in the María Madre jail. Here we read the narrator-reporter’s description of the transformation of the historically infamous penal institution:

Alguien había decidido repoblar las islas, cambiar la historia del viejo penal fundado tras un decreto promulgado por Porfirio Díaz en 1905. La escoria de entonces, los peores delincuentes, la carne de presidio, los monstruos del crimen, serían condenados a vivir excluidos en una isla, apartados de la sociedad que los había engendrado. Pero ahora el de las Islas Marías sería reconocido como un penal modelo, ideal para la rehabilitación siempre postergada en las escuelas del crimen de las prisiones mexicanas. (143-144)

The premise of the narration is that, in addition to exploring various aspects and points of interest on the island, a reporter is inquiring about the lives of female prisoners, Edith,
Leonarda, Margarita, Griselda, and Gladis who share their stories together in the prison garden; sessions that they aptly call “soledades compartidas.”

The reporter is most intrigued by Gladis Martínez’s story when he learns that she hung herself from a tree on the island. While the other women are detained for crimes such as kidnapping, homicide, and petty drug trafficking, Gladis claims to have been transferred to the island due to a five thousand peso hit on her life. While she had no family members and was frequently described as the loneliest of the group, her involvement in the narco-machine came from her drug trafficker boyfriend, Rodolfo “El Cochí.” The cathartic act of telling one’s history through speaking to one another, and to the reporter for that matter, becomes an important motif in this particular narrative. In fact, at one point the reporter asserts that “[h]ablar es una forma de consuelo y de recuperar el pasado, lo que sirve para tener la esperanza de que el presente del encierro quede atrás y venga pronto la vida recuperada” (146). The women in the prison attribute Gladis’ suicide to her inability to share her whole story. They mention that even though she shared some of her life experiences, they never felt like they really knew her (151).

By the same token, through this story we see a pronounced contrast between male and female solitude. The reporter explains that “[l]a soledad, el abandono era más intenso para ellas que para los hombres en prisión. Pronto las abandonan los esposos, los amantes, y hasta los hijos. Sufren la carga económica y la vergüenza social” (152). The irony of Gladis’ case is that in an effort to be with her companion, “El Cochí,” the drug trafficker, she ends up completely alone and ultimately takes her own life as a result. Further, although Gladis never truly opened up to the women in her prison circle; she regains her voice through her diary that doubly functions as a suicide note. The reporter swiftly acquires Gladis’ notebooks from José, another prisoner...
working as head of an alcoholics/narcotics anonymous-like institution called El Tibét, which she frequented before her death.

The reporter discovers that Gladis left her own family behind at 17 to follow the 35 year-old “El Cochi.” She explains that she got involved in the drug business to survive. She writes:

¿Por qué me metí en el negocio? Supongo que para sobrevivir. Las mujeres como yo son desechables. El Cochi y sus amigos coleccionan a las niñas que se deslumbran con ellos...El Cochi se quedaba conmigo semanas enteras, aunque viajaba mucho por lo de su negocio. Yo no sabía de esas cosas, ni quería saberlas, pero era la única manera de que no me volviera una carga, de que no se aburriera, de que no terminara por regresarme a la farmacia a vivir con mi mamá y mis hermanos. Sin querer te enteras de muchas cosas. La gente, los amigos y los hombres que lo cuidaban, las otras mujeres, sobra quién te cuente. El Cochi se encargaba de llevar mota de Sinaloa a la frontera. Un negocio de mucho dinero. Los viajes eran por carretera. En la mejor época, en tráiler, del pinche tráfico en automóviles o camionetas, nada. Era un buen negocio y a mí me ganó la codicia. (165)

In this passage we observe that Gladis used the drug trade as an escape from her life with her family. On the one hand, by choosing to escape Gladis took agency over her own life. On the other, she reinforces patriarchal norms by running away directly to the arms of a man. It seems that it started out as a rebellious teenage relationship with an older man, and before she knew it transformed into a much larger dilemma. Once inside the narco-machine, she had to maintain her position there since even without trying she was kept abreast of so much classified information that could have put her life in danger. In the same sense, she tells us that she basically started in the business to hold onto her man and to not be tossed aside like the various other women who pass through the luxurious, yet often ephemeral, lives of los narcotraficantes.

Finally, at the end of “Extrañas en la isla” the journalistic report states that:

La violencia del narcotráfico cobra la vida de muchas mujeres. Un dato: en el año 2006 fueron asesinadas en Michoacán ciento cuatro mujeres; la mitad de estos crímenes se cometió en zonas de influencia del narcotráfico. ¿Cuántas mujeres están en prisión por delitos relacionados con el narcotráfico? En el estado de Michoacán, de donde prevenía
Gladis, el noventa por ciento de las doscientas treinta y tres mujeres encarceladas están acusadas de delitos contra la salud. La mayoría de ellas son supuestas ‘burreras.” (166-167)

This draws attention to the ever-growing involvement and influence of women in the drug trade. Whether they are queenpins, guilty by association, taking the blame for others, innocent victims, violent perpetrators or linked in any other imaginable way to el narco, we can no longer negate by omission their formidable presence. Through studying transgressive and rebellious female characters, the fictional works included in this chapter open up our minds to possibilities and questions not previously considered regarding women’s complex lives inside the narco-machine.

Different from many of the other female protagonists in this chapter, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s Magda Gilbert is a journalist who disappears without a trace in his novel, Tijuana: Crimen y olvido. This gripping text merits inclusion in this chapter since it completely captures the chaos and mayhem of the narco-machine through both its plot and narrative structure. Like our other authors, Crosthwaite draws inspiration from journalism and comments that:

...la nota roja es un buen punto de partida para un cuento o una novela, brinda los elementos necesarios para la historia. Al escritor le toca explotarla, reinventarla. Mi intención es darle vida y motivos a las víctimas y victimarios que sólo son nombres en la nota roja. Por su naturaleza, la ficción permite especular, inventar, ir más allá de lo que dicta la realidad, que es donde se circunscribe el periodismo. El reportero avanza donde la información lo permite; el escritor puede continuar esa historia guiado por su experiencia y su imaginación. No se cruzan sino que avanzan paralelamente. La buena ficción se alimenta del buen periodismo. (La jornada Jalisco 1)

Here again we take note that starting from a basis in fact does not signify that a narconovela is simply a reflection of reality. As Crosthwaite articulates quite effectively, it is up to the author of

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Crosthwaite’s novel is considered an homage to Jesús Blancornelas, former director of the ZETA newspaper (renowned for exposing drug trafficking and corruption), who survived assassination attempts and died of natural causes at age 70. He is represented by Crosthwaite’s fictional Samuel Ordóñez in the novel. In his interview with Ariel Ruiz Mondragón, Crosthwaite explains that the relationship between Ordóñez and Magda in the book is a reflection of his with Blancornelas.
fiction to reinvent, reimagine, and transcend the world around him. In *Tijuana: Crimen y olvido*, Crosthwaite impeccably combines narrative and journalism in a storyline that captures the absurdity of reality, as well as the endless search for truths that sometimes only fiction can articulate.

The narrative is based on the threats and deaths of journalists and reporters attempting to reveal the stories of the drug war and widespread corruption. In the story, two journalists, Magda Gilbert, from the local papers in Tijuana, and Juan Antonio Mendívil, a reporter at *The San Diego Tribune*, disappear five years after Magda’s boyfriend, Fabián Flores Álvarez is murdered. These gender, employment and geographical distinctions are important since Mendívil’s disappearance receives more media attention than Gilbert’s. Crosthwaite seems to be criticizing the ways in which crime is reported and investigated differently according to location and gender. Since Mexican authorities decided that Magda and Juan had run away together to the Pacific coast and were lying on a beach somewhere, they did not bother to search her house nor her bedroom for clues (15).

The narrator, a writer identified as Luis Humberto, takes it upon himself to investigate their case through piecing their stories together from a series of interviews, Magda’s diary entries, and other forms of information regarding their disappearance and potential whereabouts. After interviewing Crosthwaite, Víctor Díaz Arciniega explains that “...la voz narrativa es intencionalmente muy cercana a la voz del propio autor, lo cual genera una deliberada confusión en el lector, quien no sabrá ni podrá distinguir entre lo propiamente ficticio del relato y lo estrictamente veraz de unos supuestos hechos reales” (172). In the preface that forms part of his story about their lives, the writer reveals his intent to analyze the circumstances of Fabián Flores Álvarez’s death five years earlier in order to identify possible
connections to the disappearance of the journalists. The narrator explains that “[l]as dudas generadas por la investigación policíaca, así como mis propios descubrimientos me motivaron a escribir el presente documento. La intención es elemental pero de vital importancia: esclarecer un misterio” (13). Nevertheless, he also acknowledges his own interpretations of that mystery by informing the reader that “…la narración se basa mucho en especulaciones personales y por lo tanto carece de un final apropiado. Aclaro por adelantado que me tomé ciertas libertades al intentar rellenar los huecos en la narrativa; decidí que el trabajo no sería exclusivamente periodístico sino que tendría elementos de ficción policiaca” (17).

The fact that, much like in real life, Magda and Juan are never magically discovered further links Crosthwaite’s work to Lemus’ notions of the anti-novela. Although unambiguously less bloody than *Perra brava, Tijuana: Crimen y olvido* provides a feverish structure that problematizes more than it resolves. While we may suspect that Magda and Juan’s disappearances are both related to one another in addition to their link to Fabián’s death and assumed involvement in criminal activities, there are no clarifying answers to be found in Crosthwaite’s novel. The writer-narrator underscores this fact when he says that:

> Son víctimas tanta las personas secuestradas como sus familiares que permanecen atemorizados en sus casas. La sensación de impotencia, la incertidumbre, el no hallar respuestas es una forma dolorosa de secuestro. ¿Cómo dar clausura al dolor, cómo decir adiós a un ausente, cómo frenar el torrente de dudas si no hay un cadáver, un por qué, una explicación que satisfaga? Aprendí hace mucho tiempo que en una narración bien hecha no debería haber cabos sueltos; sin embargo la realidad, esa gran instructora, nos dice que los cabos sueltos son el común denominador, que en la existencia de un ser humano habrá dudas sin resolver, preguntas que permanecerán en el aire. La única respuesta es que no hay respuestas. (86)

This quote echoes the precise sentiment that Rafael Lemus expressed in his definition of the anti-novela. Just like *Perra brava*, Crosthwaite’s novel captures the disarray, tension, fear, uncertainty, and hopelessness that the narco-machine produces in society. That is, Crosthwaite
does not have to continuously mention el narco explicitly nor exactly allude to its effects since he is creating the same feelings of unrest in his fictional account of the disappeared journalists.

During his presentation of the novel at the Segunda Feria Internacional del Libro de Azcapotzalco, Crosthwaite emphasizes that he was motivated to write about loss. This is why Magda’s ability (or lack thereof) to adapt to her life after the sudden death of her boyfriend Fabián is an important foundation for the plot. This feeling grows as Magda and Juan’s loved ones, including the writer Luis Humberto himself, experience diverse manifestations of loss. Similarly, the reader is drawn into this feeling of loss and helplessness when the plot and structure of the novel take a drastic turn in section three. Crosthwaite begins his novel with a serious preface that leads the reader to anticipate a story of journalistic integrity and form that will disclose the product of intense investigations. Thus, the first two sections of the story flow like we would expect from a classic investigative tale. By the third section, this author-reader pact is broken when the novel veers dramatically on a different path leaving us disillusioned and confused. This exemplifies Lemus’ proposal for incoherent language and the absurd in the anti-novel.

Nayeli García Sánchez affirms that beginning in the third section:

La narración empieza a bajar por una espiral de confusiones, la focalización de esta sección está centrada en Juan Antonio, por lo tanto, las reflexiones y anécdotas comienzan a ser las de una mente confundida que se ha perdido en el espacio y en el tiempo. El capítulo homónimo de la novela es la confirmación de este laberinto, las seguridades se ven perdidas, el pasado toca el futuro y las situaciones son inexplicables, el discurso aparece fragmentado por la mente dañada de Mendívil. El resto del libro alcanza a L.H.C, de pronto él es parte de la ficción: es castigado por su escritura, por este libro que el lector tiene en las manos. La ficción, que se ha mostrado como tal (o al menos eso parece cuando empieza la trasposición de tiempos y la confusión de realidades entre los personajes), es la realidad: nuestra lectura es el resultado de la historia misma y, a la vez, condena aún más a los personajes. La maldad y la violencia que azotan actualmente a nuestro país: la cotidianeidad de los asesinatos y las desapariciones por el narcotráfico, son los puentes entre Tijuana: crimen y olvido y el lector. Este es el mayor logro de Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, ya que a través de la
ruptura de los pactos de lectura y de la secuencia cronológica en la novela, logra la coherencia y la verosimilitud del texto. Al final ya no importa por qué o cómo desaparecieron Magda y Juan Antonio, sino cómo el mismo narrador (L.H.C: ¿acaso Luis Humberto Crosthwaite?) es el perseguido, el lector puede ser entonces quien lo está vigilando, puede ser quien, con su existencia, despierte a esos personajes ficticios que lo amenazan de muerte, porque ¿no es verdad que la novela se nos había presentado como una investigación real? Ficción y realidad se ven entonces alimentadas y relacionadas a través del lector, es él quien, de la mano del narrador, trenza ambos horizontes hasta quedar inmerso en un acertijo que no termina de resolverse al interior de la novela, sino, con fortuna, al interior del lector. (1)

As García Sánchez points out, Juan struggles with his memory. This is partly due to an automobile accident that results in his son’s death. When he and his now ex-wife Natalia were driving home drunk from a party, Juan, overwhelmed by the child crying in the back seat and Natalia’s nagging, deliberately swerved the car to achieve complete silence. Juan’s fragmented memory and attempts to forget this tragedy form part of the incoherence introduced in the third chapter. Crosthwaite explains that he used this rupture technique to encourage the reader to continue on. That is, the reader is unable to ignore this news story in the already repetitive cycle of disappearances and deaths attributed to the drug war. Instead, through strong character and storyline development, Crosthwaite draws us into the lives of Magda, Juan, their loved ones, and the writer, Luis Humberto, to the point that we long to discover their destiny. In this sense, we become the investigators by the end of the story.

Additionally, Crosthwaite brings up an important point about el narco. When discussing the more than 100 journalists who have been killed in Tijuana since 1988, he laments the fact that they are always blamed on el narco. While he does not negate that this is more than likely the case, Crosthwaite describes how this “sombra grande” that is the narco-machine is sufficient enough a reason to explain away the deaths and disappearances of many. In other words, it almost becomes a meaningless excuse for authorities to neglect pursuing investigations to find out which individual person is culpable for a specific crime. This is the exact opposite problem to
the issue of blaming the femicides on individual actors instead of deeply embedded systemic
gender violence that we saw in chapter two.

Along similar lines, Crosthwaite has difficulty categorizing his novel as part of the
*narcoliteratura* phenomenon. He affirms that the *narconovela* is a commercial strategy and that
his work does not constitute this subgenre since “…no hay pistolas, encapuchados ni camionetas
blindadas, más bien se trata de una obra reflexiva en la que ‘el narcotráfico es una sombra, no
es la médula ni el centro’ (*La jornada*). Rightly so, Crosthwaite does not want to be grouped
into this category of writers that critics like Rafael Lemus dismiss as abandoning “true” literature
for what sells. However, if through literary analyses like my own the so-called *narconovela* as I
have defined it receives the academic attention it deserves, writers like Crosthwaite may be
proud to be considered part of the *narcoliteratura* subgenre.

In an interview with Ariel Ruiz Mondragón, Crosthwaite once again distances himself
from the term *narconovela*. He asserts that:

> Se escriben muchas novelas sobre el narco, pero una veta muy preocupante y poco
> explorada es la desaparición de periodistas y su muerte por lo que escriben. La mía no
> es una narconovela, como las llaman ahora, porque no tiende a hacer esa exaltación de
> la violencia que hacen los corridos y otros libros. De hecho, suceden muy pocos hechos
> violentos en mi libro: no hay grandes balaceras, ni ves a los grandes protagonistas del
> narcotráfico. Pero sí ves a los periodistas y el temor que se manifiesta en la gente, lo
> que me parece que era un tema que no se había tratado a nivel ficción y creo que hasta
> de no ficción; creo que es un tema muy interesante que da mucho más que lo que
> aparece en este libro. (1)

The problem here is the common misconception that *narconovela* equals adulation of violence
and crime. Moreover, the psychological, symbolic, and systemic violence that novels like
Crosthwaite’s flawlessly capture are an integral part of the narco-machine, which is mostly
identified by subjective violence as our author mentions; mass shootings and powerful and
conniving drug lords. I am suggesting that this sentiment of fear that Crosthwaite creates in both
the protagonists and the reader is what makes his text a *narconovela*, and an even better one at that when compared to the cleanliness of Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s critically acclaimed book.

Crosthwaite’s novel, then, could be considered an example of the anti-novela as defined by Lemus since it uses creativity to reimagine reality and reject the traditional crime narrative, transforming into “un juego de espejos [que] recurre a actos mágicos para atrapar al lector y confrontarlo con la temible y violenta realidad” (*La jornada*).

While Crosthwaite declares that *Tijuana: Crimen y olvido* does not fit precisely into the molds of what is traditionally considered a *narconovela* (a negative conception of a narco exalting subgenre that I am attempting to change through the present chapter), he does recognize the critical need to write about *el narco*:

Me parece que, como fenómeno social, todos los efectos del narcotráfico deben de registrarse, se debe escribir sobre ellos. Da la casualidad de que no ha habido una novela fundamental, y si la hay, nadie lo va a decir en este momento, y finalmente eso lo va a decidir el tiempo. Por ejemplo, éste decidió que *Los de abajo* fuera una de las grandes novelas de la revolución, pero en su tiempo no lo fue. (Ruiz Mondragón 1)

In an interview with *Milenio*, Crosthwaite emphasizes the significant act of telling the full stories left behind after tragedy and the brief and censored news clips that accompany them:

…[L]o que me gusta es analizar, estudiar o solidarizarme con eso que deja la violencia. Lo que hay después del propio acto delictivo. El qué pasa con las familias…la del dolor después de la tragedia. Porque el dolor es parte del ser humano y nos da una idea más clara de humanidad. Y en mis personajes está ese dolor, ese luto y la manera en la que tratan de lidiar con ello. Los personajes nos hacen pensar que es permisible moralmente el olvido personal para poder seguir viviendo, pero no así el olvido social. El olvido personal, en definitiva, es de las pocas opciones que nos quedan. El olvido social es el que trae consecuencias muy severas, como el olvido histórico. Creo que el olvido

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86 Acclaimed Mexican journalist Alma Guillermoprieto ponders how to write about narco violence and terror in Mexico. She explains that “…[t]here are only a limited number of ways that readers can be reminded of the desperate acts of human sacrifice that go on every day in this country, or by the now calamitous statistics...[of] people who have been killed in drug-related battles and assassinations since Felipe Calderón took power...the thousands of kidnappings, the wanton acts of rape and torture, the growing number of orphaned children (*New York Times*).
His current novel expresses this pain by illustrating the vacancies felt by all of the people who knew Magda and Juan Antonio. It shows images of pain when the writer-narrator is pulled into the plot and kidnapped and tortured. It embodies the madness and the unanswerable within the narco-machine by refusing to order the chaos and by letting the absurdity speak for itself. Additionally, Crosthwaite makes a great point here as he juxtaposes the symbiotic relationship between personal and social forgetting. While their loved ones will have to attempt to gradually forget them as time passes in order to carry on, society must never forget about the disappeared journalists whose cases have been largely overlooked and blatantly ignored by the police.

In the novel, Magda Gilbert’s voice is represented through the diary that the writer finds in her untouched room. Like the memoirs from the Revolution chapter, Magda’s voice could be conceived of as a feminine retelling of the events of the drug war and the rippling effects of the narco-machine. He is able to trace her first entries to the time in 2004 when she met Juan Antonio at a conference she attended in Tijuana with her cousin Emma. 26 year old Magda is pleased when 46 year old Juan Antonio signs one of his books for her. We later learn that this was a round table discussion about undocumented immigration (145). From this encounter evolves a romantic relationship between the two journalists. It seems that Magda possessed somewhat of a neurotic obsession with books since she always kept a copy of José Agustín’s, La tumba\textsuperscript{87}, in the glove compartment of her car as a good luck charm, and had methodically

\textsuperscript{87} The novel, published in 1964, is considered the first of la Onda due to its free discourse and colloquial language. It narrates the rebellious adolescence of Gabriel Guía, avid music lover and writer. Driven to
arranged six others of his works in her bedroom. The writer describes her diary as a document that became increasingly chaotic and obsessive as it progressed to Magda’s final entry. In addition to her thoughts about and conversations with Juan, she also kept seven letters that she wrote to Fabián Flores, which the writer names “Cartas de despedida.”

Throughout the text, Magda is consumed by the idea of journalists going too far in their reporting: “¿Cómo se sabe cuándo un periodista cruza la línea?...Se puede ver en varias partes del cuaderno, en distintas hojas, en apuntes al margen y en notas garabateadas sin pensar: cruzar la línea, cruzar la línea, cruzar la línea...” (36). The writer suggests that this obsession over crossing the line is influenced by the border relationship between Tijuana and San Diego, and therefore, related to the social positions of both journalists. He explains that “[e]sa frase, que en Tijuana significa atravesar la frontera internacional para ingresar a los Estados Unidos, poseía un significado severo para Magda. La línea era la división entre los periodistas que están a salvo y los que están en peligro de morir” (36). Once again, Crosthwaite emphasizes the different worth attributed to the female body from Mexico and the male body from the United States. In a more metaphorical sense, this crossing the line can be attributed to the fact that the women born of Coatlicue must carefully cross boundaries within their own identities through creative and destructive tendencies.

For her position at the local paper, Magda reports on narco-related crimes and is also charged with occasionally working the night shift. In various moments she describes her
attraction to danger when it comes to her dead ex-boyfriend Fabián and his gun that his Tío Efe gave her, as well as her frequent visits to crime scenes. She describes Tijuana at night while she is working at the newspaper:

Guardia en el periódico, atenta a la frecuencia policiaca. El aparato escupe los ruidos de la noche, cuando Tijuana se vuelve una selva y se apoderan de ella los animales. Mientras los habitantes duermen, su ciudad se transforma. Los policías se encierran en sus patrullas. Recorren las calles, sabiendo que participan en una guerra absurda, sin fin. El narco es quien gana la guerra. (42)

What is worse is that during her night shift, Magda is frequently threatened through the police radio by a man who says that he is watching her, knows where she lives, and will be coming after her.

Likewise, Claudia Guillén discusses Magda’s character development and maternal nature even while immersed in the scene of a crime. She argues that:

Magda, con lo que el lector se adentra sin problema en la lógica interna de esta mujer, quien llegó a guardar bajo la cama la pistola de su novio muerto, Fabián, pero que se enamora perdidamente de Mendívil casi antes de conocerlo—pero después de haber leído sus libros. Magda, además, en su oficio periodístico, dota a cada muerto aparecido en las calles de Tijuana de una identificación muy particular: por su estado, pero igualmente por lo que este estado despierte en ella; es decir, quiere volverlos a la vida, arroparlos; se siente madre, hermana o hija de cada uno de ellos. No importa el número de muertos que haya conocido, el sentimiento sigue ahí, intacto. (1)

It is intriguing that through Magda’s absence, and likely death, her diary embodies this sentiment of care and love in her place. In contrast with the unsettling fragmentation of Luis Humberto’s writings, and Crosthwaite’s novel for that matter, Magda’s disjointed thoughts serve as a source of authentic information in the text. Thus, Magda, apart from her journalism, forms an additional layer to the stacking of writers in the novel through her most intimate memoirs. In one of Luis Humberto’s footnotes to his book, he informs us that Magda often reverted to the third person to talk about herself as if to distance herself from what she was describing (56). While this may be a part of her journalistic training, it also demonstrates how
her personal writings functioned as an escape from her grim narco reports. In sum, Magda’s protagonism is vital to the progression of the novel since she binds all of the characters stories together through her relationships with them.

Magda also documents her conversations with journalist, Samuel Ordóñez, who has experienced more than his fair share of threats and violence including getting shot three times in 1997. The narrator describes how by simply carrying out his profession in the world of the narcos in Tijuana, Ordóñez was forced to live as a prisoner constantly surrounded by permanent bodyguards (81-82). His relationship with Magda helps the writer further connect Tío Efe to the story since Ordóñez remembers him as a ruthless Mexican-American police officer who for many years served as the liaison between the departments in Tijuana and San Diego. In his interview with Mondragón, Crosthwaite highlights the importance of Tío Efe’s distinction as a police officer from the United States since through all the chatter about Mexican police corruption, people forget that it flourishes north of the border as well (1). Magda speculates that Tío Efe hunted down Fabián’s murderer and killed him himself, and believes that the photo that he sent to her is that of the killer. Whatever the facts may be, it is true that Tío Efe taunts Magda long after Fabián’s death, and is probably the one responsible for threatening her over the police radio. She tells Ordóñez:

Me preguntó si yo sería capaz de matar a alguien, me dijo que incluso las personas más puras eran capaces de crueldad extrema, que me podía imaginar con las manos llenas de sangre, sin remordimiento. Jugaba con tu mente por puro placer. Por eso me dio la pistola; y por eso creo que me dejó la foto. (68-69)

This haunting imagery of Tío Efe telling Magda that he could imagine her blood-filled hands makes us further wonder if he has had something to do with her disappearance and probable murder.
With regard to the omnipresence of *el narco* and its terrorizing reign, Magda remarks that in Tijuana people coexist alongside the fear and violence: “Creamos fronteras psicológicas, nos albergamos en el falso sentimiento de seguridad que nos brinda la idea de que la peor violencia se desata en los rincones más alejados de la ciudad, en la otra Tijuana, la desposeída, la tierra de nadie” (100). Like Sinaloa as described by Teresa Mendoza, Tijuana is presented as inseparably linked to the deeply ingrained criminal networks and the complicit forgetting of federal and local officials. Later on Luis Humberto echoes this same outlook when he says that “[e]n una ciudad como Tijuana, donde escribo estas líneas, la maldad es un hecho cotidiano que ha cobrado muchas vidas. Los tijuanenses soportan su existencia manteniéndose al margen de las noticias. Es la única manera que tienen de sobrevivir” (190).

At this same point in the novel, Magda describes leaving a bookstore and then feeling a strong impulse to go back in and buy a book with a “dark cover,” which could be an allusion to the growing *narconovela* readership. Curiously, she proceeds to describe the same cover from Crosthwaite’s actual book that we are reading that depicts a women dressed in a mini-skirt and knee-high boots, holding a gun with a car’s headlights shining straight at her. At the end of the diary entry she asks: ¿Cómo era posible que pudiera describir con tanto detalle la portada de un libro que ni siquiera había visto? (101). This adds yet another element to blurring the lines between fiction and reality in Crosthwaite’s imaginative text. It is almost as if Luis Humberto’s and Crosthwaite’s future stories are haunting the characters in the present, and therefore foreshadowing their sudden and violent removal from society. At the same time, Crosthwaite plays with us as readers by having us assume Magda’s subject position by holding the same book as her.
The second section of the novel is devoted to the interviews the writer conducted with those who knew Magda and Juan. The first is with Pablo Jaime Sáinz, a journalist covering police and crime stories. In one of his comments he exemplifies how *el narco* coexists with the mundane in the newspapers. He explains:

No investigamos, hacemos una que otra pregunta y repetimos lo mismo que los otros periódicos. Escribimos mucho sobre el narco porque es lo que quiere leer la raza. Pero igual los editores te asignan notas menos intensas. Un día puedes trabajar en una nota sobre la venta de arbolitos de Navidad y al siguiente cubrir un multihomicidio. (114)

Here, Sáinz highlights the repetitive nature of reporting on narco crimes. Asking questions and simply listing the violence reported by other newspapers lacks any critical thought about the illicit goings on and how to stop them. This is exactly what Corona proposes as the politics of no-information, or the lack of investigative reporting, which denies any interpretive or contextual insights.

Through an interview with Emma, Magda’s cousin, we learn that our writer-narrator knew her, and that they had met when she was a young girl. At the end of the novel Luis Humberto reveals what he had lost when Magda disappeared in the chapter aptly titled “Lo que perdí.” He explains that they had a brief romantic relationship, and maintained a close-knit friendship until he stopped speaking to her over his jealousy of Juan. He regrets never asking her how she got through it all when she lost Fabián (251). Emma tells Luis Humberto that Magda told her that he was her best friend, but that he did not want anything more, which further fuels his regret and sorrow for cutting off their relationship (121). Emma also informs him that when someone had stolen her copy of *La tumba* from the car, it did not move until she procured another (122).

The writer’s final interview is with Juan’s former wife and prominent public figure with familial ties to the president, Natalia Padilla. While she is extremely reluctant to talk about her
ex-husband, she offers her opinion on his disappearance: “Mira, se largó de mi casa en 1998, ni siquiera se despidió, simplemente se fue. Juan es de esas personas dramáticas que disfrutan al desaparecer; no dudes que pronto vuelva” (125). From Magda’s diary, the writer learned of her and Juan’s conversations regarding memory and forgetting. Natalia elucidates this topic when she explained Juan’s forgetfulness not as a pathology; but rather a convenient excuse: “A Juan le obsesionaba el olvido. Yo le creí al principio de nuestra relación pero luego pensé que eran babosadas, olvidos convenientes. Según él lo explicaba, sus olvidos eran cronológicos, pero de repente lo descubría con algún recuerdo de su infancia” (126). When the writer brings up the accident on April 3, 1998 as the reason for their split, Natalia abruptly ends the interview and orders him to leave. We find out later that this is when they lost their son.

The third section of the novel deals with Juan Antonio Mendívil’s life. Like he had done with Magda before, the writer uses her diary and his conversations with others to construct a timeline of Mendívil’s last known experiences and whereabouts. A former co-worker at The San Diego Tribune, Norma de la Vega, sheds light on the relationship between Juan and an ex-police officer with regard to the novel he was developing. Magda’s diaries also refer to this novel that Juan wanted to help return him to “la escritura verdadera” (99). The writer explains:

Según mi conversación con Norma, Juan mencionó que estaba basando su novela en un expediente que le había entregado un policía jubilado. Se trata de una investigación realizada por Edén Flores entre 1964 y 1967. Juan y el ex policía se reunían en un bar llamado Club 13 para conversar sobre el asunto. (132)

Edén Flores is described as a 70 year old ex-narcotics police officer who struggles to walk after an old gunshot wound (154). Between 1964 and 1967 he investigated the murder of George Méndez who was allegedly killed by known drug dealer Harold Rutheford who had fled to Mexico and who had died in jail almost immediately upon being captured (161).
Harold Rutheford’s storyline is important because it links us to his friend Raúl whose memories often get mixed up with Juan’s. Raúl, Rutheford’s former employee, served as an informant to Flores so that the police officer could bust Harold from his hiding place in Mexico during the sixties. At the end of the fourth chapter, Raúl, speaking as who we think is Juan, confesses to murdering Harold’s wife Deborah. We are further bewildered by the fact that an unidentified narrative voice tells Raúl (Juan?), after he discusses the accident that killed his child, that:

Magda no existe. Es parte de un futuro sin construir, pero ni siquiera es el tuyo. Nunca te casaste con Natalia, nunca tuviste un hijo. Es una alucinación Raúl, una invención. La realidad es ésta: hoy es noviembre 24 de 1967, once treinta y cuatro de la noche. Flores está encima de ti y se dispone a dar otro golpe con el machete, el tercero, el definitivo. (223)

The machete scene refers to the day Raúl led Flores to Harold’s hideout in Mexico. It appears that in addition to probably having a hand in Harold’s swift murder in a San Diego jail shortly after, Flores may have killed Raúl as well. This mixing of memories is not entirely surprising since through his investigation, Luis Humberto ascertains that Juan has some sort of memory problem. Juan admits: “...unas veces no recuerdo quién soy y otras veces recuerdo cosas extrañas, que no entiendo, que no parecen recuerdos míos” (210). Also, since Juan was investigating Rutheford’s case for his novel, it would not be unlikely that he got things mixed up in his already damaged psyche.

If we skip to the end, however, when we see Edén Flores exercising his power and corruption on all of the characters, there is another reason for Juan and Raúl’s duplicity. Norma de la Vega, who thought that it was a joke at the time, told Luis Humberto that Flores believed that:

...Juan era un fenómeno inexplicable, un salto en el orden natural del universo. Según el viejo, Mendívil también fue parte de esa investigación de 1967 porque en aquel.
entonces había un sujeto llamado Raúl que era idéntico a él...[E]l viejo confesó su teoría de que Juan no debería estar en este tiempo ya que pertenecía al pasado. En ese pasado había muerto y debía regresar a su lugar. (188)

As will be explored momentarily, if we believe that Edén Flores is the mastermind behind the entire plot, it is easy to see how he would make Raúl and Juan one in the same as it suits his vision of the events in the novel.

During many of Flores’ conversations with Juan, he talks about the pleasure of killing and how it is a natural act in life. He even shares the story of when his father wanted to leave Sonora for a better life. Resisting this departure, his grandfather kidnapped him to see if his own son would leave without his grandson. As a result of this, Flores’ father left and vowed to return for his family. As soon as he realized that his son had left for the U.S. the grandfather returned to the home in Sonora with his grandson. After receiving many letters from his father and longing to be with him, Flores took it upon himself to get his family across the border minus his grandfather. One day, he grabbed a hunting rifle and pointed it directly at his grandfather informing him that he, his brother, and mother were leaving to meet his father in Los Angeles. Although he did not kill his grandfather in this instance, he talks about his inherent instinct to kill:

¿Sabes que el deseo de matar se hereda? Mi padre fue un hombre bueno; pero yo no pude ser como él, yo era el abuelo vuelto a nacer, yo era el abuelo que se fue a la Revolución y se chingó a cuanto cabrón tuvo enfrente, no por la causa, no por la tierra ni la libertad sino por el placer de matar, la satisfacción de poder quitar una vida, terminar con una historia. (173-174)

Later on, Flores explains what he means by the statement that killing is a natural act. He asserts that evil exists inherently and genetically within every human being, and that the mere act of killing is not what makes someone evil. Rather,

...[la maldad] es volver a la escena del crimen y regocijarte con la ausencia que originaste: darle seguimiento a la muerte. Maldad es convivir con la familia que
afectaste y darles dinero y cariño y permitir que te quieran y te admiren. A la vuelta de un par de años te pedirán ser el padrino de primera comunió del hijo mayor del difunto. Tú y él en la iglesia, ¿te imaginas?, tú sabiendo que te chingaste a su papa y disfrutándolo. Maldad es entrometerse con los seres queridos de ese que mataste y escucharlos llorar, luego regresar para impedirles superar ese luto; jugar con ellos, sentirte superior, causarles otra tragedia, tal vez, para continuar el ciclo. Maldad es arrimarse a la mamá del difunto, cuando están en su lecho, moribunda, cuando ya te considera un sustituto del hijo que perdió y agradece que estás a su lado, acercarte a su oído y decirle que tú fuiste el que le robó a su hijo y describirle cómo rogó por su vida y cómo le hiciste para que no se muriera tan pronto para escucharlo chillar. Hay gente que mata y gente que sabe matar. (177-178)

After uncovering Juan’s connection to Edén Flores, it is obvious to the writer that he is the same Tío Efe who had left the photo for Magda after Fabián’s funeral. He wonders if taunting Magda was all part of an elaborate game, and if Flores was keeping tabs on her. Admittedly, despite the fact that he could comprehend a connection between Fabián’s death and Magda’s disappearance, the writer is unaware of any potential motive on Flores’ part for the disappearance of Juan Antonio Mendívil:

Por más que mi investigación vinculara a Flores con la muerte de Fabián y la desapaición de Magda, no había un motivo claro para que el viejo dañara también a Juan. ¿Sería éste un caso de la definición de maldad que confesó el ex policía al calor de las copas: <<entrometerse con los seres queridos de ese que mataste y escucharlos llorar, luego regresar para impedirles superar ese luto; jugar con ellos...>>. (190)

Edén Flores’ protagonism in the novel becomes slightly clearer in the fictional epilogue.

After revealing that he had stopped writing to surround himself with Magda’s things in order to understand her love for a man his age that was frustrated and angry at the world, Luis Humberto decides to quit the book entirely. He explains that in his own personal life, it was Juan that was the villain, and the only reason that he investigated his disappearance was in hopes to further elucidate Magda’s. Suspiciously, after this disclosure, Luis Humberto’s house catches on fire, and a man named Valentín Rosales calls him to request his work on a journal based in Tijuana specializing in northern Mexican politics. After a strange series of events where
he picks Rosales and his wife up from the airport and proceeds to do crystal meth with the man, Luis Humberto is attacked at his car. Afterward we discover that Edén Flores orchestrated the entire meeting in order to capture and terrorize the writer, and force him into finishing his story.

In the end, Edén Flores, or Tío Efe, transforms from potential suspect to full blown puppet master (283). Crosthwaite calls him ominous because he seems to be everywhere meddling in everyone’s affairs. In this way, he is el narco incarnate that simultaneously exists nowhere and everywhere with its black cloud hanging over society. Further, Flores exemplifies Mbembe’s conception of the modern sovereign State that must both protect its citizens (biopolitics) and dictate who may live and who must die (necropolitics). It is also essential to point out that the figure of Coatlicue also seems to embody these biopolitical and necropolitical characteristics through her maternity and murderous nature.

According to Crosthwaite, like el narco, Edén Flores:

...siempre planea cosas malas para jugar con el destino de las situaciones en que viven las personas. Pero también no está tan alejado del gobierno mismo, que trate de controlar el comportamiento de la sociedad, como para tener, de alguna manera, todo amarrado...Edén Flores me encanta, porque es un personaje de muchas posibilidades. Al final él mismo se considera prácticamente el gran siniestro de la historia y dice: ‘¿Saben qué? Yo controlo absolutamente todo y nadie lo sabe.’ Entonces dices: ‘¿Pues quién es?’ O sea que arriba de todos los políticos, de todos los cártel, resulta que hay una sola persona que maneja todo, y que ni aquellos lo saben. (Ruiz Mondragón 1)

Flores reminds the other characters that the depths of evil are limitless, and that they are often too unaware of its gaze. The ex-police officer tells Luis Humberto that since he was so wrapped up in his work investigating Magda’s disappearance, he did not even notice that he was stalking him. Flores forces Luis Humberto to finish his work as he is dying to see how it ends. He even seems to invent additional sinister acts to enhance the plot when he asserts that the photo that he sent Magda to taunt her was actually Juan’s. Although at this point in the novel space and
time are transcendent and anything is possible, based on the chronology of their disappearances
the writer deems it unlikely that it was Juan’s face that Magda saw in that photograph.

In his own words, Flores endorses his phantasmagoric presence, which serves as
another allusion to the narco-machine:

Aunque sabes muchas cosas de mí, sigo siendo una persona anónima. No me ves en
carteles de la FBI, no soy de los más buscados. Después de tanta chingadera que he
hecho, mi nombre sigue siendo una incógnita. Pero en México no pasa nada sin que yo
lo sepa y estoy detrás de todo: narcos, policías, políticos. Ellos saben que existo y todos
me temen sin saber siquiera mi nombre. Ahora lo van a leer en tu libro, quizá sumen dos
más dos y entiendan quién es el verdadero Edén Flores. Por eso quiero que termines de
escribirlo; tú explica que soy más cabrón de lo que te imaginabas, quiero que lo sepan
todos. (284)

As Grillo and Reguillo so fittingly described, el narco is the menacing presence to which no one is
able to neither tie down nor put a face to. Similar to Flores, we will not see its face on the Most
Wanted list either. While Flores can serve as a re-articulation of the devil, the president, or any
host of other prominent identities, his representation as the man behind the evil in the story
likens him to the entire illicit criminal industry related to drug trafficking.

Through Flores’ character, Crosthwaite exemplifies the difficulty of writing el narco and
its horrific path of destruction. Flores expresses this idea to Luis Humberto while simultaneously
confessing to Fabián’s murder:

Puedes imaginar secuestros y tortura, me dijo, pero ¿cómo escribir realmente de ellos si
no los has vivido? Fabián chilló como un niño, exclamó por su mamá, se convirtió en un
bebé aterrorizado. Le llegó la muerte y ni siquiera se dio cuenta de que iba a morir. Era
un niño envuelto en sí mismo, orinado, asustado, queriendo escapar de esa pesadilla
maldita y regresar corriendo con sus papás. Quería sentir de nuevo ese calor cito fugaz
en los brazos de su mamá. La regresión es encantadora, me dijo Flores. Tú deberías
saberlo. (258)

As fear is consuming our writer, he is experiencing exactly what the journalists he investigated
felt when they wrote a news story. Thus, instead of telling us what this fear might be like, in a
neatly ordered and minimally violent plot, Crosthwaite shows us and makes us feel the
uneasiness. Just like the writers who risked their lives to report the news, Luis Humberto is ultimately risking his life by trying to tell their stories.

In this chapter I have explored the narconovela and its various nuances as a product of the narco-machine. Within this emerging subgenre, which I consider to be a unifying categorization for the greater academic appreciation of the texts, I have investigated the ways in which female protagonists relate to the violence that the drug world affords them. While some have participated publicly as violent perpetrators and others as victims of crime, all of the women rebel, at least in some ways, against traditional roles while simultaneously upholding others. As evidenced by the previous chapters, this paradoxical relationship to gender roles seems to be more pronounced during explosions of violence at the border. Thus, like Coatlicue, the war machine, and the femicide machine, the narco-machine represents a complex system where survival and death are constantly contradictorily put at odds. Whether they commit crimes or write about them, or withhold the patriarchy in one breath or contest it in another, there is no doubt that the females in my study are consciously active protagonists in the public sphere regardless of their distinct historical context. Some of them have seen and touched more blood than others, and some have wielded more power. Whatever the setting or the circumstance, they have proven their relevance to be protagonists and have an agency worth noting and worth remembering in border literature and elsewhere.

Teresa Mendoza, captured within the pages of an extended and elaborate narcocorrido, demonstrates how a drug queenpin can metamorphose into a mythological legend. Perhaps it is because Pérez-Reverte revered the narcocorrido so much that he turned his narconovela into a heroic adventure story exalting the most (in)famous female drug trafficker in southern Spain. Through her constant struggle for survival, we witness Teresa Mendoza defy the male code of
honor and golden age of drug trafficking, manipulate a still very male-dominated drug world, use others to achieve her position, and isolate herself from others to become the cold and calculated criminal she is at the novel’s end. Despite the fact that Pérez-Reverte tried to tame and domesticate el narco, the many instances of objective violence and widespread corruption expose an essential introduction to the narco-machine’s global reach.

Víctor Ronquillo’s stories have explored the many facets of marginalized female identities influenced and affected by the drug war from queenpins and other criminals to journalists. He has demonstrated how drug traffickers have become the “movie extras” of life who are always there lurking in the background similar to the underlying heart of darkness in Mexican letters as described by Jean Franco in the introduction to this dissertation. In tales where commercialization and dehumanization coexist with the solidarity of female prisoners and fellow journalists, we catch a glimpse of how tragic situations pull people both apart and together, as well as reinforce norms and break them. Just like we saw in the previous chapter regarding the horrific femicides, a semblance of hope still exists through the women who are motivated to defy social norms and step up to be the leaders in their families.

What Rafael Lemus imagined in 2005 regarding the anti-novela came true in Orfa Alarcón’s Perra brava and Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s Tijuana: Crimen y olvido. The former fearlessly painted vivid images of violence rarely described out loud, while the latter demonstrated the absurdity of reality through a more psychologically, symbolically, and systemically imagined violence. Alarcón pushed the reader to the abject limit and reimagined a brutal reality through harsh language and a narrative as homicidal as its protagonist. Crosthwaite exemplified the almost incoherent prose that Lemus longed for through Juan’s delusions and fragmented memory. When this confusion combines with the omniscient puppet
master of the story, Edén Flores, the reader turns into the investigator, or even voyeur, desperately longing to know what will happen to Luis Humberto and his narrative’s denouement. Like Flores, our desire to continue reading forces writers like Luis Humberto to continue with their craft.

As the drug war has progressed and grown more sinister, violent, chaotic, and absurd, so too has the literary production in its wake evolved. Through my analysis we have observed how the narconovela constitutes much more than a resolvable detective story. On the contrary, it explores complex issues and dynamic themes such as the role of the female protagonist in a hyper-masculine illicit narcorealm. Crosthwaite echoes this idea by asserting that he is unable to conceive of a literature where the characters do not suffer in a similar way when compared to common individuals:

…[E]n el género policiaco tiendes a ver estos detectives a los que no sucede nada...o los personajes acartonados, como las mujeres que siempre tienen que ser voluptuosas...Me gustan personajes que tengan conciencia, que traten de acertar en sus pasos, pero que fracasan muchas veces, y me parece que es la historia de la humanidad: seguimos tropezando con las mismas piedras...por eso allí están [las] pérdidas [y] derrotas. (Ruiz Mondragón 1)

The literature included in this chapter has shown a variety of women who, through continued failures, hardship, infrequent glimmers of hope and even death, epitomize the complex nature of female subjectivity and, by extension, humanity.

In an intriguing study on the American television franchise CSI, Michelle Byers and Val Marie Johnson argue that its criminology narratives illustrate “...how fiction and fantasy can bring pleasure and catharsis through engagement with risk in a relatively formulaic manner, and a repeated resolution in ‘real’ life” (xx). While narconovelas do not typically enjoy CSI’s

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89 In his book, Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America (2008), O. Hugo Benavides discusses the telenovela as an emotional escape for Latino viewers. He explains that they
systematic resolutions, they do represent an alternative fictional space where risky topics can be explored safely. Along these same lines, Carlos Fuentes, no stranger to the importance of imagination in literature, explored the narco-machine in fiction shortly before his death\(^9\). He fittingly describes the prevalence of *el narco* as a theme, setting, or subgenre by stating that “[t]here have been times without novels, but never a novel that does not somehow reflect the times. And dealing with the times is to deal with history.” Perhaps, then, instead of condemning the *narconovela* and its propensity to deal with reality, we should cultivate its strengths in articulating and imagining what cannot be said aloud. It may in fact be that when it comes to the recent surge in drug violence, the reality is even more unimaginable and horrific than the fiction that attempts to contain it. Even if all *narconovelas* were to embody the illusion of an ordered chaos and hopeful resolution, they would still help us to (re)imagine reality, explore female protagonism, and learn from senseless tragedy.

\(^9\) *La voluntad y la fortuna* (2008) is told from the perspective of a severed head recounting his life and affairs with the drug trade. *Adán en edén* (2009) satirizes the government crackdown on crime among other relevant issues in Mexico.
Conclusion

Sergio González Rodríguez has said that “Mexico exists somewhere between the memory of its past revolutions and the certainty of its current decline” (50). He argues that the Mexico of the previous century has been transformed, little by little, into the post-Mexican nation. The years 2000-2010 were economically lost, and a good deal of Mexico’s labor force—more than ten million people—had to leave to find work: the other ‘illegal’ merchandise entering US territory, in addition to drugs. The war machine, crime machine, and femicide machine arose and were imposed in this context...Given this situation, two possible futures emerge: the evolution of a new, unforeseen model of organization, or the further devolution into a state with no functional order at all. (96-97)

Indeed, González Rodríguez’s assessment of the current situation in Mexico is harsh and his outlook for the future seems bleak. Nevertheless, he illustrates how these violent machines have flourished as a result of economic and societal reconstruction. While the two possible futures defined by a new model of organization or a dysfunctional or nonfunctional State are clearly conceivable given the recent explosions of violence in Mexico, they also leave out the middle ground, or the process of arriving at these destinies.

By the same token, it is essential to add to González Rodríguez’s declaration the idea that dysfunction and function are not necessarily mutually exclusive as we have seen through the dual, and arguably multiple, creative and destructive identities conjoining through Coatlicue’s and her daughter’s veins. As we have witnessed in my analysis, Chicana intellectuals:

...appropriate the goddess as a symbol representative of female strength derived from an Amerindian cultural past that subverts preconceived, western binary systems...[Ana Castillo] uses Coatlicue as an example of a non-Western vision that goes beyond binary opposition. For Castillo, Coatlicue offers an alternative possibility where the features of life and death may coalesce without any inherent contradiction. (Chablé 333)
Hence, chaos and organization will always exist alongside one another and must continuously be conceptualized through this seemingly contradictory relationship.

Through the novels in my study we have analyzed the complex nature of violence, its systems and structures, and its relation to female agency, among other related themes in order to explore the conditions and processes that support, sustain, and sometimes defy it. We have discovered how fiction has the potential to lead to community, solidarity, and justice by implicating much of society as an accomplice to impunity and forgetting. In this way, the works herein support a critical lens toward an essential (re)imagining of the past and current Mexican State in order to promote divergent thinking about the violence and the possibilities for a new model of organization and a better future.

The main purpose of this dissertation has been to show how fictional articulations of female agency and active female participation in war, gender violence, and criminal violence are portrayed in narratives about the Mexican Revolution, its aftermath, and the crisis of the seven-decade old post-revolutionary State, with its sequel of social problems, such as recurrent femicides and unprecedented levels of narcoviolence. Through close analysis of the novels based on Slavoj Žižek’s sideways glances at violence, and other pertinent theorizations related to violence, death, memory, solidarity, gender, agency, and nostalgia, I have uncovered the ways in which fiction reveals both the maintenance and resistance of corrupt societal conditions and structures, including prevailing patriarchal discourses. Additionally, I have also discovered how the novels and their fictional characters perform acts of remembrance for the real lives of these significant Mexican and Mexican-American women born of Coatlicue.

In the first chapter, I have shown how Nellie Campobello, Mónica Lavín, and their characters articulate the cruelty of the Mexican Revolution while simultaneously extolling the
virtues and emphasizing the experiences of the unsung heroes from mothers and children to
soldaderas, nurses, and other male soldiers often villainized through official historical accounts. While the novels’ insistence on love and hope in a violent world is unrelenting, no text included in this chapter relegates female writing or action to the sentimental sphere. On the contrary, they provide insight into the dynamic female experience during the Mexican Revolution, where the emotional impact is only one of the many factors considered. Through the eyes of children, young women, and a host of other essential actors, perceptions and experiences of violence are juxtaposed to many instances of love and humanity. The usefulness of material culture, nostalgia, and memory in evaluating the past and effecting a better future especially for those in the Mexico-U.S. border region demonstrates how fiction can inspire critical thinking, an awakened consciousness, and informed decision making, among other reflective tools.

In chapter two I turned to a group of disappeared women, this time both ignored and physically missing, in order to explore the various manifestations and impact of gender violence in the region. I commented on how women work together as investigators and activists in an endless quest to find answers as to why so many third-world women laborers are continuously being abused and killed in Ciudad Juárez, as well as in many other places. By forming their own communities united by female-centered knowledge, the women affected by such a problematic situation oppose the attitudes of indifference and impunity held by authorities and the Mexican State. Instead of simply following the traditional male detective novel that normally investigates and tracks predators to catch them and solve the mystery in the end, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Kama Gutier, and Stella Pope Duarte expose the societal, social, and institutional conditions that continue to precipitate and maintain this long period of femicidal violence and other abuses, together with drug trafficking and other illicit crimes at the border. As they expose the violence
and shift the focus from causes to conditions, these novels suggest and promote a public memory and grieving of the victims through persistent activism over time.

Female protagonism in the *narconovela* has represented the primary focus of chapter three. Through a close reading of the ways in which women use their position, power and agency to enact violence or to combat it, I determined that the journalists, queenpins, and other women related in some way to drug trafficking both maintain and challenge patriarchal discourses that mythologize, ignore, and even blame them for their particular situations. Here, too, I have revealed the contrasts between those works that purify the violence and those that seek to display it in all of its cruelty and absurdity. Once again, as we saw in the previous chapters, the *narconovelas* illustrate the complexity of violence through allusions to the various machines and *la coatlícuentidad*, and therefore engage in a less simplistic depiction of its wrath and the manifold conditions that perpetuate it.

Additionally, this chapter has effectively shown that, contrary to Rafael Lemus’ criticism of northern Mexican writers as mere reproducers of reality, narcofiction indeed moves beyond imitation to daringly engage with the darkness and submerge itself within the chaos of such widespread criminal violence. Arturo Pérez-Reverte, Orfa Alarcón, Víctor Ronquillo and Luis Humberto Crosthwaite have exemplified the many intricate layers of narcoviolence and have proven that *narconovelas* and their female characters represent more than just glorifications of the drug trafficking world.

My comparative approach to analyzing representative novels related to the Mexican Revolution and the post-revolutionary femicidal and drug trafficking plagued State has been vital to an understanding of how writers react and respond to violence through fiction and how they highlight female protagonists as crucial players to both its preservation and demise over
time. Thus, as the women born of Coatlicue act as creators and destroyers of life, or both, they concurrently serve as creators and destroyers of violence. Through a geocultural focus on women from northern Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border, I have been able to interpret female experiences of violence in more abstract and metaphorical ways, while simultaneously emphasizing the local impact of the particular precarity of violence when it explodes in this dynamic region. In this way, I have engaged in critical dialogue with the fields of Latin American, Chicano, and Border Studies through in-depth analyses of recently published novels and new insights into familiar texts and theories.

Moreover, extending beyond the novels’ depictions of women living inside these violent machines into the more abstract discussion of the interplay between reality and fiction in articulating the events of the Revolution, the Femicides, and the Drug War, we can conclude that imagination and divergent thinking plays a prominent role in the conceptualization of problems and their solutions. While fiction is hardly the first place that we should turn to encourage and sustain activism in the actual world and in environments in which the real subjects and objects of this violence exist, it is still a valuable resource that can bring about change in the form of new perspectives and reflections that ideally lead to more tangible acts of humanity, solidarity, and global justice.

By undertaking themes related to urgent current issues, either inadvertently or directly, all of the authors seem to address fiction’s influence on society. In other words, since in most cases they have been inspired and informed by actual events, journalism, history, the writing process, and other verosimilar and metafictional elements, the novels blur the lines between the real and the imaginary in order to promote a more profound understanding of women in violence. All of the female characters included in my analysis and the real women that they
represent have been fighting in one way or another against the devastation and disappearance of their voices and bodies. This is why it becomes necessary for all forms of media to unremittingly acknowledge and reaffirm their significance and value. If the silence of history and impunity is broken at all levels of discourse, there will be hope for a better future in Mexico and elsewhere.

As novels and other texts continue to portray the seemingly endless violence most notably intensified in the Mexico-U.S. border region, we will see additional instances where writers of fiction and journalists alike combine their talents to engage in a critical dialogue regarding the post-revolutionary State and the future of Mexico and its asymmetrical relationship to the United States within the global neoliberal economy. As I have illustrated in this dissertation, among the many institutional factors that contribute to the current state of affairs is the violence and human rights violations created by neoliberal economic policies. As a way to outline my future research endeavors, in conclusion I would like to highlight two examples of visual and cyber culture that complement my literary hypotheses in this manuscript.

First, in a glaring example of how “...global culture has arrived at an incredible degree of amnesia and indifference,” González Rodríguez reports that in 2010, the US cosmetics company MAC, in collaboration with high fashion line Rodarte, launched a makeup line inspired by the femicides. Along with the pale makeup and eyeshadow reminiscent of blood and grey matter came a 100,000 donation to civil organizations on the border (92-93). After public outcry led by cosmetic bloggers, MAC cancelled the campaign whose makeup bore names like: factory, Juárez, ghost town, and quinceañera. While the Rodarte company statement claimed that the inspiration behind the makeup collaboration was a celebration of the beauty of the desert
landscape, the haunting images of pale models and bloody-looking cosmetics quickly dispel this notion. One blogger and professed MAC makeup lover combined the recognizable images of the pink crosses documenting the dead in Juárez and *la calavera* invoking the Day of the Dead in Mexican culture with some of the models and cosmetic images from the campaign. This duality of beauty and horror points directly to our *Coatlicue* as we have discussed her in this dissertation.

This is the most absurd, yet perfect illustration of Žižek’s conceptualization of the post-industrial rich who, secluded in their own world, purposefully ignore and deny the cruel reality outside, yet constantly refer to it. This seemingly paradoxical notion is exactly what is exemplified through the MAC cosmetics campaign. While people do nothing to dismantle the institutions that perpetuate objective violence, they perform activism by donating to the cause. Different from throwing money at campaigns like those that involve purchasing pink products for breast cancer\(^\text{*1}\) without ever truly knowing exactly what the corporation spends a donation on, the MAC initiative blatantly makes a mockery of tragedy and the lives of the women taken by femicide as if it were all a part of a B-grade Hollywood horror movie. Confirming our conclusion that a vast majority of people the world over are complicit to the violence and impunity in places like Ciudad Juárez, González Rodríguez condemns the company, asserting that “...MAC joins the drug traffickers, the economically and politically powerful, and the authorities that have protected them throughout the years” (94). As long as powerful individuals think that an advertising campaign like the MAC debacle is a good idea, and as long as they exhibit extreme indifference for the suffering of others and flagrantly continue to systematically

\(^\text{*1}\) The documentary *Pink Riboons, Inc* (2012) talks about the commodification of breast cancer and women’s bodies and the ways in which the pink campaign distorts reality and the real facts about the disease.
ridicule their existence by mocking them and tossing money at the problem, more dialogue is necessary in all of its forms to influence societal changes for global justice and peace.

Secondly, *El Blog del Narco*, like the works of literature that I have analyzed, offers an alternative space to official journalism for depicting the ubiquitous narcoviolence at the border and all over Mexico. As a result of the participation from the cyber community, the blog takes on the responsibility of combatting the crimes, silence, and impunity that the official Mexican State does not effectively acknowledge. As I have stressed multiple times through the literary corpus herein, “the Fugitive Reporters” of *El Blog del Narco* demand that we use our knowledge of violence and the systematic silencing of marginal voices to effect change: “If we are not here tomorrow or next week or next month, please spread the message that we should not fear those in power. We are Mexico, we are good, and there are more of us” (Excerpt from *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War; Carroll The Guardian*). The fact that the person speaking to media outlets about this book clandestinely identifies as female is extremely pertinent to our analysis of women in violence.

As the various authors and critics here have suggested, the academy and communities around the world must work in conjunction to tackle persistent violence and systematic human rights abuses in Mexico and elsewhere. A combined approach that examines both subjective violence as the perturbation of what is normal and objective violence as the invisible force that sustains that normalized state will make important strides in the fight against violence in all of its forms. As the academic study of violence in fiction advances, and as the violent machines compel writers to tell their stories, more scholars will need to conceive of these texts as more than mere reflections of reality by directly engaging in additional profound analysis and close readings. To illustrate, it is not enough to simply argue that a surge in narcofiction is a result of
writers capitalizing on a best-selling theme. While this popularity is certainly an important factor, it is not the only one. As we have seen through my study, there are many more layers to *narconovelas*, novels about the femicides and works of historical fiction that recognize crucial female protagonism. The literary corpus of this dissertation has demonstrated that, like a true war story, these novels are never only about the representation of battles and violence. The works have shown that fiction depicting war, femicide, and narco machines are invaluable to the exploration of women and violence in the U.S.-Mexico border region and beyond.
Works Cited


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