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PERSPECTIVES ON SPANISH, LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINX TELEVISION AND CINEMA

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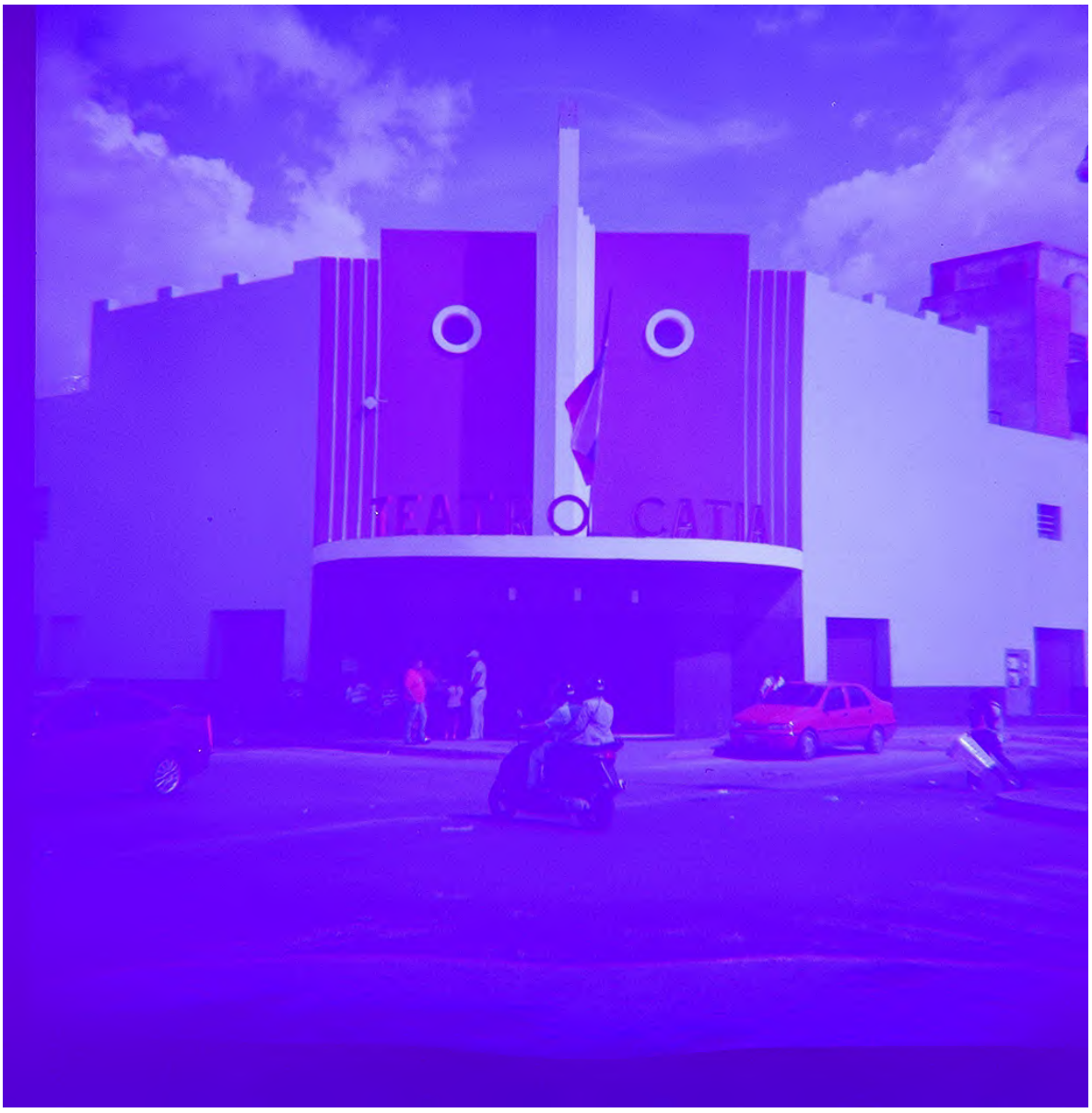

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PRESENTATION

Throughout the 20th and the 21st century, cinema and television have become privileged windows of observation into the public History and private histories of Spain, Latin America, and the Spanish speaking world at large. Films of all genres, documentaries, literary adaptations, as well as shows produced for television offered the possibility to present, represent, mirror, distort, and even transform many aspects of reality. As such, movies, documentaries, telenovelas and tv series have also become the object of interest for academics and scholars who recognize them as complex discursive and artistic constructions that not only reflect but also have the capacity to shape private and public elements of life. We are pleased to present this special issue of *Ciberletras* dedicated to the study of cinema and television. The articles included in "Perspectives on Spanish, Latin American and Latinx television and cinema" engage with a wide range of audiovisual productions spanning from canonic 1970's Spanish films to contemporary Chicano tv series, thus offering a comprehensive view of the vast panorama of the audiovisual cultures in the Hispanic world. In their analysis, the authors make use of various critical tools and theoretical frameworks that best illuminate their approach to questions of politics, identity, gender, historical memory, and political dissent. Therefore, there isn't a unifying thematic or conceptual thread. What brings them together is their shared approach to visual language as a powerful signifying construct that requires specific strategies of interpretation and as an object that also has the potential to become a transformative sociopolitical force. The pieces here included pay respectful attention to the specificity of cinematography and audiovisual techniques of production while also examining the sociopolitical impact they have amongst audiences at a local and a global scale.

The first three articles are grouped under the section "Screens and Mirrors: Series and Television." They deal with television productions. The opening two pieces constitute a diptych study of the television series *Undone* (2019). Scholars Janis Be and Aaron Aguilar-Ramírez co-authored two independent but interconnected articles that examine from complementary perspectives the fragmentary narrative of the Mexican-American protagonist, Alma. The first one looks at the innovative use of the rotoscope and how this technique reflects the altering realities and fragmentary narratives of the protagonist. The second article proposes a reading of the show from the perspective of Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of *nepantla* and *la nueva mestiza*. The third article of the issue examines the representation of Afro-Latinx characters in Spanish productions *Sky Rojo* (2021) and *Toy Boy* (2019). Richard Ardila looks at the different ways in which racial stereotypes of Blackness and Latinidad recast and perpetuate neocolonial hierarchical divisions.

The second section, "Memory and Ecstasy: Revisiting Canonical Movies" includes a set of articles focusing on reinterpretations of canonical films from Spain and Argentina. Kristiva Bivona returns to Albertina Carri's film

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Los Rubios (2003). Her study revisits the much celebrated and studied film under a new critical light: the concept of "mnemonic care." Sergi Rivero-Navarro, on the other hand, looks back at a milestone of Spanish cinema: Ivan Zulueta's 1979 movie *Arrebato*. Through a meticulous and very technical examination, he sheds light on an unexamined element of the film: the use of "rapture" and "pause" as strategic cinematic tools that punctuate and determine the protagonists' search for ecstatic moments of escape.

The next section, "Screening Vampires and Other Monsters of History," includes pieces by Walfrido Dorta and Alison Maginn. In their contributions, they discuss how the presence of the monstruous and the use of horror and gothic tropes serve as means to critique sociohistorical contexts of violence, social unrest and precarity. Dorta looks at *Sangre Cubana* (2018), a vampire film that is part of the new wave of amateur Cuban cinema distributed through black markets and alternative online venues such as YouTube. Maginn studies Guillermo del Toro's globally distributed blockbusters dealing with the Spanish civil war: *El espinazo del diablo* (2001) and *El laberinto del fauno* (2006). Notwithstanding the disparity of resources, networks of distribution, and global resonance of the movies examined by these two scholars, Dorta and Maginn recognize that by recasting elements from horror movies and gothic aesthetics, movies propose a reflection on the social anxieties that frame the sociohistorical context of production of the films they analyze.

The closing section, "Reading The Screen: Literary Adaptations**,"** showcases an article by Andrea Meador Smith. It deals with Claudia Llosa's 2021 adaptation of Samantha Schweblin's novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014). Meador Smith engages in an original reading of both the literary and the visual texts. Her study highlights how both the writer and the director, each appealing to the specific resources of literary and cinematographic languages, underscore the mutual fascination between the two female characters of the story. Meador Smith understands this element of feminine desire under the light of Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstruous feminine" and invites the reader to interpret this gesture as a critique of patriarchal Argentine normative rules.

Marco Ramírez Rojas

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ESSAYS

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Soul Searching: Alter(nat)ing Realities in *Undone*

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Whitman College

Abstract

This essay traces the complex interplay of hybridity and doubling present throughout in the sci-fi television series *Undone* (2019). We show how highly experimental audiovisual techniques accentuate the myriad identities and overlapping realities that Alma, the protagonist, both represents and experiences. At the same time, these innovative formal and structural devices position the viewer to experience narrative and temporal instability together with the protagonist. Particular attention is paid to the uniquely affective style of rotoscoping and the significance of recurring literal as well as figurative uses of the mirror. The protagonist becomes both the subject and object of the gaze even as the fixture becomes a conduit or portal to distinct geographies and temporalities. We argue that much as the show's innovative and elaborate visual style reflects personal (and ultimately narrative) hybridity, the mirror itself catalyzes new ways of seeing.

Key Words: *Undone*, rotoscoping, rotoscoped mirror hybridity

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> Every trauma is a trace… The external event, whether it occurs as a form of prolonged structural oppression as in the case of racism or colonialism or as an instantaneous event like a car accident, inscribes itself in the psyche.
>
> *The Future Life of Trauma*, xi

> "'Promise me, mijo. No jumping through mirrors looking for other dimensions. No digging up the courtyard looking for mines. And no cutting yourself in half. I need you to be… normal'"
>
> Matt Mendez, *The Astronaut*, 233

Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Kate Purdy's *Undone* (2019), the West's first serialized television program to employ the meticulous technique of rotoscoping, is a fascinating production about a Mexican American woman named Alma ("Soul") who survives a traumatic car accident and subsequent coma. As a result, the protagonist seems to develop extraordinary new abilities which allow her consciousness to travel through time and space, even as she sees visions of her deceased father, leading her to question and later investigate the established facts of his death. Alma's new abilities disrupt what is otherwise presented as a mundane existence. Grappling with relentless tedium, Alma is drawn to the allure of a fantastic or imagined utopia as a form of resistance against the norms of capitalist and patriarchal society. With a mixture of curiosity, trepidation, and wonder, the protagonist opts to explore what she perceives to be multiple, superimposed realities even as she struggles to navigate ongoing deceptions, bewildering events, and disorienting situations that lead to an uncertain future. At the same time, she is frequently overcome by dark family secrets that emerge unpredictably from a suppressed past. Yet Alma refuses to take prescribed medication for PTSD or heed warnings regarding a genetic predisposition for schizophrenia. Throughout its eight-episode first season, the show's elaborate non-linear structure makes use of flashbacks, parallel storylines, and narrative looping to revisit, time and time again, the accident and significant moments from Alma's troubled childhood. In this way, the series speaks to issues of trauma, mental illness, and both social and cultural alienation, while borrowing from conventions of speculative genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and crime fiction to tell an alluring and visually arresting story.

It is no coincidence that Alma seeks guidance and training in how to navigate distinct yet co-existent spatial and temporal realms, an ambivalent state not altogether unlike the precarious conditions that characterize her daily life. Alma inhabits the dissonant physical and symbolic spaces between cultures, heritages, ethnicities, and languages. Importantly, the show's geographical setting, San Antonio – a borderland territory formerly held by Mexico but currently occupied by the United States – appropriately reflects conflicting histories of belonging and identity. As the daughter of a Mexican mother and an Anglo father, Alma learns at a young age that analogous tensions abound within her childhood home. A heated debate around a cochlear implant reveals that she herself is the site of competing interests; her parents offer conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable arguments even as the conversation readily shifts between English, Spanish, and ASL. Eventually they remove a reluctant Alma from the Deaf Community despite her having been happy and at ease within Deaf Culture. What's more, the physical device – which, controversially, creates an indeterminate space of oscillation between two cultures, and could thus be thought of as a metaphor for the process of assimilation into (Anglo) American society – visibly marks her difference within the hearing community, particularly as a child learning to adapt.[1] In parallel fashion, Alma's hybrid Chicana identity together with her complex cultural identity as a mestiza (with a mixture of Indigenous and Spanish heritage in the maternal lineage) likewise requires constant navigation not only across linguistic, racial, and ethnic borders but also between Catholic, Jewish, Spanish, and Indigenous roots and traditions.

1. Key scenes depict Alma's childhood as marked with profound sensorineural hearing loss; a disability later corrected through surgical intervention. Importantly, a cochlear implant does not restore but instead bypasses normal acoustic or hearing processes. Alma learns to take advantage of this neuro-prosthetic device to detach from realities she does not want to face. She not only learns to cope, but in fact willfully controls her perception of ambient sounds such that hearing impairment becomes a profound ability, a power she wields with increasing determination. Ultimately, the cochlear implant allows her to control sound much as her father implores her to control time. For an impassioned critique of *Undone*'s casting choices and representational strategies of hearing disability see Sara Novic's "Bending Reality: Undone is a Testament to Hollywood's Cripping up Problem."

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The richly complex and multifaceted nature of this televised series demands a correspondingly intricate and innovative critical response. Consciously mirroring the unconventional nature of *Undone*, we have co-authored two fully independent, yet mutually informing articles. Detailed formal analysis in the first lays the groundwork for a strongly theoretical turn in the second. As such, this essay, which traces the complex interplay of hybridity and doubling present throughout Undone, is directly linked to the following essay in this volume.[2] Here, particular attention is paid to the uniquely affective style of rotoscoping and the significance of repeated literal as well as figurative uses of the mirror. Within *Undone*, the looking glass catalyzes new ways of seeing; the protagonist becomes both the subject and object of the gaze even as the fixture becomes a conduit or portal to distinct geographies and temporalities. With our combined analytical approaches, we likewise aim to offer dual readings and conceptualizations, providing a new spin on how form and content interact by means of cross-referencing techniques. Reading against the grain, in the sequel to this article, we demonstrate how the series engages Chicana feminist borderlands theory to offer a nuanced portrayal of the figure of la nueva mestiza, who in the Anzulduan imaginary is characterized by an oppositional consciousness and counterstance to systems of oppression in the US borderlands. We argue that clever narrative and audiovisual techniques of mirroring play a crucial role in the show's mainstreamed, at times simplistic, vision of Anzulduan feminist theory and speculative Chicana subjectivities. Together we show how increasingly experimental audiovisual techniques position the viewer to experience narrative and temporal instability together with the protagonist, even as *Undone* dramatizes recurring themes found in Chicanx realist fictions addressing the subjective experience of marginalized groups in US society.

Seeing Double

Throughout the series, highly experimental audiovisual strategies accentuate the myriad identities and overlapping realities that Alma represents and experiences. Much as the show's innovative use of defamiliarizing soundscapes shift and transform according to Alma's experiences, *Undone*'s elaborate visual style mirrors personal (and ultimately narrative) hybridity. Rotoscoping involves a unique blending of live-action filmmaking with hand-drawn or digital animation meticulously traced over the contours of the original footage, frame by frame. The result is a fluid visual form that, somewhat paradoxically, preserves individualized traits and the intimate details of facial expressions, corporeal gestures, and bodily movement while simultaneously warping personal identity. Actors remain recognizable and identifiable even as they are rendered unfamiliar and estranged. The innovative technique similarly alters and distorts physical objects and geographical locations. Imposing an otherworldly quality upon the ordinary creatively suggests the shifting nature of time and space.

Rotoscoping further allows for fluid transitions between scenes, states of mind, storylines, and timelines. Unknown or unknowable temporal and spatial realities are presented on the same plane as the habitual or customary routines of the protagonist's daily life. Undifferentiated stylistically, dreamscapes become plausible and credible; reality becomes implausible, incredible, even alienating. As Kim Louise Walden notes with respect to Richard Linklater's oneiric and similarly rotoscoped films, "By creating a deliberate tension between the real and the represented, what this digital technique seems to make possible is a form of animation that questions the relationship between notions of truth, verisimilitude, and reality" (11). Radically defamiliarizing the familiar invites (if not forces) the audience to share in Alma's ongoing perceptual states of disorientation and dislocation, leaving it difficult to distinguish delirium, fantasy, or delusion. Blurring the distinction between what is real and what is subjectively

2. The second article, "Soul Searching: Chicana Feminist Imaginaries in *Undone*" is also included in pages -- of *Ciberletras* 48.

interpreted or experienced, the hallucinogenic style aptly conveys the protagonist's ongoing traumas, altered states of consciousness, and deepening psychosis. As a result, the "recombined-as well as intensified and expanded-modalities of perception, sensation, and expression" (Manojlovic 198) made possible with rotoscoping, allows the show to simultaneously convey schizophrenia and the higher states of consciousness Alma believes herself to achieve. This is paramount, as *Undone* neither forces a distinction between these readings nor offers a hierarchical privileging upon the viewer. Both interpretations remain not only possible but plausible according to the show's mode of presentation and internal narrative logic.

Arguably, then, this highly expressive, layered visual aesthetic creates an effect of indeterminacy and liminality. Digital film and media scholar Maja Manojlovic, in fact, describes rotoscoping as an interstitial style that "reconfigures the conventional perceptions of space (and time) to produce an aesthetics of the in-between" (185). With *Undone*, in addition to blurring boundaries between the real and the imagined, the technique further signals an inherent instability and multiplicity of both personal and narrative identity. In this vein, the use of composite figures can be understood to reinforce and amplify the show's unifying thematic thread, that of having one foot in two worlds. It is with these words that Alma's father, Jacob, specifically references her supposed ability to inhabit two distinct planes of existence – the natural or living world and the supranatural or metaphysical realm – and simultaneously operate both within and outside of chronological time.

In addition to fluidly alter(nat)ing spaces, realities and identities within the fictional storyworld, rotoscoping live action footage of popular actors further allows for a doubling or bridging between the diegetic multiverse and the extradiegetic world. This occurs in two distinct but interconnected ways. As theorized by Marvin Carlson with respect to theater, audiences maintain "performance memory" (58) and hold expectations based on individual actors' previous roles. As he elaborates regarding the stage presence of esteemed actors, it remains "difficult, perhaps impossible, once their career is underway, for them to avoid a certain aura of expectations based on past roles. The actor's new roles become, in a very real sense, ghosted by previous ones" (67). At the same time, in theatrical works as well as in film and television, viewers have a certain foreknowledge with respect to the predictable traits of stock characters. *Undone* capitalizes on both forms of audience anticipation and reception. Inseparable from their rotoscoped representations, the distorted but readily identifiable faces, voices, and corporeal forms of *Undone*'s strategically assembled actors deepen their characters' identities through type casting, even as the animation style functions simultaneously to distance the actors from the episodic world of *Undone*. As digital media scholar Kim Louise Walden notes, no matter how deeply an actor might inhabit their character, the mere iconographic nature of their likeness undeniably draws forth the connotations, stereotypes, and memories associated with their personal star power. In her estimation with respect to *A Scanner Darkly*, "the viewer is never able to forget the recognizable face of Reeves lurking beneath the animation and hence the layers are never completely able to coalesce into a single unified figure" (13). Not unlike the main character, the audience, too, is simultaneously pulled in two distinct directions.

Such doubling proves to be especially relevant with the cast of *Undone* whereby previous roles performed by recognizable film and television stars influence audience reception. In fact, the writers at Decider.com (a New York Post pop culture website that aims to help viewers locate streaming content) go so far as to state that a primary reason the show is so effective is that "every character in *Undone* may look familiar." The screen presence of Constance Marie in the role of Camila (Alma's mother), for example, strongly evokes the stereotyped or archetypical

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maternal trope of the overbearing Chicana matriarch. Not only did Constance Marie previously perform Selena's mother, Marcela Quintanilla, in the movie *Selena* as well as Angie Lopez, a selfless but somewhat strict wife and mother in the sitcom *George Lopez*, she was also cast as Regina Vasquez - the strong-willed, single Latina mother to a deaf child in the acclaimed television series, *Switched at Birth*. Similarly, Bob Odenkirk (Alma's father, Jacob), best known for his portrayal of Saul Goodman in *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, later played an idealized but often absent paternal figure, Father March, in *Little Women*. Perhaps most importantly, viewers will recognize Rosa Salazar (Alma) as a familiar protagonist in various science fiction films from *The Maze Runner* series to *Alita Battle Angel*. The latter, significantly, used the technique of performance-capture animation to create a CG or digital likeness of Salazar as a revived cyborg with amnesia. Not altogether unlike the process of rotoscoping, this "augmented animation hybrid" records body and facial performance in order to fuse live and synthetic action.[3]

Arguably then, *Undone*'s primary actors "appear in new roles with a double ghosting, the cultural expectations of the emploi [type] itself overlaid with those of the actor's own previous appearances" (Carlson 59). Seemingly type cast for their prior roles and physically recognizable beneath the tracing and layers of rotoscope animation, the select cast members maintain a level of familiarity. Understood to embody and reaffirm the authenticity of the stereotyped roles of mother, father, and scifi time traveler, the actors themselves impart an aura of verisimilitude. In contrast, when considered from another perspective, "the viewer has a sense of the individual underneath the animation who is obscured by its rotoscoped version, and so takes on a ghost-like, almost spectral quality" (Walden 14). Considered this way, rotoscoping can be seen to create distance and foster an unsettling if not destabilizing effect. Fittingly, then, the physical presence of the characters in *Undone* remains complexly multilayered. The actors themselves bear the traces of their own previous roles even as they embody their real-world personas and stardom. Paradoxically, the cast's familiarity simultaneously allows a suspension of disbelief even as that familiarity belies that "other plane" of existence, the world inhabited by the spectator. In this way, rotoscoping's intrinsic hybridity bears multiple and at times contradictory traces, appropriately signaling complex meanings and identities.

Moreover, rotoscoping can be understood as inherently metafictional. Overlaying live action with drawn animation necessarily points back on itself, highlighting visual form as a constructed artifice. Ellen Grabiner, detailing Linklater's experimental and often philosophical or existential explorations in the medium, contends that by its very design rotoscoping necessarily engages the audience in not only thinking about but actively experiencing the very act of looking. In her view, "undoing the index" (deliberately distancing or separating the filmed subject from the resulting image) brings self-conscious awareness to the craft itself (41). Blending the seeming realism of live action with the overtly artistic nature of hand drawing also underscores the subjective if not unreliable nature of perception. When taken to extremes, such as when images disintegrate, dissemble, or fall apart (a repeated trope in *Undone* that often accompanies narrative looping and time travel), the very limits of representation become foregrounded. What's more, this dynamic interplay of form and content replicates the processes of traumatic memory. Visually representing time as splintered, fractured, and unstable reproduces the unknowability and belatedness intrinsic to trauma, in which unpredictable triggers cause past traumas to be re-experienced as sudden, fragmented flashes or as endless, repetitive loops.[4]

3. Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González' *Reel Latinxs: Representation in U.S. Film and TV* offers an historical overview of Latinx representation in popular media. For more information on the process of "augmented animation" in *Alita Battle Angel* see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOMuRopLgxg.
Frederick Aldama's "Speculative-Real Ethnoracial Spaces and the Formation of a Nepantlera Warrior" brilliantly examines how borderland spaces in *Alita Battle Angel* challenge traditional, mainstream depictions of ethnoracial identities.

4. For more on structures of traumatic memory and literary representation see Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* as well as Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*.

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As a hybrid visual form, rotoscoping, then, simultaneously points into and out of the diegetic world, highlighting the complexities of narrative form and thematic content while aptly reflecting the intricacies of the protagonist's multilayered sociocultural identity. In parallel fashion, *Undone* employs the recurring motif of mirrors as an organizing structural element that advances the plot, establishes the relationship between viewer and protagonist, and offers glimpses into Alma's warring interior states. What's more, much like the geographical setting of San Antonio, the physical properties of the bathroom mirror, itself divided, aptly reflects Alma's complex hybrid identities. Split in two halves, the looking glass serves a double functionality. On the one hand, as a mundane household object, mirrored doors simply provide access to the interior of the medicine cabinet; on the other hand, the mirror exists as a portal offering passage to other temporal and spatial planes. Understood metaphorically, as the second half of this study explores in depth, the mirror ultimately comes to reveal the condition of the postcolonial subject.

Seemingly banal at first glance, throughout *Undone* mirrors function as far more than mere home décor. As an object that one can both see and see through, the looking glass, unsurprisingly, serves as a tool for self-reflection. Understood in this way, the protagonist simultaneously exists as both the subject and the object of the gaze. Notably, mirror scenes become increasingly complex across the eight episodes, advancing the storyline in unexpected ways. As the show progresses, mirrors reflect Alma's increasing powers and deepening psychoses together with her evolving sense of self. Three pivotal, interrelated scenes illustrate the significance of the mirror's structural role in *Undone*.

Following the dramatic car wreck at the show's opening, a recurring montage accompanies the attention-grabbing first words: "I am so bored of living" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 1. 00:01:07-00.01:08). The camera functions as an observer-witness throughout the sequence, remaining stationary and with Alma neatly centered at a relatively fixed distance. From this unchanging perspective, we observe Alma re-enact, over and over, the common every-day rituals of waking up with the same person, eating the same breakfast, and driving the same route to go to the same job. Static camerawork and a repetitive soundtrack reinforce the stable, yet tedious monotony of daily life even as she dispassionately describes her daily regimen through the disembodied technique of narrative voiceover. The accumulation and repetition of insignificant quotidian acts presented from an unchanging vantage point in a dull, flat monotone voice suggest an existential crisis. Notably, at the midpoint of this montage, the camera positions the audience to witness the mundane activity of brushing one's teeth, precisely from the perspective of the protagonist's reflection in the bathroom mirror. Breaking the so-called fourth wall, we watch Alma as if we were gazing out at ourselves. This immersive, doubling technique strategically places the viewer in Alma's subject position within the mirror, creating shared perspectives and effectively establishing viewer identification.

In striking contrast, a later iteration of this predictable sequence depicts Alma deviating from her standard routine as well as from the prescribed narrative script. Appropriately, the camerawork and soundtrack also radically shift. Rather than standing in as Alma's reflection, the audience can only view her reflected image in the mirror, from an angle, as she uncharacteristically makes herself up. The viewer, no longer directly aligned with the protagonist, has been distanced and displaced. Blaring rock music, coupled with a devious smile, imply rebellious behavior. But rather than share the joke, information is now withheld from the viewer and narrative tension

escalates. Only upon arrival at her sister's engagement dinner are we let in on the secret. Subverting her mother's wishes that she bleach her lip and make herself beautiful, Alma defiantly flaunts an eye-liner mustache. In challenging beauty norms, disrupting gender binaries, and refusing to participate in the institution of marriage (she breaks up with her boyfriend, Sam, after this event), Alma deliberately situates herself outside of the established, patriarchal social order. In this way, this alternative mirror scene reveals Alma's refusal to adhere or assimilate, suggesting a willful determination to not belong.

Although a key element of the show's introduction, it isn't until the climax of the seventh episode that we again return to this pivotal sequence, albeit with significant changes. Here, a parallel montage depicts Alma completely absorbed in dance, shown to utterly transcend the trivial routines of her daily life. Alma's prior narrative voiceover expressing an inability to find meaning in her life has been replaced by the uplifting words of a ceremonial dancer who not only recognizes but affirms Alma as mestiza. Explaining *La antigua* as a way to connect with and honor the ancestors as well as a ritual to empty oneself and be open to the future, she invitingly informs Alma that "all of our dances connect us to each other […] Even though you don't know the dance, you know the dance". (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 7. 00:18:48-00.18:56). These words repeat as the soundtrack and visual sequence advance the storyline from dancing at Becca's wedding reception to dancing on the street and in her home. No longer static, the camera moves in an effort to follow Alma as she spins and turns across the frames. Significantly, as she performs the previously monotonous daily morning ritual, the mirror reflects Alma, toothbrush in mouth, but no longer actively engaged in brushing. Instead, her hands and feet respond to an unstoppable inner rhythm. Alma continues this fervent dance even as she performs her duties at work. In letting go of her Anglo father and embracing the very indigenous roots that her mother wishes to deny, Alma finds inner strength, a sense of pride, and the joy of belonging to a community.

In keeping with ritual self-cleansing and spiritual connection achieved through ceremonial dance, throughout *Undone* mirrors not only reflect interior states they also serve as portals bridging diverse worlds. In this culminating sequence, specifically, the mirror connects disparate narrative threads and causes timelines to rapidly converge. The show comes full circle. As the music and dance reach a frenzied crescendo, Alma rushes headlong into an oval mirror at the daycare, one that previously allowed her father to enter her world and that now serves as a window onto the past, projecting events from that fateful Halloween or All Soul's Day when her dad died. Now, in keeping with rotoscoping's stylistic doubling of actors and their prior roles, the mirror comes to enable an additional level of structural or narrative doubling. This scene simultaneously presents alternate understandings or interpretations, by presenting both internal and external perspectives. The children bear witness and report what they saw: "Teacher ran to the mirror, there was a big crash and she got bloody" even as Alma emphatically declares, "No! I know that's what it looks like in your reality but that's not what happened," (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 8. 00:09:43-00.09:54) utterly denying their version of events. In short, a decisive narrative rupture or splitting takes place, one that presents two opposing stories or plotlines.

The viewer becomes a witness to how words and images dramatically collide. Nine minutes of airtime trace Alma's journey through the looking glass and into the past where she and her father observe themselves on that fateful night twenty years earlier. But then, abruptly, a contradictory sequence seemingly undoes the entire narrative sequence. Now the camera aligns with Alma's first-person perspective as she gazes up to find the children looking down on her supine body, suggesting time travel did not occur but instead she blacked out.

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What's more, we view Alma's bloody forehead. Potentially a cut incurred by the shattered mirror, the wound directly echoes her injury from the initial car wreck. Uncannily, Alma herself has created a narrative loop, one that encompasses the narrative action of the whole first season. Hurtling herself into the mirror eerily replicates the action of recklessly speeding through intersections, providing an alternative reading to the show's entire chronology and plotline. The circular structure invites a re-viewing, and upon closer inspection one notices that with each iterative re-creation of the car wreck scene the words "real crash" appear on billboards in the background. As such, and much in keeping with Alma's own precarity, viewers find themselves in the liminal space of Todorov's fantastic, vacillating between two parallel (narrative) worlds.

Bordering on a Conclusion

Cleverly, this final mirror scene not only fosters a rereading of the entire first season, but also opens the door to subsequent seasons by allowing for endless future possibilities. Indeed, since the initial writing of these essays, a second season has been released where Alma, having successfully entered a parallel timeline in which her father is still alive, encounters a different version of herself and those close to her. Ever the sleuth, Alma now seeks to uncover both her mother's and Jacob's mother's interconnected secrets. But upon finding her abilities reduced, she can only experience time travel and fused perspectives through Becca. Such paired encounters compel Alma to explore beyond herself, discovering a family history of trauma as experienced by women, the legacies of both of her genealogies: European Jew and Mexican Catholic. In this way, season two extends beyond Alma's personal predicaments to engage broader issues of intergenerational familial trauma and questions of postmemory.[5]

Continuities abound even as the show takes on different themes and motifs. Fittingly, visual and narrative elements have been recombined; plotlines have been disassembled and reassembled. Decidedly autoreferential, the second season is replete with self-citations. Together with the protagonist, the viewer relives a series of reminiscent scenes, but unlike traditional narrative flashbacks, these overtly doubled scenarios contain surprising and unexpected outcomes. Reencountering Sam on the San Antonio Riverwalk reveals he has a girlfriend. Boxes in the familiar attic now contain her father's abandoned research alongside the electronic blackjack game. Upon revisiting her dad's classroom, we discover that Alma has somehow become the teacher. In another role reversal it is now Alma who urgently insists upon making use of her abilities, while her father remains hesitant, fearful, and reluctant. In many ways, then, the second season can be understood as a narrative remix in which many of the same situations and archetypes reappear but have been reassigned or re-cycled.

We've seen how the oneiric effects of rotoscoping create a setting and atmosphere in which dream, reality, and hallucination become nearly indiscernible. Similarly, when familiar situations and scenes are altered, realigned, and rendered anew they likewise become warped, confusing, and difficult to navigate, thrusting both characters and seasoned viewers into the disconcerting realm of the uncanny or *unheimlich*. At the same time, however, a pleasure derived from recognition of the source accompanies the surprise of the transformations. Akin to Linda Hutcheon's theory regarding adaptations, viewers experience a profound sense of gratification in deciphering what she terms "palimpsestic doubleness" (120). While one could, theoretically, watch the second season independently of the first, the knowing spectator will have a deeper, richer understanding. There is a sense of satisfaction in appreciating nuances. The technique of incorporating numerous visual and narrative reprises in *Undone*'s second season deliberately

5. For more on postmemory, or the transmission of traumatic experiences to a second generation, see Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative*, and *Postmemory and The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*.

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"creates the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced—and knowingly so" (Hutcheon 116). Viewers, like Alma, remember. And so, we too, become intricately ensnared in intertextual loops.

With its intricate remix of narrative and visual metaphors, whereby the second season can stand on its own even as it overtly echoes and reflects the first, the show can be understood to model, as it were, the cross-referencing techniques that we are consciously performing with these linked essays. In tune with the decidedly interrelated structure of the series, our study likewise becomes somewhat unconventional, whereby separate approaches and independent arguments remain strongly interconnected. By first presenting a formal(ist) analysis that deliberately gives way to strongly theoretical considerations and reinterpretations of now familiar scenes, we stage a hybrid critique of how form and content interact, ourselves offering a performance of dual readings.

To this end, much as *Undone* revisits and restructures its own initial premises, let's now re-consider the role of the mirror. To recapitulate, we previously examined how the looking glass, understood literally, provides a means for self-reflection and audience identification as well as a portal to other worlds and temporalities. Importantly, by means of the mirror, Alma is at once both the subject and the object of the gaze. On a metaphorical or philosophical plane, the mirror also maintains a key function as a conduit to Chicana feminist thought. Not coincidentally, in her own work pioneering Tejana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa begins her journey into the Coatlicue state – a transitional, liberatory state – precisely by recalling her own father's death and dwelling on the mirror as both a household object and a metaphorical device. As she explains, "a mirror is a door through which the soul may "pass" (42). While obsidian once provided ancient seers with a glossy material surface upon which to interpret visions of the future, Anzaldúa further posits a contemporary functionality related to "the act of seeing" (42). Specifically, the mirror shows two aspects of the self: the self that has been captured and objectified in the mirror by the glance, frozen in place. But, in somewhat contradictory fashion, the one who looks into the mirror also sees, that is to say, sees through and gains awareness, possesses knowledge. As such, Anzaldúa speculates that mirrors contain the power to facilitate new ways of seeing and, in turn, new ways of being.

To be continued…[6]

6. See note 2 of this article.

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Soul Searching: Chicana Feminist Imaginaries in *Undone*

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Abstract

This essay examines the interventions of Chicana feminist theory in the sci-fi television series *Undone* (2019). While the mysterious source and nature of the time-bending abilities the protagonist develops remain in doubt, the show makes possible a third interpretation that locates Alma's talents instead in Chicana feminist praxis as theorized in the contributions of Gloria Anzaldúa. We focus on this third way of understanding Alma's abilities. We show how the character resembles the Anzaldúan borderlands subjects of la nueva mestiza and the *nepantlera*, feminist figures whose inner psychic struggles reveal the historical and structural nature of oppression in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and whose oppositional consciousness visualizes new strategies for challenging it. We locate Alma's Anzaldúan praxis in three critical borderlands maneuvers: the counterstance, tolerance for ambiguity, and hyper empathy. Finally, by acknowledging the limitations of *Undone* as a mainstream vehicle for Chicana feminist critique, we offer that an Anzaldúan reading models an interpretive counterstance against the dominant scripts and interpretive frameworks of the show itself and the broader racial imaginaries of mainstream science fictions.

Key Words: *Undone*, Anzaldúa, borderlands, Chicana feminism, la nueva mestiza

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> Every trauma is a trace … The external event, whether it occurs as a form of prolonged structural oppression as in the case of racism or colonialism or as an instantaneous event like a car accident, inscribes itself in the psyche.
>
> *The Future Life of Trauma*, xi

> "'Promise me, mijo. No jumping through mirrors looking for other dimensions. No digging up the courtyard looking for mines. And no cutting yourself in half. I need you to be… normal'"
>
> Matt Mendez, *The Astronaut*, 233

In her landmark work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa asserts that "the mirror is an ambivalent symbol" but one that ultimately invites new ways of seeing (93). The first essay in our two-part analysis examines the mirror as a central narrative and visual device whose evolving function in Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Kate Purdy's *Undone* (2019) –a hybrid and highly experimental text with an innovative audiovisual style and non-linear narrative– reflects shifting and unstable identities, locations, and temporalities.[1] *Undone* is a fascinating production about a Mexican American woman named Alma ("soul") who seemingly develops extraordinary time-bending abilities after surviving a traumatic car accident that leaves her in a temporary coma. With these new powers, Alma travels through temporal dimensions and alternate realities that challenge her prior knowledge of the events that led to her deceased father's demise, and, in turn, take the viewer on a narrative and visual journey of doubled and shifting perspectives. The mirror becomes a clever metonym for the intricate elements of doubling in the show's narrative and visual composition, which includes the visual technique rotoscoping (a blend of live-action and animation) as well as techniques of narrative flashback, parallel storylines, and narrative looping.

In what follows, we focus on how the mirror and techniques of mirroring in *Undone* also cleverly index Chicana feminist imaginaries and, in particular, Anzaldúan borderlands theory. Ever the capacious device in *Undone*, the mirror reflects the psychic and material conditions of its Chicana protagonist, whose image on the mirror's frequently fractured surface portrays the fissured geographic and psychic terrains Alma inhabits. Seen in this light, the mirror takes on a new mediating function as a cultural sign of Alma's subjective positionality and the lived experiences of Chicanxs in the US Southwest. While the setting in the majority-Chicanx city of San Antonio and the biracial identity of its protagonist already invite a viewing of *Undone* through a Chicanx interpretive lens, the mirror intimates a more rigorous relationship with Chicanx feminist cosmologies than what might be expected from an Amazon Studios production. Indeed, the first season extensively engages core tenets of tejana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands theory, weaving Anzaldúan conceptual interventions throughout. In the protagonist, viewers find *Undone*'s iteration of la nueva mestiza and *nepantlera*, Anzaldúan types that envision and model a Chicanx feminist praxis of oppositional consciousness.

The Anzaldúan concept of the borderlands captures the multiplicity of oppression Chicanxs experience in the US southwest as a direct result of a century-long history of Anglo colonial violence. While the term broadly refers to the geographical territory of the US-Mexico border region as the historical site of struggle for Chicanxs, it also designates the embodied and psychic consequences of this oppression, in particular for the Chicana. Memorably described by Anzaldúa as an "herida abierta," la frontera conveys the ways oppression and inherited trauma manifest in the Chicana's flesh. Many other concepts in the Anzaldúan imaginary emphasize the inner, psychic dimensions of this colonial legacy. Of la mestiza, the central Chicana borderlands subject in her theoretical corpus, Anzaldúa writes:

1. The first essay, entitled "Soul Searching: Alter(nat)ing Realities in Undone" is included in pages -- of *Ciberletras* 48.

> *El choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entullada*. Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. … The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un* choque, a cultural collision. (*Borderlands* 100)

La mestiza's flesh becomes the material site of the historical conflict unfolding in the borderlands, and her "soul" the psychic arena. Alma's own name alludes to this Chicana feminist intervention, while her story arc during the first season parallels the quoted passage above: she is seemingly trapped between a supernatural realm unlocked through her newfound abilities of time manipulation, and the "technical" world of scientific explanation. A car crash in the first episode sets Alma's inner struggle into motion. We see her racing through the streets of San Antonio after a contentious argument with her sister Becca, her hurried traversal through the urban landscape and the subsequent accident striking an immediate resemblance to the affective cumulus of spatial disorientation, physical and psychic injury, and the tacit suggestion of transcendence captured in the Anzaldúan conceptual matrix of the borderlands and la mestiza. After coming out of the coma, Alma finds herself *entullada*, disoriented temporally and spatially, as she transitions back and forth between temporal states – in her words, she is "caught in a weird loop." (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 2. 00:11:36-00:11:38).

Much in line with Anzaldúan borderlands theory, *Undone* proposes that Alma's Chicana subjectivity creates the conditions for critical intervention and creative living. Anzaldúa's concept of *Nepantla*, a Nahuatl word for "an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries" ("(Un)Natural Bridges" 243) sets the stage; the figure who inhabits those in-between spaces, the *nepantlera*, in turn, "facilitate[s] passages between worlds" (248). Inhabiting *Nepantla* unlocks for the Chicana critical and creative skills necessary for her survival. In an essay published in the anthology *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002), Anzaldúa elaborates:

> Living between cultures results in 'seeing' double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent. Removed from that culture's center you glimpse the sea in which you've been immersed but to which you were oblivious, no longer seeing the world the way you were enculturated to see it. ("Now Let Us Shift" 549)

The condition of nepantilism, of being caught between spaces and torn between ways (in *Undone*, Alma's "weird loop"), inspires the *nepantlera*'s critical ability of "seeing through" the fictions and the myths reified in the service of the dominant culture. The idiomatic phrasing "seeing through" offers an important element of visuality to the deconstructive, critical perspectives of the *nepantlera*, which elsewhere Anzaldúa defines as la facultad, or "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface" (*Borderlands* 60). Alma similarly boasts the ability of seeing through the disciplining scripts and dominant ideologies in *Undone*'s world. She is an incisive critical thinker, with a nuanced understanding of historical and structural systems of oppression; her disenchantment with her life thus stems as much from the conditions of historical and structural inequalities of the world around her as it does from personal tragedy.

Even before she acquires her extraordinary new abilities, Alma is

presented as a discerning, critical thinker. Her tenacious opposition to her sister Becca's engagement to Reed, a wealthy Anglo, is informed by the history of Anglo-Mexican relations in Texas. Although Alma's mother and Becca see the marriage as a triumph, Alma "sees through" the surface of the happy engagement to locate underlying historical dynamics that form the basis of her opposition. discerning eye is only sharpened after the car crash, as her abilities of time manipulation subsequently allow her to relive conversations with others from an external perspective. Upon revisiting Becca's joke on how it would look for Alma to have a back brace at her upcoming wedding, and replaying the scene against Becca's earlier quips on Alma's lack of productivity in planning the wedding as a result of her coma, Alma begins to recognize deeper anxieties in her sister's jokes. Indeed, she sees her sister's deeper commitments to assimilationist modes of kinship and the trope of a "perfect pretty princess engagement," as she would later call it in a confrontation with Becca (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 2. 00:10:37-00:10:40). . Alma's abilities allow her to recognize, and later challenge, how quotidian scripts in her life are steeped in the Anglo colonial legacy.

Both Becca and Camila, Alma's devoutly Catholic mother, reproduce disciplining scripts intended to keep Alma within a perceived state of normalcy. From Alma's perspective, Becca and her mother stifle her creativity and critical potential, though Camila instead sees protection and safety in tradition and the status quo. She insists that Alma seek professional help and take medication to treat mental illness, which in her mind will return Alma to a prior state of normalcy interrupted by the car accident. The disciplinary power Camila exercises over her daughters must be understood, however, as one among many of the adaptive modes that borderlands subjects adopt in response to oppression. She represents a maternal type frequently seen in the Chicanx literary tradition—a character with a canny understanding of the systems of power in the world around her, who takes few risks and makes due with the cards she is dealt. Much as with the mother in Matt Mendez's short story "The Astronaut," quoted in the second epigraph above, the disciplinary intent of normalcy stems from her knowledge of the oppressive order and of the implicit dangers of challenging it. Camila fears Alma's insistence on the supernatural at least in part because she has learned that safety for her people resides in the space of the normal.

At every turn, however, Alma resists abiding by Camila's disciplinary views. Alma instead engages in what Anzaldúa calls a counterstance—"a duel of oppressor and oppressed" in which "all reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against" (*Borderlands* 100). She frequently finds herself adopting oppositional stances against the dominant ideologies espoused by her family and friends, and their expectation that she lead a mundane life. At one point, she exclaims in frustration, "I just can't do it. I can't do the wedding, and the birth announcements, and the piano lessons, and the matching Halloween costumes" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 1. 00:04:53-00:05:04). Meanwhile, she remains steadfast in her unabated opposition to Becca's engagement to the symbolic Anglo oppressor. To frustrate the illusion of a perfect dinner party celebrating the engagement, Alma dons a drawn-on mustache, an iconic sign of gender deviance. Later, when she tries Becca's engagement ring on her finger, she muses sarcastically: "This blood diamond really does make me feel special" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 1. 00:16:04-00:16:06). Through these and other similar interruptions of Becca's alliance with Reed, Alma performs an Anzaldúan iteration of what Sara Ahmed calls the feminist killjoy—"a figure that refuses to share an orientation toward certain things as being good because she does not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising" (39). Her various challenges to the family's attachments –to the engagement ring and its symbolic promise of marriage into a wealthy Anglo family, for instance– thus destabilize

the invisible ideologies of the dominant culture. When Becca accuses Alma of sabotaging her engagement out of envy, an Anzaldúan interpretation of Alma's behavior as a Chicana feminist counterstance allows the viewer to take the character at her word when she replies, "believe it or not, I am trying to help you. You don't want to marry Reed" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 1. 00:20:13-00:20:14).

Alma's oppositional attitude extends beyond the local dynamics of her family life. Against the grain of Western medical discourse, she challenges pathological explanations of her mental state, opting instead to believe that she is a kind of psychic time traveler with untapped abilities and special mental acuity. Although she eventually acquiesces to Camila's pleas and sees a psychiatrist, she spends the meeting deflecting the logic of medical diagnosis altogether. As the scene initially comes into view, with the camera still focused on the exterior of the Health Center building, her voice comes through with clarity:

> What is sanity? Is it sane that we live in boxes made out of concrete, and wires and pipes? Is it sane that we have to buy our food and water and land, and healthcare, and childcare, entertainment, and that every part of our natural lives has been commodified, taken from us and then sold right back to us? I mean, let's talk about that. (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 4. 00:09:03-00:09:24)

Alma's monologue steers the conversation away from the expected patient-therapist dynamics and toward a deconstructivist and Marxist appraisal of the medical space. At the same time, the scene challenges Alma's perception of reality by presenting schizophrenia as a plausible interpretation of her mental state; by leveraging the authoritative voice of the psychiatrist, schizophrenia thus emerges as a primary framework through which viewers situate Alma's experience as intelligible. The question of Alma's condition, in this way, becomes another symbolic and narrative site of cultural collision and ambiguity. Her dismissal of medical explanations can be understood to signify a challenge to Western epistemologies and the over-pathologization of subjugated people, as Anzaldúa observes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, even as the medical remains a plausible alternative to the supernatural. Anzaldúan theory itself allows for the interpretation of schizophrenia to coexist ambivalently with the psycho-cultural phenomena described by the concepts of *Nepantla* and the borderlands. *La mestiza*, as the "consciousness of the borderlands," must learn to navigate the interstitial and ambiguous terrains of *Nepantla* and the in-between.

Alma's powers of double-vision and her Anzalduan technique of the oppositional counterstance align with what Frederick Luis Aldama calls a "Brown optic," or a Latinx-focused narration that affirms Latinx perspectives in speculative genres (such as science fiction) that historically cast the Brown other as monstrous (Aldama). Alma's opposition to the local dynamics of her family and personal life extend extra-textually as well, contesting "sci-fi's erstwhile racialisms" (Aldama 203). In a poignant scene, Alma performs a critical historical analysis of the Battle of the Alamo when she encounters an impromptu mock reenactment of the conflict as she and her boyfriend Sam walk past the Mission one evening. In a kind of ironic theatrical mirroring of the performance taking place in front of them, Sam sets up Alma's own dramatic performance of a critical re-interpretation. He says, "Do you have strong feelings about the Alamo? I am not aware" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 4. 00:04:17-00:04:19). Taking her cue, Alma goes into an impassioned explanation of how the Battle of the Alamo was really about European settlers fighting against the mexicanos because Mexico did not allow Anglos to own slaves. "I don't think that's what they want you to remember when you 'Remember the Alamo,' replies Sam" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 4. 00:04:30-00:04:35).In scenes like these, Alma transforms into the viewer's guide to a critical perspective,

challenging not only the racialisms of speculative genres but also even national myths of Anglo supremacy.

While Anzaldúa acknowledges the counterstance as "a step toward liberation from cultural domination" (*Borderlands* 100), she maintains it is not a way of life. *La mestiza* must endeavor toward "a more whole perspective," "juggle cultures," and turn "ambivalence into something else" (101). Moreover, a *mestiza* consciousness is, according to AnaLouise Keating, "a holistic, nonbinary way of thinking and acting that includes a transformational tolerance for contradiction and ambivalence" (*Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* 321). *La nueva mestiza* must prove herself nimble and flexible in the face of ambiguity. In this vein, as early as the second episode, Alma uses her new abilities to adjust, at strategic points, her oppositional posture of the counterstance. We see a recurring scene of Camila admonishing Alma at the hospital when she wakes up from her coma after the crash. "What were you thinking? Do you know how terrible it would have been for me if you died?" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 2. 00:02:32-00:02:35). Alma's initial reaction to what she perceives as Camila's self-involved commitment to normalcy consists of a sarcastic retort: "I'm sorry I almost died at a bad time. That was super selfish of me" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 2. 00:04:10-00:04:15). After several repetitions, Alma comes to sympathizes with her mother's perspective and adapts her response accordingly, shifting away from the counterstance. Alma resignifies the initial retort to strike an effect of a genuine apology. "I'm sorry I wasn't wearing a seatbelt. Sometimes I only think about myself and not other people I could hurt" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 2. 00:17:46-00:17:56). With her powers of double vision and time manipulation, Alma adopts new tactical responses to disciplining forces around her. She learns and adapts, but does not yield.

This instructive interaction with Camila also suggests how, in learning to adapt, Alma gradually strengthens her affective bonds with family members (and even strangers) through a relation akin to hyper-empathy. Alma's psychoemotional connections with others form as a result of her powers of transtemporal travel, which also give her access to their inner consciousness. In these voyages to other psyches, Alma witnesses instances of oppression or tragedy that differ from her own, further shifting her own perspectives and making her more tolerant even in circumstances in which she has been wronged. Prior to the crash, Alma had ended her relationship with Sam, but after waking from the coma she initially had no recollection of the breakup. Realizing this, Sam proceeds as though it had not occurred, until Alma recalls the event and confronts him for deceiving her. In the scene, we find Alma locked inside her bathroom and Sam standing beyond the door, apologizing over and over again. She deliberately blocks him out by removing her cochlear implant, controlling sound as she will soon control time travel. Then, Alma unexpectedly travels into his past, seeing a vision of Sam as a child, first in India among his friends, and later as an immigrant child in the US being bullied by Anglo boys who torment him for his Indian-accented English. Back in the narrative present, Sam continues repeating the apology "I'm sorry" from across the door (an echo of Alma's apology to her mother from the earlier episode), as Alma transports in time once more to see a young Sam practicing the American accentuation by repeating over and over the phrase "I'm sorry, said the little duck" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 5. 00:13:45-00:17:58). Much like the technique of rotoscoping overlays hand-drawn images with recorded footage, Alma's abilities similarly allow her to superimpose the different situational meanings of Sam's enunciations, changing their meaning. This doubled perspective eschews Sam's local act of violence and deception to privilege a broader–indeed global and historical–perspective of the racial violence indexed in Sam's American accent and the repeating phrase she continues to hear from beyond the door. Through affective links such as these, Alma facilitates an appreciation for the global workings of

oppressive systems and derives greater awareness of the crosscurrents of discursive violence that act upon minoritized people everywhere. In the end, Alma forgives Sam for his dishonesty, even to his own surprise.

Taken together, Alma's critical counterstance, increasing tolerance for ambiguity, and growing empathy with others are all abilities that characterize the Anzaldúan figures of *la nueva mestiza* and *nepantlera,* whose consciousness is oriented toward an appraisal of history and structural systems even within the personal or local. In the Anzaldúan imaginary, *la nueva mestiza* represents the new political subject of the borderlands, a Chicana who acquires the critical consciousness to see through the myths of Anglo ideologies as well as a broader toolset of critical skills to construct a new future. "*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" (*Borderlands* 101). Similarly, Alma adopts Anzaldúan epistemological frameworks for healing personal and historical traumas; like *la nueva mestiza*, she adopts tactical maneuvers that enable liberated modes of living. Although the show maintains an ambivalent position regarding Alma's abilities (the first season concludes with a cliffhanger that leaves the audience uncertain as to whether or not Alma has managed to change the timeline and bring her father back), her own belief and commitment to her talents nevertheless reverberate tangibly in the world around her. The annulment of Becca's wedding at the end of the season seems to affirm Alma's opposition toward the marriage, for instance, suggesting that *la mestiza*'s vision for the future is indeed possible. In these ways, Alma's journey in *Undone* is as much one of world-building as it is of deconstructive oppositionality.

While Alma is indeed a compelling protagonist who captures the ethos of Anzaldúan theory and critique, she also occupies a unique position considering the interpretive challenge she poses for *Undone*'s target audience. An Amazon Studios production with a "mainstream" rather than Chicanx audience, the show retains some of the problematic trappings of the representations of Latinxs traditionally seen in similarly Hollywood films and US mainstream media throughout the twentieth century. Scholars such as Mary Beltrán, Charles Ramírez Berg, Angharad Valdivia, among others, have addressed at length how representations of Latinxs have traditionally kept to a narrow band of archetypes, such as the border bandit or the Latin lover, that reify perceptions of Latinx as marginal and foreign to the United States and even as invasive forces that threaten US culture. While Undone does not reproduce such pernicious archetypes, it does, however, simplify Chicana cultures and epistemologies, stunting the show's potential for making possible new or alternative engagements between mainstream media and minoritized cultures and knowledges. As such, it is not an entirely cohesive vehicle for Anzaldúan or Chicana feminist critique and liberatory praxis.

Importantly, the show misreads a key piece of Anzaldúan theory and its understanding of Anzaldúa's conceptual intervention on the ways oppression manifests in the psyche and the flesh. In the pivotal scene preceding Alma's car crash, she and Becca argue about the upcoming wedding. "I get it," says Becca, "he's white and he's rich and you don't like him." Alma responds, "that's not the point. We are broken people. Ok? And broken people break people" (*Undone*. Season 1. Episode 1. 00:20:05-00:20:24). Alma's statements allow for several interpretations. On the one hand, she could be referring to her father Jacob's death, and the broken family unit it left in its wake. Alternatively, Alma could be referring to her hearing loss and disability or to the family's medical history of schizophrenia, both of which are shown to mediate Alma's otherwise supernatural abilities. In another

sense, however, the phrasing of "broken people"—as opposed to, for example, a broken family—suggests a broader interpretation with deeper ethnocultural implications. In our reading, Alma's statement "we are broken people" resignifies the framing device Gloria Anzaldúa uses in the opening of Borderlands/La Frontera. The book begins with a poem reflecting on the US-Mexico border and its historical legacy on Chicanxs as a people:

> 1,950-mile-long open wound
> dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
> running down the length of my body,
> staking fence rods in my flesh,
> splits me splits me
> *me raja me raja*.
> This is my home
> this thin edge of
> barbwire. (24)

The essay then starts with the two best-known and oft-cited sentences in all of Anzaldúa's work: "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages agains, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture (25). These early passages of *Borderlands/La Frontera* form the backbone of Anzaldúas theories on the colonial subjugation of Chicanxs in the United States, which she views as an enduring historical process extending far beyond the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, and which inflicts not just symbolic violence but also embodied violence felt in the very flesh. It is colonial violence past and present that wounds Chicanxs as a people. "Me raja," It splits me, Anzaldúa says. In contrast, when Alma exclaims "we are broken people, we break people," she positions herself and her family—allegorically, her culture—as the source of violence.

Undone also engages in problematic representations of indigeneity and knowledge. The show reproduces colonialist tropes of native cultures as non-extant; indigeneity seems to exist not in the present but in some elusive, long-gone past, while native characters themselves are often portrayed as ritualistic subjects who bear and transmit ancient, inchoate wisdom though not intellectual or scientific knowledge. In contrast, Alma's Anglo father Jacob, a scientist, represents the primary source of intellectual knowledge for Alma. Though he is portrayed critically in the show, and in the end is revealed to have intentionally driven off a cliff to his demise, he is nevertheless in charge of deciphering and explaining his daughter's abilities in scientific terms. While he represents to Alma the potential of knowledge and a transcendent state, Alma's Chicana mother Camila instead is an obstacle. Jacob even guides Alma toward an understanding of her maternal indigenous roots. In this way, too, *Undone* simplifies Alma's connections to indigeneity. Though she is knowledgeable of native cultures across the continent, more often than not depictions of indigeneity are presented through indirect discourse (for example, Alma shares a story about the Kogi tribe with the children at the daycare) or as simulacra, dances, or performances. In one scene, at witnessing one such performance, Alma even falls into a trance followed by some kind of spiritual awakening.

Reading *Undone* through an Anzaldúan lens, against the grain of its mainstreaming tendencies, acquires greater importance in light of the show's limitations as a vehicle for Chicana feminist critique. Regardless of *Undone*'s fidelity to Chicanx feminist imaginaries, an Anzaldúan lens offers an oppositional perspective that, in its own right, challenges the show's whitewashing impulses, contextualizes its predominantly Anglo production and circulation, and accounts critically for the history of material and symbolic marginalization of the ethnic subjects it depicts. Further, centering Anzaldúan perspectives in our viewing means

activating Anzaldúan ways of being, perceiving, and knowing; in other words, it allows Chicanxs to take ownership of the narrative. In the words of Cathryn Merla-Watson, Anzaldúa "encourages [women of color] to speak to and illuminate their own lived experiences, ways of understanding that give insight into our diverse histories, hopes, dreams, desires, even our espantos or ghosts—that which invisibly, yet palpably, structures our lifeworlds and construct particular horizons of possibility" (225). An Anzaldúan reading of *Undone* means stretching toward the horizons of the Chicana imaginaries the show makes possible and even those it renders implausible.

The first serialized television show in the West to employ the innovative technique of rotoscoping, *Undone* is just as fascinating for its audacious if flawed foray into Chicana feminist critical thought. With its overt overlaying of drawn lines on live-action footage, rotoscoping seems a fitting match to Alma's double vision and critical consciousness. Rotoscoping, too, transgresses borders and refuses containment.[2] Though not without its limitations as a mainstream vehicle for Chicana feminist cosmologies, *Undone* forays into the similarly innovative realm of Chicanx speculative fiction, which in recent decades has seen a cultural renewal inspired in no small part by Anzaldúa's own works of science fiction. Much like the female character of La Prieta (LP) in Anzaldúa's fiction or Alita in Robert Rodriguez's *Alita:Battle Angel* (2019)—a character who, incidentally, is also portrayed by Rosa Salazar—Alma is a *nepantlera* who examines the ephemeral textures of oppression in the borderlands and the embodied metaphysical detritus it leaves behind. From this material, Alma seeks to bend temporalities and space itself to envision alternative, livable futures.

2. The use of this technique is studied at length in the first essay of our two-part analysis of *Undone*. See note 1.

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Tropicalizing the Netflix Empire: Neocolonialist Renderings of Afro-Cubans on *Sky Rojo* and *Toy Boy*

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Abstract

The recent success of Netflix España as a producer of high-quality content with a global fan base has put a spotlight on contemporary Spanish society as a modern, progressive, and racially diverse, European nation-state. However, an increased visibility of racial minorities also raises questions of how Blackness and Latinidad are wielded in popular Spanish series as tools to maintain racial hierarchies. In order to flesh out these ideas, this article analyzes the representation of two Afro-Cuban characters from two of Netflix España's most popular series, *Toy Boy* and *Sky Rojo*. This cross-examination of two Black characters, male and female, will demonstrate that colonialist ideologies persist in the Spanish media. A close reading of these two series reveals how racist tropes are refashioned in a contemporary setting and how Afro-Latinidad becomes commodified for a Spanish and global audiences. Thus, Spain reasserts itself as a racially distinct and superior society, while Cuba lingers in the shadow of the former Empire. By exposing these neocolonialist methods used in Spanish productions, this article will uncover the methods used by the popular media to mask racial inequality and silence the voices of racially marginalized communities.

Key Words: Neocolonialism, Visual Media Studies, Afro-Cubanidad, Race, Peninsular Studies

The tragic death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, sparked a serious of impassioned protests, rallies, and calls for political and social action across the major metropolitan areas in the United States in what some journalists referred to as "the summer of racial reckonings" (Chang, Martin, Marrapodi 2020). Among those leaders and organizations at the core of this emphatic response was Black Lives Matter, which was created in 2013 after the death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer. Seven years following the death of Martin and after a series of other innocent Black Americans were murdered by law enforcement officers, the movement took on a vital role by mobilizing supporters to take to social media and the streets, and to stand in defiance against systemic prejudices in the United States. The BLM movement had such an impact that the reverberations were felt on a global scale. Countries in Latin America and Europe that have struggled to contain the epidemic of racial discrimination joined forces with their American counterparts. Spain, a noteworthy case, saw thousands of advocates voice their opinions on social media networks and participate in a fervent march from the American embassy down to the city center (Ramos Aísa 2020). The entertainment and media industries were among the strongest voices to echo the cries of reform, including producers, directors, and actors, many of whom expressed their sympathy and concern by posting messages of support and using the BLM hashtag on their social media accounts. Some of the most internationally recognized faces in Spanish film and television, including Elsa Pataky, Mario Casas and Miguel Ángel Silvestre, set off a firestorm on Instagram as they participated in the "Blackout Tuesday" movement in support of Black victims of violence and oppression (Santos 2020). In addition to individuals in the entertainment industry, companies such as Netflix España, the most widely utilized streaming platform in Spain (Parrot Analytics 2021), contributed to the conversation by creating a category titled, "Black Lives Matters", which highlighted the works of Black writers, producers and actors. These responses were important steps in recognizing the persistence of racial inequality, and they served as powerful calls for reflection on how racism and structural prejudice must be addressed and dealt with on a sociopolitical level. However, it inadvertently raised a pressing question that had been in a blind spot for many years prior to the protests: Has Spanish media –including television producers, writers and actors– reflected on the lack of Black and Brown representation in their own industry and the problematic roles that actors of color are continually forced to reproduce? Indeed, racial inequality in the United States is manifested in the entertainment industry, with Hollywood and the television industry frequently criticized for racist practices and perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black, Asian, Latinx and Native American communities (Beltrán, 2009; Davé, 2017; Raheja, 2010; Ramirez Berg, 2002; Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2015; Squires 2009). The Spanish media is as guilty as their American counterparts in creating and sustaining racism, as several academics have noted in their research, yet few within the industry have brought this issue to the fore. Peninsular film scholars such as JM Persanch, Nick Phillips, Martin Repinecz, Ana Corbalán, Raquel Vega-Durán, and Isabel Santaolalla have studied the ways that race relations operate in movies, the latter noting a considerable void in race studies when compared to gender and sexuality in film (44). Even less consideration has been devoted to the study of race on television and streaming platforms, with a few notable exceptions such as Paul Julian Smith's sixth chapter of *Spanish Practices* in which he analyzes race and immigration in *Hospital Central* (2000) and *El Comisario* (1999), and Kathleen Connolly's research on Eastern European migrants in *Mar de Plástico* (2015). In Smith's chapter, he argues that television should be considered as "the true national narrative of Spain and the privileged forum for the working out of domestic issues such as ethnicity and immigration" (79). Perhaps, the historic absence of racial and ethnic "Others" in leading roles in domestic productions destined for Spanish television has limited the

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opportunities for critical research. However, the rise of streaming platforms has given more screen time to Black and Brown characters appearing in internationally viewed series, thus creating more space and increasing the need to understand how racialized characters are reproduced in a Spanish televisual text for a global audience. Among those marginalized communities that have begun to appear more frequently on the small screen are characters hailing from the former colonies, including a growing presence of Afro-Latinos. Due to this sudden increase in visibility, a more critical analysis of how Afro-Latinidad is produced in a neocolonial context on Spanish television is a pressing concern. Given the omnipresence of television in the domestic market (nearly four hours of daily viewing [Smith 1, 2006]) and the international reach that streaming services have afforded the industry, there must be a greater focus on the narratives at work in these series. Most notably, it is crucial to uncover the various ways that racialized characters –Black and Brown– are represented for Spanish and international audiences, and the mechanisms that order and reproduce racial hierarchies in Spain.

This article will unpack those ideas by analyzing two examples of Afro-Latino characters on Spanish television series that have been widely viewed by Spanish audiences, and have been released on Netflix internationally within the last three years.[1] Additionally, I will look at characters on Spanish t.v. series also released on Netflix, which have been widely viewed by Spanish audiences during the same period of time. The aforementioned series were chosen due to the extensive viewership, (Scott 2021), and their international appeal. *Toy Boy* (2019) features an Afro-Cuban exotic dancer, Germán, played by the actor Raudel Martiato. *Sky Rojo* (2021) features another Afro-Cuban character, Gina, who is interpreted by the actress Yany Prado. Both of these actors began their careers in their native Cuba. By using recent examples of Afro-Cuban representation on television series, I will demonstrate how racialized tropes and colonial ideologies continue to surface despite the claims of diverse casting and a greater sensitivity to racial issues, such as those that were referenced earlier.

The conceptual framework of this article relies principally on critical race studies from the United States and Spain, Post-colonial theory, and historical studies that trace the origins and development of hypersexualized representations of Black men and women. The fact that the characters analyzed are Afro-Cuban immigrants in the former empire that once colonized their home countries requires a multifaceted approach that takes into consideration their complex and multi-layered identity. For that reason, these intersectionalities must be explored to fully appreciate the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality that shape the Black experience (Crenshaw 1991, Hill Collins 2005). The close reading performed in this chapter borrows elements from Stuart Hall's approach laid out in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). Here, Hall theorizes that languages are representational systems, as developed from Saussure's semiotic theory. These languages contain elements that function as signs which must be read, interpreted and decoded in order to "construct and transmit meaning" (5). In other words, representation is not a mere reflection of our existence, but rather a meaning-making process shaped by culture and language. Therefore, the analysis must look closely at the televisual text to see how the series are transmitting meaning to the viewer by locating the signs that are at play. These signs must be interrogated to reveal how they construct an imaginary of the racialized Other and how they uphold, challenge, or obscure power and racial hierarchies. I have chosen key scenes from the two series that demonstrate how Spanish cultural representations of Afro-Caribbeans solidify heteropatriarchal hegemony in a multicultural Spain, and how they sustain colonial ideologies of Black Latinos, specifically Cuban immigrants, in Spanish

1. The definition of "Afro-Latino" and who this term includes and excludes is debated by some scholars. However, I use Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores' definition in the *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), which refers to "people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean".

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society. As former colonies of the Spanish empire, their cultural and linguistic ties allow them a certain degree of inclusion and closeness, yet they are never fully incorporated or allowed to fully participate in Spanish society as their Blackness marks them as perpetual outsiders.[2] Not only are they "othered" in multiple legal and cultural arenas, but also portrayed in the media as sexually desirable objects for a Spanish audience, while being stripped of intellectual agency. In addition to my analysis of the two series, I will demonstrate the extensiveness of this phenomenon by briefly analyzing how Blackness and Afro-Latinidad were perceived primarily as a sexually enticing commodity by the media in the reality dating show, *Adán y Eva*, prior to the popularization of Netflix in Spain. The reaction to the arrival of a black character on the provocative show revealed how the media (newspaper, daytime talk shows, critics) interpret and recirculate neocolonial tropes of racialized "others". In other words, the production of Afro-Latinidad on Spanish television, as well as the media response to it, created an enduring and widespread vision of Afro-Latinos as desirable, sexualized, and exotic. Even though these images have become crystallized in the Spanish imagination, spirited groups of Black actors in Spain, such as the Black View which I will discuss at the end of this article, are collaborating to challenge existing notions of Blackness.

Before delving into the analysis, I will briefly discuss some of the historical origins of Blackness in Spain and racial projects enacted during and after the colonial era, particularly as they pertain to visual culture. Racial projects have deep roots in the country, before and during the European conquest of the Americas. "Limpieza de sangre" or "Cleanliness of Blood" was a form of racial policing that prevented Jewish or Muslim converts from fully participating in Spanish society, including governmental participation and the right to emigrate to the Americas. In addition, Europeans of African descent, both free and enslaved were inhabiting the Iberian Peninsula decades before Columbus landed in the West Indies. The Spanish and Portuguese had already begun to traffic slaves from Africa and other parts of Europe in order to fuel the demand for labor in the Iberian Peninsula, as well as for their endeavors in other regions, such as the Azores and the Canary Islands (which had already been colonized by the Spanish crown) where sugar cultivation was centered. Racial projects continued in the colonies where slaves of African descent were brought to the Americas and were stripped of their freedom and forced to labor for the crown, along with the newly captured Indigenous slaves. The concept of race became a strategic tool that served as a powerful mechanism for ordering colonial societies. Jerome C. Branche affirms that race has been present in Iberian literature for centuries, reflecting the role of race in the colonies as a marker of difference. He argues that Blackness, specifically, has been branded in the Spanish consciousness as a negative concept. This was first seen in cultural productions in theater after the arrival of sub-Saharan African slaves in the 16th century. In addition to the frequent use of blackface performances by white actors, black actors were occasionally cast in leading roles, such as Juan de Mérida in *El Valiente Negro en Flandes* (Jones 30). Sporadic performances by black actors became a familiar sight for theater-goers in Spain's Golden Age. Noémie Ndiaye notes that Spain has attempted to erase these narratives of Blackness in early Modern Spain, which she refers to as "scripts of blackness" in performance, contributing to contemporary notions of race and relations of power (3). Thus, the concept of a racial hierarchy based on skin color, as opposed to religion, was already taking shape in Spanish society as early as the 16th century.

Spain ended their distant reign over the colonies in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines when they lost Spanish-American War in 1898, yet colonialist projects continued to spread theirs root in Africa. Morocco became a Spanish protectorate from 1912-1956, together with

2. The term, *Hispanidad*, which was repopularized in the early 20th century by the Generación del '98 writers and frequently invoked by the Franco regime, refers to this idea of shared cultural and linguistic bonds among Spain and its former colonies.

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neighboring regions that became known as Spanish West Africa from 1946-1958. In sub-Saharan Africa, Equatorial Guinea remained under Spanish control as a lucrative colony until independence was gained in 1968. At that point, Spanish colonialism officially ended. Nonetheless, new racial tension would arise almost twenty years later when Spain joined the European Union in 1986. Elena Delgado argues that after dictator Francisco Franco's death in 1975, there was a desire to become a truly European nation state that was defined by progress and a symbolic Whiteness. However, this was complicated by globalization and the arrival of immigrants from Africa and Latin America that threatened the image of White Spanishness. Thus, it became paramount to exclude them as members of Spanish society and mark the African diaspora in the peninsula as Othered (Delgado 207). And, as Paul Gilroy notes in the case of Black and Brown Brits from the former colonies, they became branded as perpetual immigrants. In the case of Spain, Afro-Cubans are confronted with the dual tension of being seen as Black and Cuban immigrants, carrying the stereotypes corresponding to these two labels.

As immigration from the former colonies increased rapidly in the 1980s, movies became the primary audiovisual medium for representing racialized communities and the tensions that followed in contemporary Spanish culture. Together with film production, television would subsequently serve as a burgeoning vehicle for highlighting the increasing racial diversity in cultural productions beginning in the 1990s. Jimmy Castro was one of the first leading Afro-Spanish actors in the series *Hermanas* (1998), and Sonia Okomo, an Afro-Spanish actress born in Equatorial Guinea, was cast in the youth drama, *Al Salir de Clase* (1999), in one of the first roles for a Black actress. The opportunities for Black actors and actresses in subsequent years were sparse, and they were frequently positioned as supporting characters who were underdeveloped and quickly dismissed. However, the arrival of Netflix as a streaming option in 2015 marked the beginning of a new era of internationally recognized series that shined a spotlight on Spain's diversity, and foregrounded the stories of Black, Latino, Afro-Latino, and other marginalized communities for the first time. One of the most salient examples is the show *Élite* (2015), which featured Black (Sergio Momo, Leïti Sene), Maghrebi (Mina El Hammani), and Latino (Danna Paola, Jorge López) actors in leading roles, all forced to reckon with their racial identity in an elite boarding school. This was also the case for two of the most widely watched series on Netflix that exposed what Lorgia García Peña calls the "multiple colonialities".[3] She explains this concept and the "entanglements" of Latinx identity in *Translating Blackness* (2022) as follows:

> Marked as foreign either due to their legal status and/or cultural or linguistic difference, Afro-Latinx diasporic subjects struggle to find a political and cultural place within the nation in which they reside as immigrants (or as descendants of immigrants) while simultaneously facing similar forms of racism and exclusion as those confronted by black nationals. Afro-Latinx episteme, I argue, thus grows out of the experience of simultaneously belonging to multiple regimes of coloniality (i.e. Latin American and U.S.) and understandings of Blackness (mulato, black, Latinx) while also existing in a constant vaivén of belonging and unbelonging to multiple notions of nation-citizens in the diaspora.

The two series analyzed here present an image of Afro-Latinidad fraught with negative stereotypes, yet they also demonstrate the multiple colonialities of the Black Latinx community to the Spanish public and to the global audience of Netflix. In other words, the characters must navigate their way through a society that has labeled them as racial outsiders, and simultaneously as colonized subjects who must live in a nation-state that fails to recognize them as their equals.

3. *Toy Boy* seasons 1 and 2 were among the top 10 most viewed series (non-English) on Netflix in February 2022. *Sky Rojo* season 2 also made the list, debuting at the number 3 position in July 2021. https://top10.netflix.com/tv-non-english?week=2021-07-04

Toy Boy and the Fetishized Black Male Body

On September 25, 2019, media conglomerate Atresmedia and production company Plano a Plano released the first season of *Toy Boy* on Antena 3 after a brief pre-release on the streaming platform Atresplayer. The thirteen-episode series received considerable viewership from the start with 1,849,000 spectators tuning in to the first episode and a 13.6% share. However, the series was met with harsh criticism from viewers and critics, resulting in a slide in spectatorship to 854,000 and a 6.3% share (Onieva). Despite this setback, the first season was released on Netflix in February of 2020 where it proved to be a success with international audiences, and consequently was renewed for a second season scheduled for March 2021. However, the release was delayed until early 2022 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The plot centered around five male go-go dancers, played by relatively unknown actors at the time. These dancers work in a nightclub in Southern Spain entertaining female clients. The main character, Hugo (Jesús Mosquera), is accused of murder after waking up on a luxury boat with a burning corpse on deck. In what appears to be a well-executed framing, he spends seven years incarcerated for the crime until he is released provisionally due to a mistrial and lack of evidence. The rest of the plot shows his futile attempts to prove his innocence and uncover the real perpetrator of the crimes. He is aided by his close circle of coworkers from the club and his lawyer, Triana (María Pedraza). In addition, the series offers a number of subplots that involve wayward drug deals, corruption amongst the wealthy, and strained familial relations, giving us a more detailed look at the characters' personal lives. The twisting plotlines, action-packed scenes and the visually pleasing characters fill the twenty-one episodes, many of which exceed an hour in length. Despite the questionable "quality" of the series described by some critics as plagued with a "deliberately forced and essentially implausible" plot (Stiletano 2020), poor acting (Lamazares 2020), and a campy aesthetic reminiscent of a daytime soap opera (White 2020), the unresolved mystery on Hugo's boat, as well as the sexual allure of the Toy Boys, kept the viewers' interest piqued throughout the second season.

Out of the five members of the group it is Germán (Martiato), an Afro-Caribbean go-go dancer, who charms the clientele with his chiseled figure and exotic looks. He appears in the opening scene of the pilot episode when he crashes a party with the other "Toy Boys", as they call themselves, disguised as police officers at a racy birthday party. However, it isn't until later in the pilot episode that he is introduced to the viewer in more depth in a scene that establishes the lens through which he will be depicted throughout the series. The scene begins with a panoramic shot of a beachside pool as the camera slowly zooms out to reveal Germán laying in a lounge chair wearing only a white bikini, sharply contrasting with his dark skin tone, and guiding the viewer's gaze to his genital area. Immediately after, one of the other dancers and owner of the club, Iván (José de la Torre), approaches him to discuss business matters when an elderly lady touches him and smiles before walking away, insinuating that Germán has been working as an escort at the resort for a number of wealthy retired women. He lightheartedly replies, "Alguien tiene que hacerlo…" (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 1. 00:40:52-00:40:53). His work as an entertainer and sex worker is undeniably fueled by his exotic allure, which materializes in his flashy clothing, dark skin, and Cuban accent. This exoticism, as seen from a Spanish hegemonic perspective, is emphasized in the pool scene with its tropical décor, and in the hyper-sexualization of his racialized body, which he references in his conversation with Iván as "la máquina de felicidad" (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 1. 00:40:46 - 00:40:47). Iván also utilizes this phrase to reference Germán's body when he attempts to win Germán's favor and recruit him as a dancer in the reopening of

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his club. He unflinchingly accepts the offer. In the second episode, Germán's body continues to serve as an object of desire for the other characters and the viewer. A salient example of this is when the female lawyer representing Hugo comes to the club. She searches for Hugo in a backstage room and enters to find Germán facing the attractive young lawyer, Triana, in a completely nude pose, and with the camera positioned behind Germán, forcing the spectator to gaze upon his exposed rear while her gaze is directed at his genitals. The objectifying gaze becomes a pattern throughout the series. However, unlike the other "toy boys", his sexual objectification is tied to his Blackness. This is apparent in the rhetoric used to describe Germán, which repeatedly considers his Blackness as an inextricable component of his beauty. After one of the raunchy routines in the Inferno, one of the clients leaving the club states, "No veas como estaba el chocolate, eh? Me vuelve loca" (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 9. 00:06:05 – 00:06:07).. In a later episode, an Irish mafia boss selects Germán from the "Toy Boys" as a special birthday present for his aunt, saying, "Look, I even got you a mandingo, Patt. Happy birthday" (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 12. 00:49:16 – 00:49:18)..The woman rises from her seat as she stares wide-eyed with lust and disbelief at his muscular body. The chocolate reference and mandingo comment reinforce the idea that Germán is marked simultaneously as a racialized character and an object of consumption.[4] He is a source of pleasure stemming from his Blackness and the neocolonialist ideas attached to it.

The overt objectification and racializing of Germán is compounded by the lack of character development and involvement in the plot, as opposed to the other members of the dance group, each of whom are afforded more screen time, psychological and emotional depth, as well as a more active role in the plot. Very little background information is given about Germán, and he appears to be the one that is least involved in hatching a plan to save Hugo from returning to prison. Therefore, he is reduced to a mere object of sexual desire who is absent of intellectual or psychological depth. He is a foreigner aimlessly searching for pleasure and economic opportunities, an idea that is reinforced by his life motto: "Vive y deja vivir." (Live and let live). Thus, he never fully exists within the group of Toy Boys, as well as the Spanish nation-state, due to his Blackness and Cuban identity.

The Tragic Afro-Cuban female in *Sky Rojo*

Unlike *Toy Boy*, *Sky Rojo* is a Netflix original production that was produced by Vancouver Media, the same company that brought Spain's most successful series, as well as the second most watched series not in the English language, *La Casa de Papel* (2017) to viewers spanning the globe ("Netflix"). It's formula of impressive cinematography, action packed scenes with stunning special effects, and strong female leads packed into episodes lasting less than 30 minutes proved to be a commercial success.

The three lead characters are Coral, Wendy, and Gina (played by Spanish actress Verónica Sánchez, Argentine actress Lali Esposito, and Cuban actress Yany Prado, respectively) who are a trio of close-knit sex workers on the run from their hardhanded pimp, Romeo (Asier Etxeandia), and his assistants, Moisés and Christian (played by Miguel Ángel Silvestre and Enric Auquer, respectively). The action precipitates when Gina, the Afro-Cuban prostitute played by Prado, is called into Romeo's office to discuss her debts. She is blackmailed into paying him an exceedingly high price for business expenses at the brothel, including her trip to Spain, condoms, lubricant, lingerie, and other items necessary for sex work. She asks for more time to pay back her debts, and he refuses to return her passport, thus denying her the liberty to leave the club: "Invertí en ti. Te traje aquí" (*Sky Rojo.* Season 1, Episode 1. 00:10:58 – 00:11:01). She is stripped of all her power and agency as a

4. Mandingo is a stereotype of a sexually promiscuous and animalistic Black man, often portrayed with a large penis, that was propagated during the slave trade as a way of emphasizing the physical superiority of Black men at slave auctions. The term derives from the Mandinka people of West Africa who currently live in Senegal, Gambia, and parts of Guinea and Sierra Leone. Scott Poulson-Bryant's Hung (2005) discusses the mandingo stereotype, which is closely related to the film trope of "the black stud" or "the black buck" addressed in Donald Bogle's Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (2001).

mere "investment" for Romeo, reducing her to a sexual commodity. Trapped in Romeo's web of power, the only possible escape is through violence. She strikes Romeo on the head with a trophy, and he retaliates by stabbing her multiple times with a ball-point pen. It appears that she has been defeated. However, she is rescued by her fellow sex workers, Coral and Wendy, who carry her bleeding body out of the club. Seeing that a trip to the hospital would alert the authorities and jeopardize their plan to save Gina, Coral decides that the best option is to take Gina to one of her trusted clients, a corrupt veterinarian. The fading Gina lies bleeding on the surgical bed where she is treated and revived. Her helpless body on a veterinary bed evokes images of an injured animal, only saved because of the efforts of her heroic friends and allies. Once again, she is presented in a degrading form which establishes her initially as a tragic and inferior character, though she challenges this representation in later scenes. To complicate matters, and further corroborate the image of a tragic, Afro-Latina woman in need of saving, Gina reveals that she is pregnant.

In the third episode of the first season, Gina finds the man who impregnated her, naively hoping that he will help the three friends escape and start a life with her. He is astonished to see her reappear at his residence, and even more so to see that she has left the club as a free woman. After telling him that she is pregnant with their child, he states, "me ocuparé de eso" (*Sky Rojo.* Season 1, Episode 3. 00:20:00 – 00:20:01) which shows that he exerts dominance and total control of her body. This idea is further cemented when he immediately turns her around without her consent and penetrates her in a degrading sex scene while Lou Reed's "Perfect Day" plays in the background. She grimaces in discomfort, even closing her eyes momentarily. Unable to react, she silences her cries of terror and pain during the brutal rape scene. The action then abruptly shifts to a romantic flashback with Coral and Moisés on a luxury yacht. The jarring juxtaposition of the two scenes minimizes the possibility of empathizing with Gina by reshifting the focus on Coral's memories.

Clearly, Coral is portrayed as the main heroine in the story, much like Hugo in *Toy Boy*, yet Gina is positioned as the character who is denigrated, ignored, silenced and abused. One of the ways that this is established is by limiting the development of her backstory, which is only briefly depicted in a flashback scene, and foregrounding Coral and Wendy's story, whose Whiteness and Argentine identity places her in a privileged position in the series. In an emotional flashback scene accompanied by melodramatic music to set the tone, Wendy reveals that she left her humble neighborhood, Villa 31, with her female lover seeking an escape from her violent and homophobic environment. When her lover refused to work as a prostitute, Wendy accepted the offer as an act of sacrifice, leading her to the Club de Las Novias in Spain. In contrast, Gina's backstory is not a romanticized tale of devotion, but rather depicts a naïve, young Cuban woman who is promised a better life in Spain as a waitress, only to be forced into sex work. Adding to her tragic story, it is revealed that her mother was responsible for selling her as a sex slave in Romeo's brothel for financial compensation. It becomes apparent that she was one of several victims from impoverished areas in Latin American countries when Moisés confesses that the mothers of his victims embrace him for making an offer that assures their survival. In season 1 episode 5, he justifies this by saying "Y porque ahí, en todas las favelas, se mueren de hambre" (*Sky Rojo.* Season 1, Episode 5. 00:18:29 – 00:18:32). The racial implications of the word "favelas", referring to underdeveloped neighborhoods in Brazil overwhelmingly populated by Black Brazilians (dos Santos Oliveira 73), cannot be ignored. The favela is a place of extreme poverty, yet it is also a site characterized by the exploitation of Black and mixed-race Brazilians, many of whom have been uprooted and displaced. Moisés uses this term, specific to the Brazilian context, indiscriminately when referencing sex workers from impoverished Latin

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American neighborhoods. This generalization, which dislocates the specificity of the term, exemplifies a tendency by Spanish society to demarcate a difference by describing Latin Americans as poor, dark, and coming from dangerous regions. These characteristics are emphasized and hyperbolized by the metaphor of the favela. Additionally, Moisés' use of this term indicates that communities such as the favela, and Gina's poverty-stricken environment in Havana, benefit from the sex trade. She is one link in a chain of racial exploitation, which is made apparent by the multiple Latinas working in his brothel. Although the series brings to light a very real and urgent concern in Spain by highlighting the harmful effects of neocolonialism and capitalism in which Black and mixed-race women are forced into for survival, the representation of Gina as submissive, naive, and exploited creates a barrier that she must overcome as a victim of violence and as a racially marginalized woman in Spain. Although Gina is able to find the strength to rescue the other women in later episodes, her "otherness" and her inferiority is continually reinforced by the excessive use of Afro-Latina stereotypes and by limiting her narrative voice.[5] Their narration at critical moments in the series expresses their deepest thoughts and emotional dilemmas, yet Gina's voice is suppressed, depriving her of complexity and depth.

Race, Gender and Colonialism in the Spanish mediascape

The question that now lingers is "What do the scenes described earlier say about Blackness and gender in Spain, and where do these images come from?" *Toy Boy* reveals a depiction of black masculinity that was not simply created and projected onto the screen, but rather one that has circulated in recent years in Spain. The dating reality series *Adán y Eva* (2014), infamous for its all nude contestants, featured a Black Spaniard in 2014 for the first time in an episode that drew considerable attention from fans and critics. The national newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *La Provincia* labeled him as, "un adonis ébano que tratará de enamorar a las dos 'Evas' en el programa de hoy'', and "con un cuerpo de escándalo". The choice of words to describe the contestant was an undeniable example of the Spanish media commodifying the black male body as a sexual object of desire meant to satisfy the appetite of the two White Spanish female contestants on the episode, as well as the viewers. The case of *Adán y Eva* signaled a growing trend by the Spanish media to fetishize the black male body for white consumption. This phenomenon was not entirely unprecedented on Spanish television at the time, and certainly not a new phenomenon in Spanish cinema.[6] The fetishization and commodification of Black bodies was well established in the American mediascape before lending itself to the Spanish media in the post-Franco era. Ronald Jackson identifies enslavement as the historical origin of exploiting and commodifying Black bodies, which was continually manifested in the popular media, including 18th century theater and early Hollywood film (e.g. *Birth of a Nation*). Jackson sees the mass media as a tool that uses Black bodies as "a canvas on which figurative scripts or writings are inscribed" (13). In this way, the Black body has been "scripted" as a site with symbolic meaning, such as the site of sexual deviance and pleasure. bell hooks also discusses the commodification of race as a source of pleasure. Racialized bodies create "an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other" (23). Therefore, the body of racialized Others is a necessary tool to reinforce relations of power through sexual commodification, which becomes solidified through repeated images in the mass media. The mandingo trope was one of the circulating images in early American media which was featured prominently in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and continued to appear for decades in Hollywood productions, as evidenced in the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. It was an early representation of black masculinity as animalistic and lascivious, posing an imminent threat of the rape of White women and

5. These are not unique to Afro-Latina women, but are rather an amalgamation of stereotypes attached to Black and Latina women a result of what Lorgia García Peña identifies as multiple "colonial entanglements", such as exotification, hyper-sexualization, and objectification. She explores these stereotypes in *Translating Blackness* (2022), as does Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez in *Decolonizing Diasporas* (2020).

6. Several scholars have written about the fetishization of Black characters in Spanish immigration films, including Michelle Murray in "The Politics of Looking in Fernando León de Aranoa's Princesas", and Ana Corbalán in "Questioning Cultural Hybridity: Perceptions of Latin American Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Cinema".

miscegenation. Black men became a source of racial terror in these films while simultaneously being treated as a sexual commodity, much like the exposed body of Germán in *Toy Boy* in the scene described earlier. The foregrounding of his work as a male escort and exotic dancer, compounded with the overt exhibiting of his body and genitals for the viewers to gaze upon, demonstrates these concepts playing out in Spanish television. This highly sexualized scene demonstrates how Black men are depicted as animalistic and devoid of mental and intellectual agency. They are reduced to the genitals, which can be threatening or enticing, as Frantz Fanon notes in *Black Skin, White Mask*. Additionally, the scene highlights the control that White Spaniards have over the Black body as a commodity that can be transferred from one sphere of control, the elderly clients at the resort, to the owner of the nightclub, who convincingly rehires Germán and his "maquinita", which he states as he stares in the direction of his penis. The emphasis placed on Germán's body creates a "biological" being, in Fanon's terms, that must be conquered and contained.

In *Sky Rojo*, Gina is also seen as a sexual commodity due to her forced work in the sex industry, and by the way her body is brought into the viewer's focus. The scene from the first episode demonstrates how this takes place, as her breast and torso are mutilated by Romeo. It is then in the hands of her friends to bring her to safety, and the veterinarian to heal her body, thereby restoring her for the sexual pleasure of men. The destruction and restoration of her body is a way to exert power and dominance over the Black female body by White men, which is a practice that can be traced back to slavery. Thus, her body circulates as a commodity in the sexual economy of slavery, or modern-day sexual slavery in Gina's case (Davis 29). Her body is also brought into focus by the narrative of her pregnancy. It can hardly be overlooked that the one main character who becomes impregnated is a Black Latina woman, which is fraught with negative stereotypes in Spain and the United States. Additionally, the pregnancy narrative brings the focus back to her body as a site of pleasure, pain, and reproduction. Her body is essentially converted into a vessel that not only serves as a source of sexual desire through her sex work, but also a symbol of femininity. However, unlike Coral and Wendy who are depicted as strong and intellectual heroines liberated of masculine dominance, Gina's pregnancy evokes a brand of feminism characterized as passive, nurturing, and submissive. These qualities, along with her expressed desire to become a mother in a nuclear family, as opposed to the other two women who reject a heteropatriarchal lifestyle, only serves to bolster her image as a fragile woman in need of saving, and an outsider who is incapable of embodying the modern, European womanhood displayed by Wendy and Coral. According to Saidiya Hartman, this idea of Black motherhood as a mode of subjugation and control can be traced back to the Atlantic slave trade. She states

> The maternal function was not enshrined with minimal or restricted rights but indistinguishable from the condition of enslavement and its reproduction. Motherhood was critical to the reproduction of property and black subjection. (98)

Hartman's quote can be understood in contemporary forms of slavery as well, represented by the Latina sex workers, and essentially sex slaves, in *Sky Rojo*. Gina's pregnant body symbolizes the imperial desire to police Black and Latina reproduction, as we see in the sex scene analyzed previously, as well as a reminder of her subjection to the laws of a capitalist market and those who benefit from it. In addition to the inordinate focus on both characters' bodies, the White Spaniard is positioned as a mentally superior race by limiting the presence and intellectual contributions of Germán and Gina. They are either largely silenced and absent when important decisions are made and unable to contribute to the main characters' fight for freedom. Germán, for example, is essentially turned into a prop that only has a visible

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presence and voice when the male bodies are on display. Patricia Hill Collins theorizes "At the same time that Blackness must be visible, it also must be contained and/or denuded of all meaning that threatens elites" (178). This explains why Germán is selectively placed in a highly visible position during the dance sequences, yet he is obscured from the more important plot elements. It is a formula of containment that is meant to exclude Black characters from intellectual and power circles by foregrounding the body. Gina experiences the same kind of intellectual and mental containment by restricting her dialogue and creativity, as noted earlier in her limited narration. She is silenced while the other two characters reflect and offer their personal analysis of the events that transpired. Even though she appears in the same shot as Coral and Wendy in many scenes, she is often filmed in a position that reinforces her as an inferior character, such as the back seat of the car, obscured, or out of focus. A prominent example of this occurs in the final episode of the first season when the three women are executing their plan to destroy their enemies and live in freedom. Coral, who is the main architect of the plan, returns to the club where she has a violent showdown with Romeo. Meanwhile, Wendy is fleeing from Moisés on a motorcycle while Gina nervously clings on behind her. After Moisés is baited into crashing his car in a large hole, Wendy gets in the driver's seat of a tractor and buries him as Gina looks on from the ground. While there are moments when Gina shows bravery and strength, this critical scene is particularly significant because it reiterates Coral's role as the intellectual component, Wendy as the brute force of the group, symbolized by her command of masculine machinery, and Gina's passivity as an onlooker. These shots are subtle ways that the series creates a racial hierarchy with Whiteness being placed at the top of the ranks.

The hypersexualization and commodification of the Black body has gradually seeped into cultural productions worldwide. It is seen on television, film, theater, and advertisement. However, this cannot be seen as merely a result of the influence of American media and culture, in a transnational flow. The legacy of colonialism and slavery still persists in former empires and shapes the way Black communities in those nation-states are seen in the media. It is what Hill Collins calls "new racism", which stems from racial formations established during earlier periods, yet it remains embedded in society in less explicit forms. (54). In the context of Spain, the representation of the black body must be further nuanced by tracing how colonialism has shaped the imaginations of Blackness attached to Afro-Latinos, and more specifically Afro-Caribbean identity.[7] It would appear that the image of the Caribbean sex worker has been branded into the Spanish imagination. Germán and Gina are testimony to this enduring and pervasive trope. This idea can be fleshed out by identifying the patterns that are used to characterize Afro-Cubans as racially inferior outsiders, in particular through exotification and tropicalization. Cristina Carrasco explores the ways that Afro-Caribbeans are othered in the film Princesas by "exotización" or, exotifying the culture and people from the region. She points to the ways the body of the Caribbean sex worker is signaled as exotic by their fellow Spanish prostitutes, who claim that the Caribbean women "put something in their asses to make it bigger" and who are able to kiss better because of their teeth and lips. Carrasco is one of several scholars (Brennan 2004, Cabezas 2009, Mullings 1999, Padilla 2007) who have noted that much of this negative imagery stems from Cuba as a site of sex tourism for single Spanish men, or what Anne McClintock calls a "porno-tropic" where formerly colonized lands become a highly sexualized space for the former colonizers. (McClintock as referenced in Carrasco 239). Drawing from the idea of Said's *Orientalism*, it is the representations by Anglo and European nations of "countries and cultures 'south of the border' in textualizations that have, in the main, reified the political, economic, and cultural hegemony of the 'neighbor to the north' (Aparicio and

7. Research on Afro-Latino identity in the Caribbean is analyzed in several scholarly texts, including but not limited to *The Dominican Racial Imaginary* (2016) by Milagros Ricourt, *Afro-Latin@s in Movement* (2016) by Petra Rivera-Rideau, et al., and *Afro-Cuban voices: On race and identity in contemporary Cuba* (2000) edited by Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs.

Chávez-Silverman 1). One of the patterns that is used to tropicalize the characters of the Caribbean is through their clothing and accessories. This is especially true for Gina, who is seen wearing brightly colored dresses with feather patterns, as opposed to the more tepid outfits donned by Coral and Wendy. One of the promotional billboards for the series in Madrid's Plaza de Colón demonstrated how fashion is used as a way of othering the female Caribbean body. Gina is wearing large hoop earrings, a feathered pink miniskirt and a shiny, teal halter-top exposing her torso and cleavage. In addition, she is holding a cocktail in her left hand while the other hand is holding the straw to her lips as she seductively stares off in the distance. In contrast, the two other female protagonists' bodies are not as exposed and they are each holding guns in an aggressive, rather than seductive, pose. The flashy costumes and overtly sexualized props that Gina is displaying in the ad demonstrate what Jorge Pérez calls a "sartorial hypervisibility" that racializes and exotifies black characters in Spanish film, and in this case Spanish television (27). In *Toy Boy*, Germán represents an idealized form of the Caribbean man wearing his white speedo as he lounges at the pool with fruit and a cocktail, which contrasts with the image of the fully clothed Iván who is there to discuss business matters. These forms of tropicalizing the Afro-Cuban characters sustain colonial ideologies by continually circulating degrading images and stereotypical representations on the screen, and consequently, branding these ideas into the Spanish consciousness.

Conclusion: Challenging Black representations in the Spanish media

As institutional racism is increasingly being addressed in a number of arenas, change is on the horizon for communities that optimistically look to the future as a time of inclusion and reckoning with the past. Nevertheless, this becomes a greater challenge in spaces and nation-states that are considered post-racial. The term "post racial" gained considerable currency in the United States during the Obama presidency in 2008, asserting that society and state has moved beyond and healed from the racial division of previous years. The cultural anthropologist Dan Rodriguez García argues that Spain sees itself as a "post-racial" nation-state that has purged its society of the specter of colonialism. By making this claim of being a post-racial haven, Spanish society is essentially masking the underlying effects of racism that continue to disenfranchise immigrants and racialized communities (2). Post-racial society and globalization have also made multiculturalism and diversity more visible on the screen. Non-White actors are growing in demand in Spain as Netflix and other OTT platforms produce more content for a global audience. Afro-Latino actors, such as Yany Prado and Raudel Martiato, are testaments to this changing dynamic, as well as Black Spaniards, including the popular actors Berta Vázquez and Will Shephard, both of whom had leading roles in the Netflix series *Vis a Vis* and *Mar de Plástico*, respectively. The problem with this new form of inclusive casting is that racialized communities are still positioned as "others", which only serves to reaffirm White Spanish hegemony. Rosalia Cornejo Parriego calls for a reckoning in contemporary Spain that involves self-representation in order to arrive at the moment when Spanish and Black are no longer mutually exclusive categories (35). In sum, media institutions must prioritize uprooting representations of the "other" that are anchored to the colonial past, as well as rethinking fixed notions of Blackness by creating a space for Black production behind the camera. A group called The Black View is a collection of Black and Brown actors and artists based in Madrid who have made it their primary objective to normalize Blackness on the screen and create a more positive representation of racialized communities (https://theblackview.com/). One of the ways this is achieved is by giving Black artists the creative space to write about their own experiences, the opportunity to produce film and television, and to create and interpret roles that accurately reflect their personal experiences. While this would appear to be far on the horizon, there

are directors, such as Santiago Zannou, who are paving the way for Black and first-generation Spaniards to challenge the dominance of White Spaniards in film production. In addition to the mainstream studios, Black productions are turning to alternative mediums which allow more creative freedom, notably YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. The popular influencer on TikTok and Instagram, Afropoderossa, is an example of Black Hispanic artists creating a space on social media where they can address issues in Spain, and create messages of optimism, solidarity, or even defiance, using nonconventional methods to reach a large audience. These initiatives are an important step in the right direction. However, White Spanish media players will also need to reflect on how they are perpetuating racism in ways that are becoming more difficult to recognize on the surface. Questions such as the one I posed at the beginning of this essay should direct the industry to look inward, as well as outward, when it comes to racial concerns. In other words, the media must do more than post positive messages of support for the Black community, but also critique their own industries and networks which continually silence and exploit Blacks, Latinos, and other racially marginalized groups. This means not only reexamining the roles Black actors bring to life on the screen, but also the lack of representation behind the screen.

This analysis of Afro-Latino characters on the two series serves as a starting point for uncovering the problematic representation of racialized Others on one of the most popular mediums, and explores the way racial hierarchies are affirmed. While some viewers and critics have seen the increasing presence of Black and Brown actors as a step in the right direction, I would caution that visibility alone does not lead to the dismantling of racist ideologies. For that reason, television shows must be analyzed with a more critical lens in order to expose the way Blackness is imagined in Spain and how it is reproduced discursively. The two characters I have analyzed show how difference is clearly emphasized in order to assert racial superiority of White Spaniards. Notably, Gina and German's stories are cast aside and the other characters' perspectives are centered. They are developed in more depth and given intellectual and psychologic nuances, even branded as heroes, while the two Afro-Latino characters are presented primarily as primitive, hypersexualized and corporeal. These observations have been researched extensively in the case of cinema, yet they are overlooked in television, an area that has long been an object of disdain for academics (Palacio 12). By giving more attention to the way television sustains racial hierarchies, we can begin to understand how racist tropes persist and evolve in somewhat inconspicuous forms, as well as the ways that neocolonial ideologies are sustained. Perhaps, in a not-so-distant future, the industry will begin to hire screenwriters, producers and directors from Black and Brown communities, thus allowing them to tell their own stories and critique the structural and social inequalities in Spanish society.

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The Aesthetics of Care in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios*

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Abstract

Nearly 20 years since its release, Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* remains a crucial film for understanding the sequelae of the Argentine civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983). This article examines how *Los Rubios* renders visible certain processes of consolidation of memory and mythmaking while simultaneously challenging the discourses that were becoming dominant as Argentina was making significant headway in its pursuit of truth and justice. The film's iconoclastic representation of the dictatorship, resistance, and their aftermath brings attention to what dominant discourses of the dictatorship had rendered invisible. Carri rebels against the doxa of documentary filmmaking to more aptly depict the non-linear processes of memory. Considering political theorist Mihaela Mihai's work on the aesthetics of care and engaging in visual analysis, this essay posits that Carri's film undertakes a project of mnemonic care with a clear preoccupation for presenting a more complex and expansive memory of the dictatorship. Understanding the film as a work of mnemonic care illuminates how *Los Rubios* intervened in Argentine political memory when it came out as well as the stakes of the controversy that followed.

Key Words: Argentina, cinema, documentary, *Los Rubios*, dictatorship, memory

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Argentine filmmaker Albertina Carri lost her parents, Ana María Caruso and Roberto Carri, to enforced disappearance during the Argentine civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983) when she was only three years old[1]. Her parents were Montonero militants who were abducted from their home in 1977 in La Matanza, the suburban, working-class neighborhood where they were living underground. Carri's 2003 film, *Los Rubios*, depicts her search for information about her parents, poses questions about the reliability of memory and testimony, and challenges a number of the discourses about the Argentine dictatorship that were previously taken for granted in the collective imaginary. *Los Rubios* came out at the time when the post-dictatorship generation in Argentina, that is the generation who is too young to have first-hand memories of the dictatorship and learns vicariously through the older generation, was coming of age and beginning to tell their stories and organize. It was a moment fraught with an intergenerational struggle for memory after nearly two decades of slow progress towards truth and justice for the human rights violations of the dictatorship, but preceding an acceleration of legal proceedings towards justice that would occur under the governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández Kirchner (2007-2015). Carri's film proved controversial, with reviews and academic analyses both praising and attacking *Los Rubios* for how it represents the memory of her parents and their generation, her experience as the child of disappeared activists, and the memory of the dictatorship period more generally.

Los Rubios is the subject a large body of academic work on the cultural production and memory of the Argentine dictatorship and of Operation Condor (Aguilar, Amado, Andermann, Bartalini, Blejmar, Draper, Forcinito, Forné, Garibotto, Kaiser, Lazzara, Macón, Noriega, Nouzeilles, J. Page, P. Page, Quílez Esteve, Ros, Sarlo, Sosa, Tandeciarz, Walas). Scholars have written about what *Los Rubios* contributes to memory discourses as a postmemorial work or posit that postmemory is an inappropriate framework for understanding the film, while some criticize it for how it portrays the parents' generation that struggled against the dictatorship. Others attack it for depoliticizing the disappearance of Carri's parents, while some scholars celebrate it as an innovative articulation of second-generation experiences of memory, of the search for information about her family, and for how it addresses the crisis of representation of atrocity and trauma. In relationship to that debate, in this essay I argue that *Los Rubios* renders visible certain processes of consolidation of memory and mythmaking while simultaneously challenging the discourses that were becoming dominant as Argentina was making significant headway in its pursuit of truth and justice. Considering political theorist Mihaela Mihai's recent work on political memory, I show how Carri: (1) reveals widespread complicity with the dictatorship, which raises questions about the revolutionary project of her parents; (2) shows the ongoing repressive and ideological apparatuses of the dictatorship in democratic Argentina, which goes against the discourse that the transition to democracy made a clean break with the past; and (3) intervenes in the heroization of the disappeared by showing how the older generation engages in mythmaking, both at the institutional and personal levels. As such, *Los Rubios*' iconoclastic representation of the dictatorship, resistance, and their aftermath brings attention to what dominant discourses of the dictatorship had rendered invisible. Following Mihai's work on the aesthetics of care, this essay concludes that Carri's film undertakes a project of mnemonic care with a clear preoccupation for "the health of the hermeneutical space of memory" (Mihai 9). Understanding the film as a work of mnemonic care illuminates how *Los Rubios* intervened in Argentine political memory when it came out as well as the controversy that followed. Artworks that foster mnemonic care from different post-atrocity contexts are unique and function to care for memory in distinct ways, but what they share is a preoccupation for challenging reductive and hegemonic narratives that flatten the possibility for understanding

1. I shy away from referring to Carri as an hija because of her repeated statements in which she distances herself from the activist organization, H.I.J.O.S. For more information about Carri's critique of H.I.J.O.S. refer to her book, *Los Rubios: Cartografiía de una película*. Buenos Aires: Buenos Aires Festival de Cine Independiente, 2007.

the past. By including *Los Rubios* into the debate about the aesthetics of care, I will show how Carri's artistic intervention into the memory of the civic-military dictatorship effectively advanced a broader and deeper understanding of the impact of the dictatorship on Argentina even decades after transitioning to democracy. *Los Rubios* exemplifies how "due to their hedonic elements and mediated nature, artworks are better positions than historical and anthropological accounts of the past to interrupt cognitive and emotional investments in reductive mythmaking about the past" (Mihai 15). The dozens of academic articles and books that analyze the film and its continued importance in the canon of Latin American documentary are a testament to its impact. Interestingly, Mihai's work on post-Holocaust France, post-Communist Romania, and post-Apartheid South Africa helps me make sense of Carri's work as cohesive with other post-atrocity contexts in that it challenges hegemonic memory, combats erasures, and resists mythmaking and heroization.

Mihai's recent work on political memory and the aesthetics of care can shed light on the implications of Carri's aesthetic intervention in processes of memory-making in post-dictatorship Argentina. Mihai identifies a double erasure that occurs in narrative and memory-making in the wake of systemic atrocity and violence. The first erasure is widespread complicity and the second is impure forms of resistance. For Mihai, these erasures:

> reflect various groups' unequal access to processes of meaning-making, which is itself a function of these groups' relative social, economic, and political capital within the community. Successor elites' politically motivated search for moral "fresh starts" and for robust public support often leads to certain perpetrators, victims, and heroic resisters ideologically overdetermining the public's imaginary of "what happened." (26)

Mihai shows how the damage control in post-atrocity situations tends to follow a pattern of rendering invisible certain aspects of the past in order to move on while maintaining power structures and the position of the elite class despite having benefitted from repression and state violence. Argentina is no exception to this pattern. In what follows, I will show how Carri combats erasure in her film, thus opening up space for different processes of meaning-making and remembrance.

Los Rubios **and Combatting Erasure**

Los Rubios is widely recognized as a breakthrough film for post-dictatorship Argentina. Memory studies scholar Geoffrey Maguire points out that "Los Rubios was, of course, not the first to deal with the dictatorship period from the perspective of an *hijo*, but it did have the greatest impact on the cultural sphere" (28). In a 2003 interview with the director in *Página /12*, María Moreno calls Carri's film, "Una de las películas más originales y valientes del nuevo cine argentino." Carri's perspective as the child of disappeared activists diverges from the canonized memory of the dictatorship which had centered on the immediate victims of the dictatorship, such as her parents. In his *Estudio Crítico sobre Los Rubios*, Gustavo Noriega posits that the film resists meeting any expectations that a spectator might have when watching a film about the disappeared. Carri rejects the traditional approaches to biographical documentaries that set out to reconstruct and celebrate lives. Instead, "Todo lo que uno espera de un documental relacionado con desaparecidos no está o aparece oblicuo, distinto, tergiversado" (Noriega 21). For example, the photos that appear in the film are defaced or do not appear in their entirety in the shot and it is never clear who exactly the "talking head" interviewees are or what their relationship was to the Carri family.

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Los Rubios exposes a crisis of representation through its depiction of its own creative process, and this extends to the other crises of representation that the film examines—the failure of individual memory, the deliberate and interested intergenerational transmission of memories in order to construct a cultural memory, the role of institutions like cultural associations and academia in authorizing and gatekeeping memory, and how all of these processes in tandem lead to selective mythmaking and erasures.

Much of the scholarship about *Los Rubios* comments on its innovative form as a meta-documentary and how the form relates to the film's themes of the construction of identity and memory. Tandeciarz posits:

> The film's willingness to put on display its own process of composition not only highlights its conceptual sophistication it has the added benefit of laying bare some of the affective imperatives guiding Carri's choice of cinematic strategies. The use of a double to represent her is particularly instructive in this respect: it enhances the film's metacritical articulation through its insistence on performance as a key element in the construction of identity and simultaneously protects Carri from the exposure and vulnerability all recollection entails. (131)

The choice to hire an actress to play Carri is framed to be a consequence of the first interview, which Carri and her crew conduct with a neighbor in La Matanza. During this interview, the neighbor recognizes Carri and the interview becomes uncomfortable for everyone. Memory studies scholar Ana Forcinito observes that Carri's use of Analía Couceyro to portray her reveals the crisis of representation that is characteristic of Argentine films from this era, which is inextricably linked to the residual violence that permeates post-dictatorship culture. Indeed, "violent" is the word that Carri and her crew used to describe the first interview in La Matanza (*Los Rubios* 00:07:06-00:07:08). While featuring an actress seems to go against the doxa of documentary filmmaking, media studies scholar Laia Quílez Esteve points out that Carri's use of Couceyro in her film enables her the distance and anonymity necessary for directing *Los Rubios*.

I see Carri's engagement with erasure beginning with the formal structure and the ways in which the film reveals what is traditionally omitted from documentaries. *Los Rubios* calls attention to the creative choices and fictionalization that occur in documentary filmmaking, which typically presupposes non-fiction and faithfulness to a referent in what we consider the real world. Fictionalization opens up the possibility of challenging and expanding memory. The film shows the processes of pre-production, filming and directing, and even of seeking financial support for the project. Carri addresses the crisis of representation of the documentary genre by utilizing two diegetic levels to show filmmaking methodologies that are typically hidden in documentary. *Los Rubios* switches between diegetic levels, sometimes within the same scene, making it difficult to determine on what level a given shot is occurring and destabilizing these narrative levels. On the intradiegetic level, the primary level, is a narrative depicting Carri as she directs a film about her search for information about her parents; this level, shot sometimes in color and sometimes in black and white, shows Carri as she converses with her crew and directs the actress who portrays her. Then there is the film within the film, which operates on the metadiegetic level. The metadiegetic level is the film that the spectator sees being produced in the intradiegetic level: Carri, the character played by Couceyro, searches for information about her parents, and Playmobil toys act out certain scenes from Carri's childhood imagination. Testimonial interviews and scenic shots of the city and the country appear on these distinct diegetic levels, and oftentimes single sequences will jump between shots from the two levels, which are distinguished by the use of color of black and white

images. The film includes what seem to be characteristics of traditional documentary filmmaking, such as the talking-head interviews, but even these interviews prove unconventional as the interviewees are relegated to anonymity, and they transition from shots of the interview playing on a monitor that the actress is watching (a video within the film within the film) to shots of the interview taking up the full frame, suddenly shifted to the intradiegetic level. At times, the soundtrack and the visual shot are mismatched, such as when the actress contemplates photographs on the wall of the forensics center over the reverberating sounds of VHS tapes rewinding. By combining the shot of the actress examining photographs of human remains and images used in forensic investigation with the sound of the VHS tapes, the media used to record the testimony of her parents' friends and relatives, the sequence shows how these two distinct approaches to learning about the past are mediated by technology, like video, photography, and biological technology. Carri resorts to various resources to tell the story because each approach proves inadequate on its own. The depiction of complex processes of mythmaking and erasure in the post-dictatorship period calls for innovative forms that can replicate the non-linear processes of memory.

Carri's innovation includes undermining the authority that was presupposed in documentary filmmaking throughout the 20th century by drawing attention to her artmaking process in her documentary film. Her use of different diegetic levels to experiment formally with documentary functions as part of her aesthetics of care as she reveals the constructedness of her film on the constructedness of memory. Mihai explains that "certain artworks seductively sabotage reductive narratives about what happened by prosthetically enabling audiences to see the world of systemic violence in its complexity, from different points of view, and as it changes over time" (15). Including the art of documentary filmmaking as a theme in *Los Rubios* shows Carri's preoccupation for caring for and nourishing the memory of the dictatorship by problematizing the ways in which dominating narratives of the past offer a reductive glimpse of what happened at the expense of robust, plural, and messy narratives that can potentially foster new ways of remembering and understanding. Beyond merely being released at a moment when Argentina was beginning to make new progress in the struggle for justice following atrocity, *Los Rubios* catalyzes the conversation surrounding memory and accountability as a work of mnemonic care. Carri's film generated critical debate and contributed to a turn towards a more expansive and critical understanding of the past.

The concept of what literary scholar Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory and whether it is appropriate for analyzing Carri's film appears in much of the scholarship about *Los Rubios* (Aguilar, Amado, Andermann, Gómez, Lazzara, Macón, Nouzeilles, Ros, Sosa, Walas). In considering postmemory among other "post" movements, such as postcolonialism and postmodernism, Hirsch explains that she sees postmemory as "a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience" (6). One point of contention that arises in discussions of postmemory is the tension between the generations. From the position of a member of the post-generation of the Holocaust, Hirsch poses the question:

> How do we regard and recall what Susan Sontag has so powerfully described as 'the pain of others?' What do we owe the victims? How can we best carry their stories forward, without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them? How are we implicated in the crimes that we did not ourselves witness? (2).

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While Carri does not explicitly set out to answer these questions with *Los Rubios*, she does touch on them by exploring the intergenerational struggle over memory in her film. *Los Rubios* challenges the older generation's hegemony over how the story of the dictatorship and disappearance is told and over how they represent themselves. She contests the older generation's ownership over memory by interrogating the contradictions inherent within it. In doing so she reveals how the older generation has shaped the memory of the dictatorship by rendering certain parts invisible, such as what Mihai calls impure resistance.

The erasure of impure resistance, that is resistance that might be cowardly or wavering, resistance that engages in violence and causes harm, or other forms of resistance that are problematic, enables the elevation of the memory of her parents to mythical proportions. The invisibility of impure resistance, as Mihai shows in her work, is a common feature of post-atrocity narratives around the globe. Like other works in the world that render visible impure forms of resistance in the face of state violence and genocide, *Los Rubios* problematized the choices of Carri's parents, thus depicting uncomfortable memories and inconvenient questions about their involvement in the resistance to the civic-military dictatorship. Ultimately, Carri's engagement with her parents' impure resistance reveals the imperfectly human decisions that her parents and surely thousands of others made while trying to navigate life under a murderous, authoritarian regime.

In 2007, nearly four years after the film's release, Carri published the book *Los Rubios: Cartografía de una película*, in which she describes her motivation for making the film and her intentions with its production. The book articulates Carri's self-awareness as a filmmaker and that she understands the film as a position that she assumes and as a turning point in the struggle over memory. Among her primary concerns is the sanctification of certain narratives that she recognizes as dangerous for memory in the post-dictatorship. Carri clarifies her position:

> La historia argentina, sobre todo la reciente masacre de una generación, corre el riesgo de la santificación: la misma mitologización del pasado que no nos permite tener una mirada crítica sobre los actos y consecuencias que marcaron a las generaciones posteriores. La canonización y la necesidad de llenarlo todo, de reconstruir una memoria histórica y clausurar hasta el más remoto de los misterios dejándonos así sin espacio para la sorpresa o la pasión, lejos de acercarnos a una postura reflexiva nos expulsa del conflicto verdadero y sólo contribuye a distanciarnos de aquello que fuimos. No permite una verdadera interpelación a un pasado que, al no subrayar nuestra libertad, opaca. (Carri 23)

Carri consciously enters into the debate about memory as a frustrated daughter who has been disappointed in the narratives transmitted to her and the older generation's methods of transmission. Moreover, she enters as a filmmaker who has the talent and the habitus to make an impact[2]. As her book and her film show, Carri's position is not one of competition with the generation of her parents, but rather it is one of multidirectionality in Michael Rothberg's sense of memory "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (3). This results in a generative critical analysis not only of her film, but of the status of memory in Argentina. Her questioning of memory, victimhood, and responsibility make space for the inclusion of other subjectivities to stake their claims in the discussion and negotiation of meaning of the past and the potential for a more nuanced reckoning with state terror.

2. Here I use habitus as Pierre Bourdieu describes it as "the subjective basis of the perception and appreciation of [a cultural producer's] objective chances" (64) towards a position in the field of cultural production. Randal Johnson describes it in clearer terms as "a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions" (Johnson 5), noting that it is often likened to "a feel for the game" (Johnson 5).

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Complicity and the Continuation of State Violence

Los Rubios shows Carri's return to the neighborhood of La Matanza, the working-class neighborhood where her family lived underground when she was a toddler. The interviews with neighbors reveal the complicity of civilians with the military leading to the detention and enforced disappearance of Carri's parents. Carri's inclusion of the discourse of a complicit neighbor is an important aspect of how she combats the erasure of widespread complicity, which Mihai posits is one of the two principal erasures that tend to occur in memory-making following systemic violence. Whereas transitional justice mechanisms focus almost exclusively on those who can be individually defined as victims or perpetrators because of how transitional justice operates as a politico-legal framework, cultural production such as *Los Rubios* can expand the public's understanding of the violent past as more complex and layered. Carri includes an interview with someone who is in the grey area—the neighbor could not be considered a perpetrator by any legal, juridical, or transitional justice criteria despite being complicit—which expands the possibility of remembering positions and relations located outside of the victim-perpetrator dyad[3]. By delving into the grey area, Carri challenges the widely accepted view of society during the dictatorship as innocent and uninvolved as put forth in the theory of the two demons[4]. Through the revelation of the neighbor's cooperation and support of the soldiers who were staking out the Carri house, *Los Rubios* problematizes processes of mythification: first, it challenges the revolutionary project of her parents as a failure; and second, it shows that the fear that permeated the dictatorship years persists into democratic Argentina, thereby disturbing the temporal framing of state terror as being past.

On the first point, one of the opening scenes of the film introduces the revolutionary ideology of the movement in which her parents participated. The fictional Carri reads aloud from Roberto Carri's book, Isidro Velázquez: *Formas prerrevolucionarias de la violencia* on the infamous Argentine bandit.[5] The close-up shot focuses on the lower part of her face and the adjacent cover of the book (*Los Rubios* 00:02:04-00:02:59). The excerpt that she reads describes the process of politicization of the masses through which "la muchedumbre se hace pueblo" (*Los Rubios* 00:02:35-00:02:36) and rises up to transform society towards a communitarian ideal. Some of the anonymous friends and family who appear in interviews celebrate the political ideals and activism of her parents. However, when Carri's crew goes to shoot in La Matanza, home to the popular classes who could mobilize, the film shows how disconnected the theory and the practice of revolution were. In an interview towards the beginning of the film, Carri (played by Couceyro) describes the position of the crew in the neighborhood, that they were "como un punto blanco que se movía y era muy evidente que no éramos de ahí, que éramos extranjeros para ese lugar. Y me imagino que sería parecido a lo que pasaba en su momento con mis padres" (*Los Rubios* 00:17:59-00:18:15).Towards the end of the film, Carri's suspicions are verified as she learns that her parents were indeed considered outsiders and treated as such. The revelation occurs at the climax of the film, when Carri and her crew interview a neighbor from La Matanza who collaborated with the state as they surveilled and prepared to abduct her parents. According to one neighbor's testimony, their neighborhood saw the Carris as outsiders, which the misnomer of "blond" to describe them symbolizes.

Los Rubios reveals the disconnect between the theory of popular uprising as Roberto's academic work represents and the failure of the movement to engage the working class, as is evident in the Carris' being perceived as outsiders. By showing this in her film, Carri contests how resistance had been shaped in the national imaginary and troubles it. Mihai posits that the "morally purist visions of resisters that dominate national myths" (44), like the vision of the Carris' resistance as their

3. More recent scholarship examines issues of complicity and implication of Argentines who were not directly victimized, nor where they perpetrators. See Carassai and Sheinin.

4. The theory of the two demons essentially assigns guilt to both political sides, positing that the military was forced to act in response to the threats that revolutionary, armed organizations posed to national security while society watched as a passive victim (Ros 16).

5. Isidro Velázquez (1928-1967) is a legend and a conservative columnist accused "leftist populists" of appropriating his memory for political means (Alaniz). Ironically, Albertina Carri engages with a double mythification, that of her father and of Velázquez.

comrades put forth, function to "obscure the ambivalence, hesitations, compromises, silences, betrayals, violent abuses, and bitterness political resisters often feel toward the very communities they fight for, but whose members fail to show solidarity with their struggle" (44). By presenting her parents' struggle outside of the paradigm of morally purist heroization, Carri performs the labor of ensuring that memory includes nuanced accounts of the past to show its complexity and to challenge mythification.

On the second point, the film shows how the fear that proliferated during the dictatorship has rippled into the post-dictatorship period, which challenges the temporal framing of state terror as ending with the transition to democracy. Even in 2003, both of the neighbors who remember the Carris express that they are wary of problems as a result of speaking to the crew, which reveals that they believe in the possibility of negative consequences. The neighbor who appears early in the film speaks from behind the safety of her fence and from inside her home, speaking through an open window. Despite her claims of solidary with the Carris and reiterating that they were good people, her distrust of the film crew is apparent in her repeated inquiry about why they are filming her and where the video will end up. She explains, "Porque una vive tranquila y no tengo drama con nadie. Jamás, jamás, toco madera, ¿no? me han molestado por nada" (*Los Rubios* 00:06:34-00:06:44), revealing her apprehension to speak and fear of consequences, although it is not clear who she worries might confront her with problems. Another neighbor interviewed, who collaborated with the repression and claims that the capture of the Carris was a relief after the military had ransacked her house, says twice, "No me metan en problemas" (*Los Rubios* 00:59:17), acknowledging the possibility of consequences as a result of speaking on camera. Again, the nature of the problems or the parties involved is not clear.

The neighbors' mention of possible negative consequences as a result of speaking on camera about the Carris reveals that nearly 20 years since the end of the dictatorship, even people whose positions fall outside of the victim-perpetrator dyad understand engaging in memory practices or giving testimony as potentially risky. Showing the neighbors' acknowledgement of possible consequences as a result of their speaking to the crew is one way that *Los Rubios* reveals the ongoing impact of the dictatorship over 20 years since the disappearance of Carri's parents.

Beyond the affective sequelae, *Los Rubios* shows how institutions at the time were dealing with the aftermath of the dictatorship, either towards transitional justice efforts or towards reorganizing institutions so that they could conform to democratic norms after operating under a state of exception. Due to the nature of enforced disappearance, the specific events leading up to the genocide of an estimated 30,000 people in Argentina remain unknown. The scene in the forensics lab (*Los Rubios* 00:20:48-00:22:58) depicts a uniquely post-dictatorship practice that is an integral part of Argentine transitional justice: collecting DNA in order to identify the human remains that may belong to disappeared political prisoners. Forensic investigation offers some information about the bodies that are recuperated; therefore, many family members of the disappeared submitted DNA samples and some of them have received confirmation of the deaths of loved ones when their DNA has matched that of remains. The forensics lab appears in *Los Rubios* when the fictional Carri goes to the lab to submit a DNA sample. The scene at the lab transitions from one diegetic level to another. On the metadiegetic level, Albertina/Couceyro gives a DNA sample and the shot is in color. Immediately following, in a black and white intradiegetic shot, Carri herself submits a DNA sample. The DNA collection, despite consisting of a little prick, is a moment in which the physical trauma of her parents is reproduced. Because her parents were murdered by the state, Carri is compelled to submit her body to injury and give

her blood in anticipation of learning about the past. This scene shows the role of the post-dictatorship generation in contributing to an understanding of the past. Interestingly, Couceyro as the fictional Carri also submits her DNA although no personal information about the actress and any possible relationships to disappeared people appears in *Los Rubios*.

Another approach to understanding what happened to her parents was to visit the Sheraton, the former clandestine detention center where they were detained before their disappearance (*Los Rubios* 01:06:13-01:09:25). At the time of the filming, the building that once served as a clandestine prison was a functioning police station. As such, the building is a palimpsest of state violence, once clandestine and illegal and now official and legitimized. Before entering, the crew, Couceyro played by herself, Carri played by herself, and Carri's aunt prepare for their visit (as the intradiegetic level shows). Then, in a metadiegetic shot, the fictional Carri enters the police station. The building's interior immediately reveals the ongoing presence of state violence. In the lobby, the camera focuses on the officers' holstered guns interspersed with intradiegetic shots of the crew shooting and of Carri's aunt waiting. The violence of the state carries over though the officer's weapon, even though the Sheraton no longer serves as a concentration camp, but rather as a police station. An intradiegetic shot of Carri (as herself) holding a camera and walking through a hallway cuts to the perspective of Carri's camera, and from here the rest of the scene takes place on the metadiegetic level.

Regardless of the resources at Carri's disposal to learn about her parents' time at the Sheraton, including the actress, her aunt, access to the space, and her background information, what her visit shows is a rather unremarkable police station. Physically returning to the place where her parents were clandestinely detained offers little information. What the camera shows is the erasure of the past. The illegitimate state terror carried out under the guise of a state of exception that abducted Carri's parents is rendered invisible by the transformation of the space into that of a police station, with the police representing an official arm of the democratic state. While the state continues to hold a monopoly on violence, under democracy the police station at the ex-Sheraton is open to the public and offers certain kinds of transparency in contrast to the secret mode of operation of the Sheraton. When the crew arrives at the ex-Sheraton, the first shot establishes that it is a police station as the camera pans across the sign, "POLICIA." The next shot shows a bronze plaque commemorating the renovation and reinauguration of the police station with the names of the board of directors who oversaw the renovation listed below. The guns of the police are not concealed, rather they are displayed. The visit to the ex-Sheraton reveals that the clandestine, repressive organs of government transitioned to official and legalized forms of law enforcement and the violence it presupposes as Argentina transitioned to democratic governance.

The erasure of complicity, both of widespread civilian complicity from every facet of society—even the working class neighbors of La Matanza—and the institutional complicity of all organs of the state, is required in order to make a clean break with the past. Mihai explains

> The historical carpet is thus drawn over widespread involvement *with* and accommodation *to* systemic violence, over historically continuous traditions of exclusion and violence, leaving the hegemonic self-understanding, as well as the distribution of power and privilege it justifies untouched (26-27; her emphasis).

The continuity of exclusion, violence, privilege, and power in the Argentine context is symbolized in *Los Rubios* by the transformation of

the Sheraton into the police station. The very infrastructure of state terror is remodeled and re-inaugurated as the house of law enforcement that may not disappear political prisoners, but is implicated in massacres and quotidian violence against the impoverished and working class of the villas.

Against Heroization

In the film, Carri (as a character and as a director) rejects her parents heroization despite efforts on both interpersonal and institutional levels to elevate their memory to mythical proportions. This rejection is apparent in the formal presentation of testimony from her parents' friends and family as well as in the film's narration. Testimony as arguably the most crucial method in the aftermath of the dictatorship towards fact-finding and learning about the past is undermined by the way the film integrates video testimonies. The speakers are never identified and when on the metadiegetic level the actress plays the interviews on her television, they are often in the background and not her primary focus in the scene. Even when the interviews jump to the intradiegetic level, the speakers are anonymous. In her 2007 book, Carri explains how she understands the role of testimony in memory:

> El testimonio es un recurso que no legitima, no deja de ser 'ficcional.' Entonces la forma de tratar estos testimonios consistirá en trastocarlos—invertirlos—en palabras escritas en la pantalla y/o en la banda de audio, siempre en continuo movimiento de una versión a otra para dejar implícito este fracaso inicial e inevitable que se establece—para cualquier persona enfrentada a la memoria—entre el carácter indecible de la verdad y el acto de hablar—solo, en público o ante una cámara (28).

Carri goes on to say that by using different formats, she would convey the disorder and confusion inherent in the search for reality while also interrupting the possibility of any kind of intimate identification between the spectator and the witness.

As she spoke to her parents' comrades and family, she realized that the memories they shared with her did not tell her what she wanted to know about her parents. In a voiceover in the metadiegetic level, the fictional Carri narrates her critique of the way that the older people in her life construct the memory of her parents:

> La familia, cuando puede sortear el dolor de la ausencia, recuerda la manera en que mamá y papá se convertieron en dos personas excepcionales, lindas e inteligentes. Los amigos de mis padres estructuran el recuerdo de forma tal que todo se convierte en un análisis politico. (00:34:16-00:34:31)

Rather than transmitting memories of who her parents were as people with tastes, habits, tendencies and personalities — the quotidian aspects of memory — she finds that the memory of her parents is flattened, only remembered in terms of their political positions and activism. In the same voiceover, she connects the inadequacy of memory to her struggle to make her film:

> Tengo que pensar en algo, algo que sea película. Lo único que tengo es mi recuerdo difuso y contaminado por todas estas versiones. Creo que cualquier intento de acercarme a la verdad, me voy a estar alejándome. (00:34:41-00:34:53).

The more testimony she compiles and the deeper she delves into her investigation, the more unstable and unclear the narrative of the past becomes. *Los Rubios* interrogates this disconnect between what the

older generation, who assumes ownership of memory, is able to transmit and what the post-dictatorship generation wants to know. The intergenerational struggle over memory at the institutional level becomes apparent when a letter from the Comité de Preclasificación del Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA) arrives rejecting Carri's application for support for *Los Rubios*. The letter reads:

> En Buenos Aires, a los 30 días de octubre de 2002, el Comité de Preclasificación de Proyectos decide NO EXPEDIRSE, en esta instancia, sobre el proyecto titulado "LOS RUBIOS", por considerar insuficiente la presentación del guión. Las razones son las siguientes:
>
> Creemos que este proyecto es valioso y pide—en este sentido—ser revisado con un mayor rigor documental. La historia, tal como está formulada, plantea el conflicto de ficcionar la propia experiencia cuando el dolor puede nublar la interpretación de hechos lacerantes.
>
> El reclamo de la protagonista por la ausencia de sus padres, si bien es el eje, requiere una búsqueda más exigente de testimonios propios, que se concentrarían en la participación de los compañeros de sus padres, con afinidades y discrepancias. Roberto Carri y Ana María Caruso fueron dos intelectuales comprometidos en los '70, cuyo destino trágico merece que este trabajo se realice. (Carri 5)

The letter explicitly states the position of the INCAA: that while Carri's parents' story is valuable and must be shared, her approach is not how the INCAA envisions their story should be told. The letter privileges above all the testimony of the comrades of her parents, and insinuates that a film about Albertina Carri, daughter of disappeared activists, is not the rigorous and appropriate project that would merit institutional support.

The letter appears in the film on two diegetic levels: sometimes with Carri as herself and sometimes with the actress portraying her in the metadiegetic film. First, in a color shot, the actress prints the letter; in the next shot, also she reads it out loud; then the next shot appears in the intradiegetic level signaled by the use black and white, where the actress (now as Analía Couceyro, herself), the crew, and Carri (performing herself) discuss the letter. The discussion turns to the generational tension over how the dictatorship and its implications can be represented on film with the support of the INCAA:

> Carri: No, en realidad quieren la película que necesitan.
> Analía: Claro.
> Jésica: ¿Como institución?
> Carri: No, como generación, y yo lo entiendo. Lo que pasa es que es una película la que tiene hacer otro, no yo. […] Ellos necesitan esta película y yo entiendo que la necesiten. Pero no es mi lugar hacerla o no tengo ganas de hacerla.
> Marcelo: No es tu proyecto. . (*Los Rubios* 00:27:04-00:27:29)

Carri recognizes the position of the INCAA not as an institutional demand, but as the demand of a generation that controls the institution and that seeks to shape the construction of cultural memory. This scene reveals how institutions in post-dictatorship Argentina actively work towards canonizing particular forms of memory and excluding others that do not validate and consolidate their perspective of the past.

Clearly, Carri is aware not only of the intergenerational struggle over memory, but also of her film as espousing a position that falls outside of the narratives and stories that were circulated regarding the

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dictatorship and the disappeared up to that point. In this sense, Carri personifies what sociologist Elizabeth Jelin calls "emprendedores de la memoria", those who are pitching their version the past, engaging in a struggle over memory through which various groups and individuals vie for their narrative to become the widely accepted version of the past (49). For Jelin, the enterprise of the "emprendedor de memoria" is their narrative of the past that they are selling to the public, presupposing that the dominant discourses on the past will inform the future. In putting forth her story, Carri is challenging the older generation. The INCAA committee, as part of a government institution, has the power to support or reject emerging filmmakers in Argentina and therefore imposes their own vision to shape the Argentine film industry and position different filmmakers in the field[6]. The INCAA gives both funding and cultural capital to the filmmakers that they support bestowing them with a certain authority to tell stories through filmmaking. Carri, however, is not granted support; the INCAA does not respect her authority or creative endeavor.

In her description of the struggle over memory and the construction of an official story, Jelin describes the role that institutions play in permitting or blocking certain narratives from the mainstream. The The inclusion of the INCAA letter and the cast and crew's analysis of it in *Los Rubios* exemplifies Jelin's argument in two interesting ways. First, it accounts for the INCAA's position that the testimony of survivors is necessary, and second, it exposes the role of institutions in authorizing subjects, such as filmmakers, to contribute to the construction of memory. Jelin writes:

> La memoria como construcción social narrativa implica el estudio de las propiedades de quien narra, de la institución que le otorga o niega poder y lo/a autoriza a pronunciar las palabras, ya que, como señala Bourdieu, la eficacia del discurso performativo es proporcional a la autoridad de quien lo enuncia. Implica también prestar atención a los procesos de construcción del reconocimiento legítimo, otorgado socialmente por el grupo al cual se dirige. (35)

At once, the INCAA simultaneously interferes in Carri's filmmaking process by denying her support while also interfering in the possibility of her becoming an authority. To be sure, a filmmaker with institutional support is received as an authority just as a film with INCAA backing gains cultural importance as a project that merits institutional support.

By including the letter in *Los Rubios*, Carri exposes the agenda of the INCAA to foment a specific version of the dictatorship, which centers on the disappeared and the generation of survivors. In other words, the INCAA contributes to the version of the dictatorship that was dominant at the time that frames the families of the disappeared who were adults during state terror as the rightful owners of memory and the only authorities who can speak on the past. Carri addresses her inclusion of the letter in the film in interviews explaining that it indeed illustrated a point that she thought was key to understanding her experience.

> Lo que me di cuenta es que la carta era sintomática, era parte de lo que la película estaba contando, por eso la incluí. Hasta sugería que yo estaba intentando hablar de mis padres y no me animaba. La carta era también como una palmada en la espalda por los 'hechos lacerantes.' (qtd. in Moreno)

For Carri, including the letter was an effective way of showing what she confronted, and the letter becomes a symbol of the struggle over memory more generally with which Carri is engaged.

6. Once again, I am using Bourdieu's sense of the field of cultural production, which is "understood as the system of objective relations between those agents or institutions and as the site of struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated" (78). The INCAA is one such institution operating within the field.

The intergenerational struggle over memory also seems to have spilled into the critical reception of *Los Rubios*. While the critical reception does not show a clear generational divide, it shows how the struggle over memory plays out in scholarship with some critics siding with the INCAA's view that Carri's film is not rigorous and does not offer anything in terms of understanding memory and the past, while other critics praise Carri's filmmaking as brave and innovative. Ros explains:

> All the aspects of the past unearthed by Carri's film—the sensorial and the concrete, the armed struggle and the disagreements about it, the class gap between activists and members of the working class—unsettled the preestablished human rights narrative and therefore provoked strong reactions in the groups that identified with it. (41)

Indeed, the old guard of memory, which activist groups such as Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo represent, advocated for human rights while promoting a narrative that split the past in terms of good and evil, innocent and guilty, right and wrong. *Los Rubios* challenges such binaries by suggesting that these dichotomies inadvertently strip people of their humanity.

The tone that the film espouses regarding the older generation has been the subject of critique. Critics took particular offense to the scenes on the metadiegetic level in which the fictional Carri plays the recorded interviews with her parents' peers. Martín Kohan writes:

> La actuación de Couceyro es en estos casos el despliegue de un vasto muestrario de modos de la desconsideración: da la espalda a la imagen grabada de quienes hablan, desoye, desatiende, ensaya gestos o se pone a hacer otra cosa. (qtd. in Noriega 27)

In his analysis, Noriega posits that by screening the interviews on a monitor within the metadiegetic level of the film with its distorted sound quality and fuzzy images shows that

> Los testimonios, entonces, deliberadamente no son centrales de *Los Rubios*; el contenido de esas conversaciones no es esencial a la película sino como demonstración de una distancia insalvable entre la experiencia de aquellos que convivieron con Roberto Carri y Ana María Caruso y la de Albertina, que solo tenía tres años cuando aquellos fueron secuestrados. (Noriega 26).

What some read as belittling the experiences of the older generation, other critics, like Noriega, interpret as an approach to show the disconnect between the generations.

Beatriz Sarlo argues that Carri's film is not really about her parents, but a self-centered production about her search for her parents. In her reading, which deals exclusively with the narrative of the film, all but overlooking the possible interpretations available through formal analysis, Sarlo critiques how Carri portrays the interviews with her parents' peers. She argues that Carri mutes her parents' political projects and the reasons behind their activism (Sarlo 147).

Sarlo criticized Carri not only for choosing to focus on the non-political aspects of her parents, but also for focusing more on her childhood in the country, on her own search for identity and goes so far as to represent herself doubly through her own appearance in the film and through Couceyro, while relegating the members of her parents' generation to anonymity. Sarlo's more general critique of post-dictatorship memory's "giro subjetivo," (22) that is the privileging of testimony and first-hand experience, and more specifically the

post-dictatorship generation's subjective movement towards memory is that the affective connection that defines their position to past events also undermines the possibility of any rigorous understanding of the past. Sarlo's critique seems to agree with the INCAA's: that *Los Rubios* should be more focused on Carri's parents and what happened and less on her own feelings and experience. In response to Sarlo, Tandeciarz points out that Carri's film in fact, "Triggered precisely the kind of deep reflection and response that Sarlo and her counterparts reserved for *avanzada* aesthetics and for arguably more objective academic treatises, as if these were not also subjectively encoded" (xxxi). Although Sarlo's critique is framed by a privileging of what she considers objective and rigorous works on memory of the dictatorship over the subjective and identity-centered works such as Carri's, this paradigm can also be understood as part of the intergenerational struggle over how memory of the dictatorship should be expressed and analyzed. Tandeciarz mentions that of the few works that deal with memory of the military dictatorship that Sarlo applauds are works conducted by survivors of state terror, such as Pilar Calveiro and Emilio de Ipola. To be sure, Calveiro and de Ipola both approach their excellent research from their personal and affective links to state terror as survivors of clandestine detention and torture.

Los Rubios is not merely a critique of the old guard of memory. Through her film, Carri relates her experience as a member of the post-dictatorship generation. The post-dictatorship subject, as her film shows, is someone with a mediated experience of state terror, and as such it is someone who must wade through the ideology and emotions of the older generation upon whom they rely for these vicarious memories. Carri suggests that ultimately, the politics of her parents and their revolutionary struggle do not matter to her, because what matters is that they are gone. In a scene in which the fictional Carri screams into the open space of the pampa, her voiceover poses questions about her parents' choice to stay and fight instead of fleeing with their children. She says "Me cuesta entender la elección de mamá. ¿Por qué no se fue del país? me pregunto una y otra vez. O a veces me pregunto ¿por qué me dejó aquí, en el mundo de los vivos?" (01:04:42-01:04:51). The question of her relationship to her parents leads to more existential questions about what happens after death, "¿Dónde están las almas de los muertos? ¿Comparten sitio todos los muertos o los asesinatos transitan otros lugares? ¿Las almas de los muertos están en los que venimos después? ¿En aquellos que intentamos recordarlos? Y ese recuerdo, ¿cuánto tiene de preservación y cuánto de capricho?" (01:05:00-01:05:20). This scene, which occurs purely in the metadiegetic level, shows the existential crisis of the post-dictatorship generation, particularly that of the children of the disappeared. She contemplates her parents' choices and asks questions that she can never answer about her parents' motivations. She connects her rage to her father's, suggesting a sort of inheritance, but rather than being outraged over the political situation like Roberto was, she is outraged for surviving her parents. Understanding her parents' political project is not urgent when compared to understanding why they chose activism over saving themselves for their children; a viewpoint that distances her from the *hijos* who set out to revive their parents' revolutionary projects. She is against their heroization and denounces the process of mythification that occurs on the personal level with the testimony of their peers, and institutionally with the demands of the INCAA while problematizing their resistance as a sort of impure one.

Mihai argues that impure resistance is one of the principle erasures that occurs in processes of constructing political memory following atrocity. *Los Rubios* was so controversial in part because it positions itself against heroization by focusing on the impure resistance of Carri's parents. Mihai explains:

> This canonization […] purifies all resisters of their vulnerabilities and uproots them from the very relationalities and structures that make their actions possible, while concurrently occluding the contributions of those who cannot be easily subsumed under this predominantly masculinist, exceptionalist blueprint. Resisters moments of cowardice, betrayal, and ambivalence, their silences and complicities and their flaws of character but also the violence and abuses they commit in their struggle are purged from inventories of honor. This erasure is enabled by the way in which national myths normally capture political violence in antagonistic, dichotemic terms of "us" versus "them," reducing history's cast of characters to "perpetrators," "victims," and "heroes" to the exclusion of those who do not neatly fit any of these reductive roles. (6)

Los Rubios reveals this process of national mythification as well as what must be purged from mythmaking: the impure resistance as revealed through: the testimony from one of Roberto's peers who had a falling out with him over politics; Albertina's rumination on her parents' decision not to flee; and the ways that the La Matanza neighbors remembered the Carris. By including the impurity of her parents' resistance in her film, Carri offers a more complex understanding of their revolutionary activities, returning to them their intricate humanity. She sheds light on the complexity of their commitment to the armed struggle, their sacrifices, and harm that came about as a result of their choices. These revelations, which run counter to what at the time were dominant narratives of resistance as heroic, idealistic, and pure, prompt what Mihai calls mnemonic hesitation, which "open up space for remembering and imagining differently" (46). Building on the work of philosophers Alia Al-Saji and José Medina, Mihai argues that mnemonic hesitation breaks the routine relationship between memory and the imagination, thus inviting the reconfiguration of memories and prompting the imagination to respond to what seems outside of the paradigm of our interpretive schemas (51). She writes:

> The past is thus unlocked through a reorganization of memory, which means that both the present and the future are simultaneously rendered uncertain. Once the automatism of the mnemonic habitus and imagination is suspended, alternative ways of relating to others becomes possible. (51)

By prompting mnemonic hesitation by her iconoclastic depiction of the past and resistance to her parents' heroization Carri creates possibilities for other ways of remembering, imagining, and understanding.

Through her film, Carri undertakes the labor of mnemonic care. By rejecting the limiting visions of the past and of her parents' memory as the testimony of the older generation puts forth, and instead opting for a more complicated and uncomfortable portrayal of mythmaking, complicity, and the limits of memory and documentary, Carri triggers a productive conversation among spectators, critics, and scholars. By prompting these conversations, Carri is not merely being provocative, rather she takes care of the space of post-dictatorship memory. Considering *Los Rubios* through a lens of the aesthetics of care connects Carri's documentary filmmaking with other artworks from other cultural contexts that utilize their form and their content to interrupt the consolidation of uncritical remembrance and mythmaking in a post-atrocity situation. *Los Rubios* problematizes the then-dominant narrative of the dictatorship's temporality to show how the systemic violence that underpinned dictatorship-era state terror continues latently under the guise of legalized violence. Meanwhile, by showing the imperfections of the struggle and the failures of memory,

Carri broadens how resistance and remembrance can be defined to be more inclusive and robust, thus challenging the culture of memory to expand and confront its own contradictions.

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Iván Zulueta's *Arrebato*: A Journey Towards Ecstasy

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Spanish film *Arrebato* [Rapture], directed by the Basque filmmaker Iván Zulueta. I argue that this film is a reflection about the ecstatic dimension of human beings, and about cinema as a way of having access to it. While other academic works address this subject peripherally and focus their attention on other issues such as vampirism, addictions, Peter Pan syndrome, and self-destructive impulses, I examine two important notions that appear multiple times during the film: the rapture, and the pause. Both concepts are related to an ecstatic state that the three main characters are constantly trying to achieve. Not surprisingly, provoking ecstasy through cinema will require accessing to the pause, to the atemporal instant, with the precise frequency of the obturator.

Key Words: Rapture, Ecstasy, Pause, Film, Zulueta

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The Spanish film *Arrebato* (1979), directed by Iván Zulueta during the political transition that started after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, offers many layers of interpretation. Existing criticism has focused on a variety of subjects such as vampirism (Costa 2005; Epps 2013; Gómez Tarín 2001; Pedraza 2005), Peter Pan's complex (Costa 2005; Gorostiza 2005; de Felipe 2005), or substance abuse (Gómez Tarín 2001; Hernández Ruiz 2005), to mention just a few. Though valid and interesting, such approaches tend to displace the focus on what I believe it is the main goal of this film: to provide a reflection on the human quest for ecstatic experiences, and on the role cinema can play in that endeavor. To demonstrate the critical importance of this subject in *Arrebato*, in this article I examine the role and meaning of two concepts, "pause" and "rapture", which are ubiquitous in the film.

I will establish a dialogue between the film and different authors and critics such as Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Friedrich Nietzsche and, particularly, Georges Bataille. I discuss in detail Bataille's considerations on ecstasy and the notions of "continuity/discontinuity" and of "sovereign moment," which he understands as instant in which the individuals are able to relish the present time and escape any utilitarian calculation. Walter Benjamin's concept of Profane Illumination, as well as the notion of "lines of flight", and the ideas on "movements of deterritorialization and destratification" developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's are also used in my interpretation of Zulueta's enigmatic film.

When in an interview included in Jesús Mora's documentary *Arrebatos* (1998), Marta Fernández Muro –the actress who interprets Pedro's cousin in the film– believes necessary to clarify that this film is about the action of going to the other side, rather than drugs or vampires, she is already manifesting that the importance that ecstatic experiences have in this film has not been highlighted enough. Pedro P., one of the three main characters of *Arrebato*, expresses a similar idea in the film when he explains what to expect working with cinema: "el espejo se abrirá y veremos ... El ... lo Otro" (00:58:45 – 00:58:56). Fernández Muro's expression "going to the other side," as well as Pedro's image of climbing through a mirror (or a screen) into a different reality, are reminiscent of the journey that takes place in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) –a sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* (1865)–, or of the doors of perception that William Blake opens in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794). Several Eastern philosophical and religious traditions also use similar metaphorical references in their descriptions of ecstatic transport.[1] In any event, Zulueta's film is not approaching the question of ecstasy from Eastern or Western religious perspectives. There is no quest for God but for intense experiences capable of counterbalancing the alienated existence of regular individuals in a modern society. It is for this reason that the main characters' craving for rapture cannot be equated to that of classical Spanish mystics like San Juan de la Cruz or Santa Teresa de Jesús. Rather, Pedro, José and Ana search for what Walter Benjamin defines as "profane illumination": a type of experience that leads towards a revelation, a vision, or an intuition able to transcend the conventional plane of reality, but that is immanent and freed of religious dogmas. The scholar Richard Wolin summarizes Benjamin's "profane illumination" characteristics in the following terms:

> Like religious illumination, profane illumination captures the powers of spiritual intoxication in order to produce a "revelation", a vision or insight which transcends the prosaic state of empirical reality; yet it produces this vision in an immanent manner, while remaining within the bounds of possible experience, and without recourse to otherworldly dogmas. (132)

1. Luis González-Reimann explains that in the early Buddhist Sutta Nipāta text from the pali canon, an individual that has spiritually awoken (therefore a Buddha), is described as somebody that has reached the other side, the other margin of the river (204).

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Benjamin himself distinguishes religious from profane illuminations by differentiating the ways in which trance is achieved. If religious mysticism employs ascetic practices and contemplation, Benjamin considers art, sex, and narcotics as facilitators of profane experiences of illumination.[2] Those same facilitators – art (in the form of film), sex, and narcotics – are the means employed by the main characters of *Arrebato* in their quest for non-ordinary states of consciousness.

In Zulueta's film, the clearest sign of this fascination with ecstatic experiences is the title itself. "Arrebato" means "Rapture" in English, a word that is synonymous with concepts such as "trance" or "ecstasy". These equivalent terms presuppose an idea of displacement, of leaving behind the world we are familiar with. Ecstasy, for example, derives from a Greek expression meaning "standing outside oneself." Instead of understanding this as alienation or escapism, many spiritual traditions have understood ecstasy as an act of parting ways with one's previous identities. The etymological definition also implies a sensation of excess that the ecstatic subject experiences and that leads to the dissolution of the limits of individuality and ordinary spatial-temporal categories. In Zulueta's film, the B-movie director José Sirgado (Eusebio Poncela) and his ex-girlfriend Ana (Cecilia Roth) look to achieve rapture through drugs and sex, while Pedro P. (Will More), an amateur filmmaker and the third main character of the film, worried about the drawbacks of his friends' ecstatic methods, is looking for an alternative resource.[3] Sensing the possibilities that cinema allows for breaking the conventions of human perception, Pedro embarks on a search for the cinematic mechanisms that can lead to ecstasy, convincing José to explore these possibilities with him.[4]

What to Do with "the Pause"

Set in the 70's, *Arrebato* begins with José finishing the montage of his last film, a B-movie about vampires. When he goes home after his editing session, he finds out that Ana, his ex-girlfriend, has settled herself in his apartment and is looking to rekindle their relationship. He also finds that he has received a mysterious package from Pedro, containing a Super-8 reel, an audiocassette, and the key to Pedro's apartment in Madrid. Under the effects of the heroin given to him by Ana, José starts listening to Pedro's message on the audiocassette. In a flashback, he remembers their first encounter. José had met Pedro a year before, during a weekend at a house he intended to use for his next production. Discovering that José was a professional filmmaker, Pedro stopped by José's guestroom to ask him "qué hacer con la pausa," as well as to request his help "para filmar al ritmo preciso" (00:32:19 – 00:32:29). As José did not seem to understand what Pedro meant by "the pause," the latter decided to prepare a practical demonstration. Still in the guestroom, Pedro asks José what his favorite trading card collection was when he was a child. José answers that it was "King Solomon's Mines". Afterward, Pedro guides his new friend towards his own room where, among other toys, there are the trading card José had just mentioned. Francisco Javier Gómez Tarín pays special attention to the apparently transitional scene of the corridor that connects both rooms. In his opinion, the short walk of the characters through the corridor towards the light of Pedro's room functions as a metaphor for the initiation journey on which José is about to embark:

> La cámara permanece al fondo del pasillo, mostrando a José Sirgado en su avance hacia la luz (de espaldas a la cámara). Esta posición no responde al punto de vista de Sirgado sino a un narrador omnisciente que viene a subrayar el viaje iniciático del personaje: un viaje que ha comenzado con las drogas en su experiencia vital y que el cine va a materializar posteriormente haciéndolo suyo ("Es al cine al que le gusto yo"). (43)

2. In "Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), Benjamin not only distinguishes religious from profane illumination, but also disassociates the latter from the experience produced by narcotics. For him, narcotics give a glimpse of the state of consciousness brought by a profane illumination, but their effects are not the same. In "On Hashish", he states that "the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson" (132-33).

3. In *Guía para ver y analizar: Arrebato* (2001), Francisco Javier Gómez Tarín argues that Pedro P. is Sirgado's alter ego as well as that of Zulueta's. One could add that both Pedro and José Sirgado are reflections of Zulueta's authorial footprint. The two characters reflect two sides of the director's two conflicting personalities. On the one hand, as réalisateur, cinema is a modus vivendi that has led him into the web of heroin addiction. As auteur, on the other hand, Zulueta searches for fulfilment through artistic creation.

4. For Pedro, cinema allows for the manipulation of the images Their sequencing, the duration of exposure, the acceleration of rythm and the us of focus allow us to see images that the naked eye cannot perceive. Additionally, Pedro believes that the camera can change our state of consciousness, allowing us to see the world from a totally different perspective.

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In "El pastiche y su límite en el discurso audiovisual español de los ochenta," Vicente Sánchez Biosca also uses the concept of "initiation" to explain the narrative articulated in *Arrebato*. It is a process, he explains, that doesn't demand to look more but "profundizar la mirada o, incluso mejor, desprenderla de la razón" (475). Consequently, this scholar argues that Pedro deploys a perfectly planned strategy of initiation: "todo el relato de Pedro parece responder - como su mismo lenguaje refleja - a una enigmática estrategia de iniciación minuciosamente calculada, pero cuyas claves permanecen desconocidas incluso para él" (Sánchez Biosca 475). Pedro knows what he wants, but he does not know where his pursuit will take him. His unpredictable journey is made bearable with some company.

The climactic moment of that sequence of initiation arrives when the amateur filmmaker asks the movie director how long he had spent staring at the trading cards when he was a child. Without waiting for an answer, Pedro replies to his own question: "Años, siglos, toda una mañana. Imposible saberlo. Estabas en plena fuga, éxtasis, colgado, en plena pausa. Arrebatado" (00:37:00 – 00:37:16). Pedro elicited José's childhood sensations to show him that "the pause" is a safe-conduct to ecstasy, a timeless moment in which mentally rational processes of judgment, conceptualization, classification (in other words, the internal dialog of the subject) are put on hold.

In *Inner experience*, Georges Bataille argues that "words" (concepts, ideas and value judgments that inhabit our consciousness) as well as the tendency of the rational mind to conceptualize everything, preclude us from accessing an essential dimension of our own self that ecstatic moments have the ability to reveal. This human realm that, according to this author, escapes conceptual scrutiny may only be accessed in extraordinary circumstances:

> Even though words drain almost all of our life from us –of this life there almost isn't a single twig that hasn't been seized, dragged, piled up by this restless, busy crowd of ants (the words)– it remains in us a silent, elusive, ungraspable part. In the region of words, of discourse, this part is unknown. It also usually eludes us. Only under certain conditions can we attain it or use it. (21)

As the French author explains, the "circumstances" or "conditions" that are capable of interrupting the flow of thoughts are created when one experiences episodes of "laughter, ecstasy, [or] terrified approach to death" (*Inner* 45). These experiences lead the subjects to extreme, boundless, sovereign moments, free of any utilitarian dimension. Interestingly, Bataille recognizes that his goal of halting the subject's internal dialogue is reminiscent of millenary traditions and methods, such as yoga or transcendental meditation. These Eastern disciplines share the belief that human beings remain entrapped by their identification with the incessant flow of thoughts in their minds. However, between one thought and the next, yogic traditions draw attention to an empty space that concentration techniques seek to expand to suspend mental dialogue.[5]

The Interstice

To better understand what Pedro means by the notion of "pause", it can be useful to establish an analogy between the chain of thoughts of the rational mind referred by yogic traditions, and the materiality of the celluloid and its exposed frames. If there is a space between one thought and another that breaks the apparent continuity of a flow of thoughts, there is also an interstitial space between frames, despite the apparent continuity in which images in motion are shown when they are projected in a specific cadence.[6] In *The Emergence of Cinematic*

5. In *A New Earth*, the German philosopher Eckhart Tolle also refers to the space between thoughts but he identifies another interstice too. The one between the perception from our senses and the subsequent thought that classifies it: "In the first moment of seeing something or hearing a sound - and more so if it is unfamiliar - before the mind names or interprets what your see or hear, there is usually a gap of alert attention in which the perception occurs. That is the inner space. Its duration differs from person to person. It is easy to miss because in many people those spaces are extremely short, perhaps only a second or less" (253). After the perception and before the words have trapped and interpreted the perception there is a gap in which only exists awareness without any mediation from the rationality.

6. The interstitial spaces of the celluloid are those unexposed segments or intervals between frames. They are the result of the interruption of the exposure when the obturator is covering the lens.

Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive, Mary Anne Doane highlights the lack of information of these spaces by stating that "much of the movement or the time allegedly recorded by the camera is simply not there, lost in the interstices between frames" (172).

And if Doane highlights the absence as the starting point for recognizing that the sense of continuity of cinematic images is pure illusion, in "The Space of the Vampire: Materiality and Disappearance in the Films of Iván Zulueta," Brad Epps stresses that in cinema

> continuity and plenitude are illusory, part and parcel of a powerfully persistent myth of the persistence of Vision, with its ghost- or after-images, whose perceived clarity and sharpness —crucial to dominant realist practice— are the effects of an unperceived blinking, blotting, and blocking. (581).

Cinema cameras capture 24 images per second, a frequency that allows the human eye to perceive (based on the phenomenon of retinal persistence) a continuum of what is actually a group of static and consecutive images. Thus, what the camera offers cannot be understood as a direct sequence of the reality, but a re-construction and re-presentation of that reality, based on discontinuous segments.[7] The interstice or separation between frames is always there as evidence of the impossibility of the camera to capture a continuous and complete flow of reality and serves as testimony that cinematic images are, above all, the result of a mere optical illusion.[8] Frames and interstices reflect two different types of temporality both converging in the filmstrip. Frames, reproducing the succession of moments captured, are distributed sequentially in a timeline. The interstice, on the other hand, reveals itself as a timeless instant, as a moment that reclaims its independence with respect to those moments that precede and follow it.

In *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889) Henri Bergson had already distinguished two temporalities. The first one is conceived in spatial terms and, therefore, it was quantifiable and capable of being broken down in intervals. The second one exists as a flow, as pure duration, and is only perceived through intuitive experiences and linked with the vital impulse of any organism. In their chapter "Ucro-topías", Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayén observe that, coexisting in Zulueta's film, are two temporalities similar to those pointed out by Bergson: one external and objective, and another one internal and subjective.

> La tensión se establece entre un tiempo externo, que se puede medir en términos matemáticos, y un tiempo interno, de experiencia subjetiva: la tragedia de los personajes de *Arrebato* es la de querer instalarse en el segundo (el arrebato), a través de la necesaria concurrencia del primero (el ritmo). (Cerdán and Fernández Labayen 284)

In this quotation, Cerdán and Fernández Labayén also suggest that both temporalities converge at certain points in the film. The example they offer to make their point is Pedro's trip to Madrid by train. In that scene, Pedro's voiceover narrates the following:

> Ya en el viaje en tren me invadió una euforia loca. Segovia-Madrid resultó Venus-Plutón. Las velocidades se sumaban, restaban, multiplicaban. Tantos ritmos, todos distintos nunca vistos por mí, sí presentidos. Eran los de siempre en realidad, sólo que a favor, no en contra. El caso es que ahora los sentía, ocurrían. En todo descubría tesoros y con cualquier cosa me agarraba un éxtasis, o al menos, a mi no me cabía la menor duda. (01:09:03 – 01:09:40)

7. If one considers that humans blink an average of one time each four seconds, it seems clear that human vision doesn't offer us a continuum of reality either.

8. In 1878, Eadweard Muybridge, one of the precursors of cinematography, designed a synchronized 12-camera system that took snapshots intended to capture the images of a horse galloping. Viewed at a specific velocity, these snapshots are not a group of static images but an animal galloping in motion.

Pedro notes that those rhythms he perceives "were, actually, there all along," but now are being experienced in a completely different way. When Pedro asks José what to do with the pause and how to catch the proper rhythm, it is all about time. He identifies the pause with the ecstatic moment, and the rhythm with the frequency that one has to tune into to reach the rapture. With the cinematic eye of his camera, he tries to capture not the chronological time, but the one that is, in fact, capable of subverting the linear succession of measurable intervals of time. In his "Method of Meditation", Bataille explains that only when one is placed in this autonomous instant it is possible to bypass the conventional representation of reality: "[i]n the plenitude of rapture, when nothing counted but the instant itself, I escaped the common rules" (*Inner* 202). Similarly, Pedro wants to reveal the specific time (or, even better, timeless moments) involved in experiences such as those of ecstasy, rapture or trance and, accordingly, Vicente J. Benet reminds us that rapture implies the suspension of time, and not in just any moment but in a significant one: "La característica del arrebato es la detención, pero no en un instante cualquiera, sino en el momento clave de la epifanía, del acceso a la revelación" (Benet 309).

These common rules are precisely the conventions of human perception that Pedro tries to break with his camera. Considering the pause as the gap that makes it possible to access a timeless experience, Pedro echoes another idea from Bataille: because of its difficulty, the sovereign operation can only be reached in a "slippage", through an almost accidental and unexpected event.[9] Pedro chooses the cinematic medium, convinced that the perceptive abilities of the camera are superior to those of the human eye, a factor that should help capturing and retaining that evasive moment. In his essay "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye" (1929), a classic figure of cinema such as Dziga Vertov had already supported this idea when he was referring to the capacity of the "cinema-eye" to register life in sequences of time or by speeds unattainable to human beings on their own: "Kino-eye means the conquest of time (the visual linkage of phenomena separated in time). Kino-eye is the possibility of seeing life processes in any temporal order or at any speed inaccessible to the human eye" (88). Vertov, the director of *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), considers that the numerous techniques that can be employed by a movie camera allow for a greater capacity to capture reality. As de Felipe puts it, these

> inofensivas "máquinas de vision" […] ampliaron hasta límites insospechados el horizonte de nuestra experiencia del mundo mediante la congelación, la aceleración o la ralentización de lo visible por encima de los atrofiados límites de nuestros sentidos (y de nuestra cordura) (217).

The Intervalometer

In *Arrebato*, Pedro is the most inclined character to experiment with cinematographic techniques such as those mentioned by de Felipe. One is the "time-lapse," which allows the filmmaker (by adjusting the exposure rate between frames with an intervalometer) to register events that require a substantial quantity of time to happen and are thus imperceptible to the human eye.[10] Just Another scene where the director uses acceleration is when José watches TV images during a non-conventional state of consciousness.

Pedro's fascination with the intervalometer seems to corroborate Jean Epstein's idea that cinema's primal objective is to rethink time. It is not a coincidence that the enigmatic character of *Arrebato* searches for the proper filming cadence to capture what is missing from a conventional viewpoint. Vicente J. Benet, in his chapter "La Materia del Instante," further argues that Pedro believes the intervalometer puts him closer to capturing the pause because it renders human intervention unnecessary:

9. Specifically, Bataille states in *Inner Experience* that "[f]rom the start, the sovereign operation presents a difficulty so great that one must seek it in a slippage' (197).

10. An example of an event that the human eye is unable to capture is the blooming of a flower. The intervalometer is an instrument that allows to control the shooting times necessary to capture this kind of events.

"Se fija la esperanza de que, en la absoluta desmaterialización, separando totalmente el cuerpo humano del aparato, la propia cámara será capaz de encontrar ese instante" (Benet 310).

According to Pedro, automating the process would not only prevent distortions produced by human beings when they try to interpret reality, but it would also bring them closer to a sort of defamiliarization effect. This effect is what José Sirgado experiences by watching the reels that Pedro sends to him. In them images are intertwined in an apparent random form, exposed to different cadences, or even manipulated to highlight their corporeity by adding scratches in the celluloid, making the grain visible and through through a technique of posterization.[11] As Matt Losada notes in his article "Iván Zulueta's Cinephilia of Ecstasy and Experiment", these techniques reveal the director's intention to induce trance-like states in the audience:

> With the effects produced by the looping psychedelic noise-track, associative montage with visual rhymes and matches, vertiginous fast zooms through images of pop culture icons, and, of course, the ever-flowing silly putty, this is the closest Zulueta comes to creating a filmic vehicle of rapture. (Losada n.p.).

Consequently, Zulueta would not only be interested in narrating the psychedelic story of three characters in search of transcendence, but also in offering the audience filmic mechanisms to reproduce those very same ecstatic states.

Pedro is looking for a way to overcome the arbitrary and elusive nature of the pause by creating cinematic productions capable of recalling the rapture at his discretion. But even with the intervalometer triggering the shutter automatically, Pedro cannot avoid losing what happens during the blinks. What is relevant here, as Cerdán and Fernández Labayen point out, is what happens during the moment in which the rhythm is interrupted: "Con el sonido monocorde del temporizador, como el del metrónomo que utilizan los músicos, lo verdaderamente relevante pasa a ser lo que ocurre en ese momento de suspensión del ritmo, entre golpe y golpe" (Cerdán and Fernández Labayen 285). Pedro's attempts to capture the pause with the intervalometer put him on track toward his ultimate goal, but it is still not enough to catch the ecstatic moment. Not surprisingly, as Begoña Siles Ojeda highlights in her article "Arrebato: un éxtasis siniestro," Pedro becomes gradually horrified of his own amateur movies because they "carecen de la esencia de un elemento estético: el ritmo preciso, la pausa" (9). Although his Super 8 productions offer a glimpse of it, they are unable to capture the perfect instant that Pedro is desperately seeking. Ultimately, the only way to complete that task would require the use of a camera without a shutter (or an eye without lids), which would be physically impossible. As de Felipe notes, Zulueta expects that "el abismo le devuelva una mirada libre de todo parpadeo" (de Felipe 218). As we will show later, Pedro realizes that the solution to his problem consists not of being an agent that reveals the hidden reality with the camera but rather a subject that becomes captured autonomously by the camera.

Rapture as Deterritorialization

In the previously commented scene in which Pedro tries to explain the pause to José, the amateur filmmaker adds that this interstitial moment is "el talón de Aquiles, es el punto de fuga, nuestra única oportunidad" (00:32:48 – 00:32:57). Pedro's words are reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's notions of "vanishing point," and "lines of flight," as well as "movements of deterritorialization and destratification," developed in works such as *Anti-Oedipus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). For these authors, there is a tendency to articulate, stratify, territorialize and assemble in specific structures all

11. The posterization technique consists in manipulating images by reproducing only a small number of their different tones.

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that exists. One particular consequence is that subjects identify themselves with organized and "solidified" modes of being that trap them and limit their chances of experiencing life. Yet the mere existence of the process of stratification, assembly, and organization/condensation enables its counterpart – namely, lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization or destratification, and, eventually, bodies without organs (BwO, in its abbreviation.).[12] Reaching a full existence requires an escape from the crystalized (territorialized) perspectives and definitions of reality. Instead of embracing formulas that have become normative, human beings should take the risk of creating original paths and lines of escape, which, for these two theorists, would be a means "to blow apart strata, cut roots, and make new connections" (*Thousand* 15). In their *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari mention precisely this possibility of escaping by means of a vanishing point or *point de fuite*, from codes, signifiers, and structures that keep individuals subjected: "at least something arose whose force fractured the codes, undid the signifiers, passed under the structures, set the flows in motion, and effected breaks at the limits of desire: a breakthrough" (369). Deleuze and Guattari's breakthrough is equivalent to Pedro's pause: the way to new paths in which the modes of being are not crystalized or mediated. Pedro and José's willingness to experience life from a completely different plane of reality must be understood as an attempt to trace these lines of deterritorialization, to search for the point of escape from descriptions of the world that, having lost their evocative power as metaphors, become a "truth" that cannot be questioned any longer.[13]

Pedro, José, and Ana are devoted to the search for intense, boundless, or even excessive moments, able to redeem an empty and meaningless existence.[14] While cinema (as an artistic expression) may be the privileged method of attaining that objective in *Arrebato*, the characters also explore three additional methods of "deterritorialization" and rapture: regressing to the past, sex, and drugs.

Recovering the Past

Pedro takes José and Ana back to their childhood to determine if they are "ecstatic creatures" like himself. As previously shown, José fully displays his capacity for rapture while viewing King Solomon's trading cards. Ana's case is more complex because, as Pedro himself acknowledges, she is "a hard nut to crack". Pedro challenges her to lose herself while contemplating two toys: a scale model scene from the Pied Piper of Hamlin and a Betty Boop doll, like the one she had as a child. Although she requires using drugs to be raptured by these toys, Ana passes the test and demonstrates that she is still able to reach ecstasy.

In "Ucro-topías", Cerdán and Fernández Labayén state (in opposition to the importance assigned to the Peter Pan syndrome by other critics) that the pause does not reflect the common desire for recovering a lost childhood and the avoidance of adulthood. For these latter authors, the pause that characters search for is not the result of recovering a "historic" or biographical past, but a return to "un pasado mítico, atemporal (al cual se llega mediante el olvido del pasado inmediato, el presente y el futuro)" (287). Zulueta"s rapture would be related to "la memoria (el recuerdo) y el olvido" (286). Without denying the ecstatic capacities of the past, I believe that the pause in *Arrebato* has more to do with a timeless present than with a process exclusively related to the past (mythical or not). Pedro does not want to conquer the pause by returning to the past, because that implies losing the present. Rather, this returning is just a useful mechanism for evaluating the ecstatic disposition of an individual.[15] Pedro's statement that one cannot live in the past ("Nada de recuerditos. Al contrario. Tendrá que ser aquí y ahora") is evidence of his interest in finding an ecstatic method that allows the individual to stay in the here and now (00:37:35 – 00:37:41).

12. Deleuze and Guattari borrow this expression from Antonin Artaud, who uses it to oppose "body" to "organs" and "organism." Artaud considers that the structuration and organization of our own self leads to automatization and, therefore, to a limitation of our freedom. Interestingly, becoming a BwO could be equated to an ecstatic experience. Thanks to the ecstatic experience, subjects are able to perceive themselves outside of their limits, in a plane of pure intensity that flows freely. Similarly, the experience of becoming a BwO implies replacing fixed identities by a subjectivity that flows permanently, like a port through which circulate multiple intensities, sensations, and desires.

13. Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (1873) refers to a metaphoric description of the world that, due to convenience and the power of habit, becomes "truth".

14. In *Inner Experience*, Bataille also refers to the excessive character of those supreme instants that he calls "sovereign moments." Everything in them, he says, is "too much": "this, nevertheless, is the instant … this, presently, neither my absence nor me, neither death nor light --and my absence and me, death and light--a light laugh rises in me like the sea, it fills the absence immensely, All that is –IS TOO MUCH" (201).

15. Returning to the childhood implies reconnecting with a previous version of oneself that was allegedly more natural and less affected by the social rules that individuals tend to internalize during the adulthood. These characteristics would, therefore, make the individual more open to ecstasy.

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Intoxicant Paradises and Sexual Adventures

In addition to (filmic) art and regression, sex and drugs are the other two ecstatic paths to which *Arrebato*'s characters resort. On the one hand, during the sexual encounter, lovers fuse their bodies overcoming individual boundaries, and become channels throughout which the desire circulates. Sex, in this sense, becomes an effective way to privilege sensation and experimentation over representation and rationalization. On the other hand, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us, intoxicants have the ability to offer pre-significant alternatives to highly stratified semiotic (*Thousand* 138). For these theorists, inebriating substances push subjects to experiment on their own, to find their own answers instead of resorting to prefabricated solutions and, ultimately, to challenge what it is taken for granted without question or objection (139). But these two temporary methods of rapture come with strings attached, and Pedro makes clear to José that he is not very fond of them.

First, sexual ecstasy is constrained by several circumstances. According to Bataille, if eroticism is mainly physical, "[i]t holds on to the separateness of the individual in a rather selfish and cynical fashion" (*Erotism* 19). If it includes affection, lovers are still not able to escape discontinuity because what they have now is just an egotism of two: "Only the beloved, so it seems to the lover […] can in this world bring about what our human limitations deny, a total blending of two beings, a continuity between two discontinuous creatures" (*Erotism* 20). In *Arrebato*, a pattern of abuse, emotional dependence, and suffering – instead of one of joy and rapture – emerges in José and Ana's relationship. Meanwhile, the intoxicating substances used by the characters of the film manifest their constrains in the form of tolerance and addiction. In the first section of *Artificial Paradises* (1860), entitled "The Poem of Hashish," Charles Baudelaire describes a state of unusual beatitude and happiness which allows for the sharpening of thought and the delight of senses and spirit. The spontaneous and fleeting nature of this state drives human beings to try to replicate and to retain the sensations generated by it. Baudelaire found that humanity's fascination with intoxicating substances could be understood as a means to recreate such a paradise. In his words, humanity "has sought to find in the physical sciences, in pharmaceuticals, in the harshest liquors, in the subtlest scents, in all places, and at all times, the means to flee his wretched dwelling, if only for a moment" (32). Hungry for the infinite, many people try to recreate that spontaneous moment of grace by chemistry. But this is a way that Baudelaire discourages as artificial and addictive.

Fascination with intoxicating substances in Zulueta's film reflects the social reality of the period in which *Arrebato* was produced. Luis Antonio de Villena, in the newspaper's article "Memoria de Iván Zulueta," notes that the movie was filmed at a time when heroin was not considered a low-class drug but a substance used by bohemians, intellectuals, and artists:

> Hay que recordar que la terrible heroína (el "caballo") no era todavía el arrastrado "jaco" de la delincuencia, la marginación o las sórdidas barriadas extrarradiales, no. La heroína era aún (lo fue poco tiempo) la droga intelectual del límite, del borde abismático, cantada por el gurú yonqui William Burroughs y por la canción de Lou Reed. (Villena n.p.)

To some extent, *Arrebato* could also be considered an autobiographical film since Zulueta had already started using heroin at that time. In an interview with Andrés Duque for the documentary *Iván Z* (2004), Zulueta confirms this fact and defines that substance as "the last frontier of all drugs" (00:37:30 – 00:37:34). *Arrebato* also echoes the social reality of those times, in which a whole generation tried to live by

pushing their limits in order to detach themselves from what Javier Hernández Ruiz in "Psicotrópicos del deseo: Sexo, drogas y rock 'n' roll en el cine de la transición" qualifies as unbearable everyday nature of Francoism and its setting of repression and nonsense (49). It could be said that Zulueta's proposal is not only a reflection of that "unbearable everyday" under Francoism, but also a defiant reaction against the values of a regime whose institutions did not die with the dictator. While the approach to sexuality in the film challenges the morality of nacional-catolicismo, the importance of intoxicant substances and the natural way in which these are addressed in the film highlights *Arrebato*'s willingness to question social values. It is worth remembering that drugs are not only prosecuted because of the risks they pose for the individual, but because of the risks they present for the system: intoxicants threaten the productive activities that sustain the society.

To some extent, *Arrebato* could also be considered an autobiographical film since Zulueta had already started using heroin at that time. In an interview with Andrés Duque for the documentary *Iván Z* (2004), Zulueta confirms this fact and defines that substance as "the last frontier of all drugs" (00:37:30 – 00:37:34). *Arrebato* also echoes the social reality of those times, in which a whole generation tried to live by pushing their limits in order to detach themselves from what Javier Hernández Ruiz in "Psicotrópicos del deseo: Sexo, drogas y rock 'n' roll en el cine de la transición" qualifies as unbearable everyday nature of Francoism and its setting of repression and nonsense (Cueto 49). It could be said that Zulueta's proposal is not only a reflection of that "unbearable everyday" under Francoism, but also a defiant reaction against the values of a regime whose institutions did not die with the dictator. While the approach to sexuality in the film challenges the morality of nacional-catolicismo, the importance of intoxicant substances and the natural way in which these are addressed in the film highlights *Arrebato*'s willingness to question social values. It is worth remembering that drugs are not only prosecuted because of the risks they pose for the individual, but because of the risks they present for the system: intoxicants threaten the productive activities that sustain the society.

Maybe because of that, the importance of drugs in this film is not merely reflected narratively, but also formally. A good example of this is the sequence in which José is preparing a dose of heroin with a syringe, which portrays, in Gómez Tarín's opinion, a "sucesión de eventos rituales de la inyección de la droga" (34). The three main characters relate to drugs differently. In his first solo encounter with José, Pedro admits using "unos polvos de esos que me rebajan el ritmo" (Zulueta 00:34:21 – 00:34:27). These substances can slow the stressful rhythm of one's daily life, but also bring one to a state of consciousness linked to adulthood, which lacks the magical capacity to place the person in an atemporal moment. In fact, Pedro advises Sirgado against abusing these substances: "Tú deberías tener más cuidado, te veo mayor" (00:34:37 – 00:34:43).

Dionysian Excess

Nevertheless, José Sirgado has fallen into heroin's spiral and has dragged Ana with him. In a flashback to the beginning of their relationship, one can witness how José Sirgado initiates Ana into drug use by inviting her to snort a line of heroin while giving her a contradictory warning: "Mira, hay polvos y polvos, pero, de los polvos que no son los polvos, estos polvos son los más polvos" (00:42:49 – 00:43:03) and "No conviene pasarse, si te pasas, no vale" (00:43:44 – 00:43:52). They end up abusing heroin, and while José is able to control his addiction, Ana cannot. She even complains when they do not have heroin during José's second trip to Pedro's aunt's house in the countryside. Pedro's voiceover says that she is "una muchacha un tanto

excesiva, capaz de colgarse de lo que sea en quince días" (00:46:48 – 00:46:52).

Both masculine characters in *Arrebato* hold Ana responsible for her inability to see the difference between ecstatic journeys with and without return tickets. Gómez Tarín argues that Ana's surrender is intolerable to Sirgado because it is complete and without conditions. The critic considers that José experiences quotidian life as insipid and unstimulating: "Ana no puede formar parte de ese paisaje porque se trata de un personaje que todavía posee la fuerza del arrebato, la necesaria inocencia (regreso al pasado con la muñeca), y, sobre todo, la facultad de apasionarse" (103). Gómez Tarín's perspective that drugs, like sex, are still able to provoke the same intensity in Ana that she experienced in the past is very plausible. Nevertheless, it is necessary to add that any surrender to the point of putting one's life at risk, like the path that she has formed toward her own destruction, prevents the attainment of ecstasy. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche warns of the irreparable consequences caused by the force of Dionysian activities. To prevent madness or self-annihilation, the ecstatic experience must be negotiated with form, the Apollonian component. Art is the best outcome when Dionysian and Apollonian forces combine. Perhaps because of that, the seventh art emerges as an alternative for Pedro.

That doesn't mean necessarily that Pedro's quest for the rapture is not as bold and overwhelming as Ana's. Not surprisingly, Marta explains to José that for her cousin Pedro cinema is a source of hallucination: "para mi primo el Cine es ¡alucine!" (Zulueta 00:19:47 – 00:19:52). As Vicente J. Benet puts it, by using the camera, Pedro obtains a representation of reality that becomes "alucinante, desbocada, vertiginosa" (310). Moreover, mentioning Arthur Rimbaud's clairvoyance, José Enrique Monterde states that cinema invites the audience into a sort of hallucinogenic journey that will lead them to reveal what is behind the appearances.[16] In *Arrebato*, cinema materializes an alternative way to deal with the world. A way in which the audience becomes one with the flow of images or, in other words, a way in which cinema implies "dejarse llevar, arrebatar, por el fluir de las imágenes" (Monterde 257). Although not only the audience is meant to let go by the flow of images. Pedro, and José after him, will also be invited to do so.

As Pedro himself explains in the audiocassette sent to José, when his trips around the world filming the rhythms of life are not able to summon rapture anymore, he abandons cinema and starts a conventional life in Madrid. Pedro qualifies that new life as alienating and admits bottoming out shortly after. The emptiness of his life becomes so unbearable that one day he goes to sleep hoping not to wake up anymore. This abandonment sparks a spontaneous rapturous state and triggers the unexpected event that will bring back him to cinema: when Pedro wakes up, he discovers that the camera, by its own will, has started to film him while he was asleep. It is the beginning of a new stage in Pedro's long relationship with cinema, but inverted: he will no longer be the subject but the object of the lens. In Zulueta's words, this is the starting point of "un extraño ritual de entrega y fagocitosis, en el que la imagen acaba interviniendo de forma insospechada" (qtd in Gómez Tarín 119). Equally intriguing is the presence of a red frame in the first reel filmed by the camera's will. Pedro believes that this void frame hides something revealing that happened while he was asleep. The presence of red frames, that will increase in subsequent reels, challenges any attempt to formulate an intelligible representation of reality and evidences the progressive physical consumption of Pedro perpetrated by the camera. Furthermore, a last tape that remains undeveloped in the camera's magazine has registered the day in which the camera (acting like a vampire) consumes Pedro completely, and sends him into a parallel

16. Arthur Rimbaud identified himself as a sort of clairvoyant capable to look beyond the superficial appearance of existence to discover a reality beyond the ordinary range of human senses.

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reality. It will be José himself who will have to go to Pedro's apartment and develop the film it to see what happened. While watching Pedro's last reel, José discovers that the red frames took over the whole tape, except for one single exposed frame that comes to life independently of the projector's beam. In it, Pedro invites José to join him in this new filmic dimension, pressing him to lie on his apartment's bed and let the camera also capture and send him to the realm of the celluloid. José struggles between his desire to reach the other side of reality and the consequences of such action. Despite his doubts and suspicions, a part of him has already reached that dimension, as evidenced by the superposition of his face with Pedro's in the filmic projection he assists. The camera, controlled by the timer, takes snapshots of José, while he blindfolds himself. Abandoning all that one identifies with implies a painful process reminiscent of death. The camera ends acting like a rifle and the shutter resembles the shots of a firing squad when it captures José and his body disappears from this plane of reality[17]. Pedro and José didn't understand Ana's excessive surrender to rapture but, in the end, they seem to take similar measures to assure an unlimited ecstatic experience.

Bataille argues that, at the beginning of time, human beings enjoyed living in communion with the rest of existence or, as he puts it, having a consciousness of continuity. Unfortunately, the arrival of civilization changed that, replacing their interconnected consciousness by one of discontinuity. Since then, human beings, isolated and enclosed in their individuality, only dream of returning to that happy stage. There are three methods to do so: eroticism, the sacred, or death. Only the last one cancels discontinuity permanently, but it fails to fix the problem because it implies the suppression of the subject that should enjoy the recovered continuity. If Pedro and José's final jump to the other side of the mirror involves their physical disappearance, then their search for a definitive way to recover continuity would be in vain. But if that jump is not physical, if it represents the permanent adoption of a non-conventional state of consciousness that allows the subject to see the world from a new and revealing perspective, then perhaps Zulueta's characters have found a lasting formula to return to continuity without dying in the process.

Throughout this article I have tried to demonstrate that the pursuit of ecstatic experiences is the main focus of *Arrebato*. This quest is not only the express intention of the three protagonists, but can also be inferred from the director's personal inquisitiveness. Zulueta himself experiments with the ecstatic methods represented in *Arrebato* in an effort to facilitate a route map for the audience – a map that consecrates not regression, drugs, or sex but cinema, and art in general, as the best path to rapture.

17. A link can be established with the idea of the camera-as-rifle with a scene from Dziga Vertov's *A Man and a movie camera* where the film camera aimed at planes resembles an antiaircraft gun. The association between movie cameras and weapons is more common than could be expected, as proved by the rifle of Étienne Jules Marey, a French photographer and doctor interested in recording movement who invented, among other things, a photographic rifle capable to take up to twelve frames with a speed of 1/700s. Pilar Pedraza, in "Arrebato: la cámara vampira", associates Marey's rifle with the mentioned scene in Arrebato: "José Sirgado no acaba succionado por la cámara como su doble Pedro sino ametrallado por ella, fusilado. El resultado, sin embargo, es el mismo. Ser fusilado por el fusil de Marey con los ojos vendados envía a Sirgado al mismo universo virtual en el que ya reside Pedro. Puede que suponga un castigo, una depuración antes del paso, pues aunque José Sirgado diga que el cine le ha escogido a él, no lo cree" (Pedraza 149-50).

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Tropical and Millennial Vampires: an Amateur and Exploitation Film (*Sangre Cubana*)

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Abstract

An emergent panorama of audiovisual amateurism redefines Cuban cinema's representational and political boundaries. This article focuses on the amateur and exploitation film *Sangre cubana* (*Cuban Blood*) (Edgardo Pérez, 2018) as part of that panorama. It sheds light on an area virtually unstudied by Cuban cinema scholarship, which typically focuses on canonical films and authors and professional independent cinema. The article analyzes the features of *Sangre cubana* as an example of exploitation and trash cinema. It explores the aesthetic and conceptual implications of choosing the figure of the vampire as the protagonist. Examining the tropicalization of this figure and the gothic genre carried out by *Sangre cubana*, the article addresses the film as an example of global gothic and explores the strategies used by the film to rewrite the legacy of *Vampiros en La Habana* (*Vampires in Havana*) (Juan Padrón, 1985). It argues that *Sangre cubana* symbolically manages the anxieties and crises of the Cuban millennial generation by focusing on the monstrous and liminal figure of the vampire. *Sangre cubana* tropicalizes the figure of the vampire and uses this tropicalization as a tool of social criticism. It also comments on the stigmatization of dissidence, otherness, and the verticalism of power utilizing the vampire narrative.

Key Words: *Sangre cubana*, amateur cinema, exploitation cinema, vampire, tropicalization.

A group of young residents on the outskirts of Havana (in the municipality of Marianao) decided to join forces to bring one of the projects they most dreamed of doing together to life: a film about vampires. With hardly any resources, and after many setbacks, they finished *Sangre cubana* (*Cuban Blood*) (2018) (henceforth *Sangre*). The film tells the story of several vampires in the insular tropics who are torn between their survival or their disappearance, marked by the internal struggles of the vampire clan and the scarcities of the place where they live. The film was recorded by the young amateurs using a small Canon Pro camera and edited on a PC. The dialogues had to be re-recorded in a home studio (because the camera had no sound quality), and unsophisticated animation sequences (made with Macromedia Flash Player) were used to replace scenes of actors who left the project before it was finished – a setback that its director did not foresee at the beginning of filming.

The leading promoter of this project was Edgardo Pérez, a Primary Education graduate who also sold DVDs as a form of self-employment while making the film. Pérez acted, edited, handled special effects, and wrote the script. He approached one of the main distributors of the Paquete Semanal (Weekly Package) with a copy of the movie to include in it (the distributor charged him 3 CUC, approximately $3). The Paquete is an ensemble of about one terabyte of audiovisual material compiled by a small group of people, distributed through flash drives and external hard drives to the rest of the island by a larger group of people, and consumed by a large percentage of the population. Its price varies between $1 and $5. It is tolerated by the government, although it is technically neither legal nor illegal. In this way began the journey of *Sangre*, which would eventually get its premiere at the Ludwig Foundation in Havana.

There is an extensive corpus of valuable books that have recently studied the so-called independent, alternative, new Cuban cinema, such as Juan A. García Borrero's *Rehenes de la sombra* (2002); Ann Marie Stock's *On Location in Cuba* (2009); Dunja Fehimović's *National Identity in 21st-Century Cuban Cinema* (2018); Laura-Zoë Humphreys' *Fidel Between the Lines* (2019); Dean L. Reyes' *El gobierno de mañana* (2020), and Ángel Pérez's *Burlar el cerco* (2022). This article sheds light on an area virtually unstudied by the Cuban cinema scholarship, which has typically focused on canonical films and authors or professional independent cinema. *Sangre* is part of an emergent panorama of audiovisual amateurism that redefines Cuban cinema's representational and political boundaries. This panorama is the result, among other factors, of the changes in the dynamics of creation, production, and distribution generated by more democratic access to technologies and the democratization of cultural consumption caused by the phenomenon of the Paquete.

The first section of the article addresses the characteristics of the Paquete, which has been studied extensively to date, and the new media ecology it has created. It also briefly describes the features of the emergent Cuban audiovisual amateurism and places *Sangre* in the broader panorama of both independent and institutional Cuban cinema. The following section places *Sangre* within the Cubaexploitation category, which I have been using in previous articles (Dorta, "Cubaxploitation"; "Narcos"), and addresses the features of the film as an example of exploitation and trash cinema. The third section introduces more details about the plot of *Sangre* that are pertinent to its analysis and explores the aesthetic and conceptual implications of choosing the figure of the vampire as protagonist. The later sections focus on the tropicalization of this figure and the gothic genre carried out by *Sangre* and address the film as an example of globalgothic. The final section analyzes the strategies used by the film to rewrite the symbolic and ideological legacy of *Vampiros en La Habana* (*Vampires in Havana*) (Juan Padrón, 1985).

This article argues that *Sangre* challenges the hegemony of Cuban cinema and its representation models as an exploitation narrative. It further poses that the young amateur filmmakers appropriate the vampire as a "cultural persona" (Edberg). In this way, these young millennials chose to use the figure of the vampire to project their own anxieties amid intense transformations of their social context and identities. The film symbolically manages the anxieties and crises of the Cuban millennial generation by focusing on the monstrous and liminal figure of the vampire, but does so in a playful and occasionally parodic way, while dialoguing with the national context.

El Paquete Semanal: new media ecology, authorship, and amateurism

The audiovisual consumption landscape in Cuba has changed drastically since the early 2000s due to the Paquete Semanal (Weekly Package). This way of distributing and consuming audiovisual material has notably diversified the content that Cubans can access. Most of the Paquete's materials (series, films, telenovelas, documentaries, reality shows, etc.) originate in international media conglomerates, mainly from the US, but there is also a significant domestic presence. Examples of the audiovisual materials that Cubans can find in the Paquete include, to name a few, popular series such as *Westworld* (2016-2022) and *Stranger Things* (2016), Turkish telenovelas like *Hercai* (2019-2021) and *The Magnificent Century* (2011-2014), and current blockbusters such as *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) and *Jurassic World Dominion* (2022).

New audiovisual materials have been created in Cuba for distribution and consumption through the Paquete. *Sangre* is an example of this type of audiovisual material. The Paquete has been well analyzed by various scholars recently (Armenteros and Calviño; De Ferrari; Farrell, "Piracy"; Fowler; Humphreys, "Copying", "Utopia"). It is an essential component of Cuba's hybrid online-offline digital media environment (Henken) and Cuba's media ecosystem (Humphreys, "Utopia" 249).

The Paquete's content is determined by different factors, among them, the self-censorship to which those who create it (the so-called "providers") subject themselves, excluding pornography or political content that is explicitly against Cuban government (Humphreys, "Utopia" 250). For this reason, and because those who compile and sell the materials strive to satisfy the consumer's needs, the Paquete is a highly curated (De Ferrari 11) compilation that is shaped primarily by demands in the final stages of distribution at the neighborhood level, where the consumers can personalize the content they purchase. The contents of the Paquete do not coincide with what current Cuban legislation recommends citizens consume but rather reflect what citizens prefer to consume (Concepción Llanes and Oller Alonso 51).

Young people (between 16 and 30 years old) make up a large percentage of the Paquete's consumers. In general, they do not identify with the image of themselves promoted by state television. They prefer to interact with the Paquete rather than with traditional media (cinema and television) because it offers more cultural options and greater consumption flexibility (Concepción Llanes 160). Young Cubans have been increasingly exposed to values shared through globally produced audiovisual materials, which are, in many cases, different from the ones promoted by the state. Nevertheless, it should be noted that those values do not only come from foreign materials but are also promoted by domestic content, such as *Sangre*. We should not forget that Cuban content is in high demand among the Paquete's consumers (Concepción Llanes 345). Sangre has benefited from that popularity in its distribution, in addition to being available on platforms like YouTube.

The Paquete and films like Sangre are part of what Paloma Duong calls the "Cuban post-socialist mediascape" in which "nation-state and transnational markets, the Communist Party and global finance, meet

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informal and hybrid economies mediated by local digital cultures" (307). In this new media ecology, says Duong, Cubans have become producers of images of themselves that go beyond those created by state media and a foreign view that has traditionally exoticized them. Sangre is proof of that self-empowerment in taking on "[the] authorship and ownership of one's own image, individual and collective" (Duong 310).

Hector Amaya argues that the relationship between the nation-state and citizens is a relationship of "authorship," the latter defined "as ownership of action that establishes legal responsibility and legitimate authority" (508). Through this relationship, "the nation-state authors citizens," grants them authorial status, in the sense of agency and legality, and "shapes media that authors the discursive ground for the subject positions that we identify with citizenship." Thus, Cuban amateur films could be seen as unauthorized by the State but legitimized by their creators and by the consumers of the Paquete. They would establish an alternative cultural citizenship based on their enjoyment and identification with the imaginary of the films.

Amateur Cuban filmmakers create projects without state sponsorship thanks to their access to production and distribution technologies. This independence empowers them. Significantly, these projects contradict the view that such empowerment would lead to "authentic" stories (in identity terms) and the production of testimonial reality. Instead, Cuban amateur filmmakers have produced non-emancipatory or redemptorist narratives. Therefore, they are not aligned with the institutional desire to represent subjectivities saved from moral corruption or captured according to certain ethical paradigms.[1] The state policy's sponsorship of "cinema of amateurs" in the 1980s has been transformed into non-professional, individual and communal initiatives for producing visual narratives without institutional support.

Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes and Susan Aasman (2) state that amateur audiovisual production has become a crucial feature of our lives in the 21st century because it has reshaped the media landscape and the borders between the private and the public sphere. This has created an "amateur media culture" and an "amateurized media universe" (3), in which *Sangre* fits. This film is also part of an emergent panorama of Cuban audiovisual amateurism, along with other films distributed through the Paquete. Film critic Dean L. Reyes ("Cine cubano") speaks of a "spontaneous Cuban cinema" when he refers to several examples of amateur films in Cuba.[2] These do not pretend to emulate the institutional cinema or gain legitimacy but use cinema to entertain themselves, states Reyes. We observe group identity politics and imaginaries from communities that need to self-represent in these movies. As a result, a popular culture emerges that does not fit into the discourses that supposedly represent the imaginaries of the country.

In his article "The Amateur Connection: una provocación," Reyes reviews some of these productions. This amateur cinema is created independently of the official institutions and their production, distribution, and exhibition systems. It is a parallel audiovisual field, as Reyes states, that questions the vertical administration of culture in Cuba and "widens the thematic field of traditional cinema, proposes aesthetic routes that capture the nuances of our epochal sensibility, fosters new creative practices, and appeals to audiences that have deserted film and television as they have been known for decades."

1. In a previous article (Dorta, "Narcos"), I studied the amateur film *Corazón cubano* (2014), about a group of drug traffickers in Havana, also distributed through the Package, as an example of dystopian empowerment.

2. All translations, unless otherwise specified, are mine.

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The amateur films in the Paquete, such as *Sangre*, move away from the visual narratives standardized by professional Cuban cinema (independent or institutional) to propose other narratives strongly linked to the so-called "entertainment fandom," which is supported by "groups who are strongly motivated to produce and circulate media materials as part of their ongoing social interactions" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 29) and who, on many occasions, seek to create alternative identities to those prescribed for them by social norms. These groups produce their version of particular genres or works, as in the case of the young amateurs of *Sangre* and their recreation of the vampire narratives. *Sangre* can be considered a product of what Henry Jenkins refers to as "participatory culture," describing the social interactions and culture produced within fan communities, which deploy "media production and distribution to serve their collective interests" (qtd. in Jenkins, Ford and Green 2).

The audiovisual landscape in Cuba is distinguished by the progressive move away from "icaicentrism" (García Borrero, "Notas" 19) – that is, a focus on the Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industry (ICAIC) as a center for legitimization and film production. That decentralization, along with access to technology and new production and distribution channels, has contributed to the development of an alternative or independent cinema that challenges traditional themes and narrative structures, while also presenting characters and formulas absent in traditional domestic cinema. Originating outside of institutions, amateur movies like *Sangre* share these innovations with the cinema created by these new filmmakers. Both independent/alternative and amateur filmmakers are similarly dependent on digital literacy, inexpensive digital technologies, and alternative distribution to share their work (Farrell, "Slightly independent" 167). Nevertheless, unlike professional alternative or independent cinema, the works of amateur filmmakers are not "submerged" (García Borrero, *Rehenes* 13) but are consumed by domestic audiences and benefit from a circulation system like the Paquete, in addition to being available on platforms like YouTube.

Cubaxploitation: *Sangre cubana* as trash and exploitation cinema

In previous articles, I have used the term *Cubaxploitation* to encompass several Cuban discourses, narratives, visualities, aesthetics, sensibilities, and artistic politics of representation marked by exploitation. I place *Sangre* within the boundaries of this category, which is related to three conceptual frames from which it takes some of its more defining features: exploitation, cult, and trash cinema. Although exploitation cinema, cult cinema, and trash cinema are not interchangeable classifications, on many occasions, they overlap conceptually. It is not the goal of this article to define these conceptual frames in depth, yet I will highlight what they have in common and what is relevant to analyze *Sangre*.[3]

As Guy Barefoot argues, trash cinema has sometimes been understood as a particular subgenre or form of exploitation cinema that emerged in the 1970s (7). The term "trash cinema" can be applied to *Sangre* as an amateur movie not as a judgment of its value but as a label that allows us to explore further how it invokes "bad taste, violence, kitsch, camp, and sexual explicitness" (I. Q. Hunter, qtd. in Barefoot 15). Trash cinema could also be seen as part of the umbrella category of cult cinema (Barefoot 14). Linda Williams (qtd. in Barefoot 20) has linked trash cinema to "body genres" ("melodrama, horror, low comedy, pornography") that want to generate a physical rather than an intellectual response in viewers. Guy Barefoot expands the term to include "films that make effective or distinctive use of limited resources, films with

3. In previous articles (Dorta, "Cubaxploitation"; "Narcos"), I defined exploitation, cult, and trash cinema in more detail. I also compared the category *Cubaxploitation* with that of *Latsploitation* introduced by Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney in the same volume (see Dorta, "Cubaxploitation" 151-152).

aspirations far beyond their resources or achievement, and films that embrace a trash aesthetic" (108), as is the case of *Sangre*.

Sangre follows one of the guiding principles of exploitation/cult/trash cinema: the "forbidden spectacle" that works as their "organizing sensibility" (Schaefer 5). This spectacle fascinates spectators and elicits an affective response (76). The film exploits vampire narratives' gore and violent side with its blood-spattered scenes of conversion from human to vampire form. It also incorporates other moments where violence appears intrinsic to both the vampire group's internal wars and their extermination by anti-vampire hunters. As a trash, cult, and exploitation object, *Sangre* embraces explicit violence so that its content and style trigger ideas of impurity or danger (Mathijs and Mendik 3-4). It exposes and capitalizes on cultural sensibilities while simultaneously destabilizing the boundaries between good and bad taste (9).

The spectators are frequently reminded that they are watching a film, whether through its spectacular dimension or the disruptions in the narrative continuum, as Eric Schaefer argues about exploitation films (80). In the case of *Sangre*, it is a low-budget spectacularity due to material shortages and technical inadequacies, which contributes to the outrageous and bizarre features of *Sangre*'s plot. In this way, *Sangre* displays the exhibitionist tendencies of the so-called "cinema of attractions" that are at the heart of exploitation cinema, according to Schaefer (77). It is a type of cinema that attracts the viewer's attention through an "exhibitionistic confrontation rather than diegetic absorption" (Tom Gunning qtd. in Schaefer 78). The spectacle in exploitation films tends to disrupt the cause-and-effect chain of the traditional narrative, which overrides the story's coherence (80, 340).

Sangre also shows the double edge of exploitation cinema, according to which movies turn into cautionary tales that warn of certain dangers or risks of pursuing individual pleasure, which could lead to disaster, but also highlight negative and dangerous acts through the spectacular (Schaefer 15, 341). This is relevant to *Sangre*'s narrative, which highlights the dangers of becoming a vampire through the identity conflicts of its protagonist William: the dehumanization of the vampire, who kills his victims to survive, becomes linked to the benefits of immortality.

The Paquete's amateur movies, specifically *Sangre*, have not reached cult status in terms of their "long-lasting public presence," in the words of Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (11). However, certain emerging practices could be seen as the beginnings of a potential alternative canonization (Mathijs and Mendik 8) and examples of a lively communal following (11), as expressed by the testimonies of those who saw *Sangre* (residents of Marianao, students, consumers of the Paquete, etc.) in the documentary *Sangre cubana. Vampiros a lo cubano* (*Cuban Blood. Vampires Cuban Style*) (Edgardo Pérez, 2018), which tells the story of the film's creation and its popularity. Both the director and the actors of *Sangre*, who are fans of vampire films, and the audience that reacted positively to the film, take advantage of "performative spectatorship" as a means of constructing cinema through their own devotion to particular films. This kind of spectatorship is also a means of establishing individual identity and a sense of community (Ian Holney, qtd. in Barefoot 3).

One brand common to trash and cult films is "badness," whether aesthetic or moral. Such films are "valued for their 'ineptness' or poor cinematic achievement," positioning them opposite the norm or mainstream and giving them a status of "otherness" (Mathijs and Mendik 2). In terms of their transgressions, these films' competency lies in their ability to transgress the barriers of good and bad, or obliterate them, by challenging the conventions of filmmaking (2), such as the

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narrative coherence, which turns the films into chaotic and outlandish stories. On many occasions, this chaotic character is due to narrative and stylistic loose ends – scenes that show signs of forcing inclusion, violating continuity, or disrespecting narrative cohesion (3), like the interspersed stories in *Sangre*: the short story on the death of Midas's family, the vampire slayer, and the one of Dorian's death, the head of the vampire clan, which are animated sequences with Macromedia Flash Player.

Trash, cult, and exploitation movies attach themselves to "devalued" genres and subgenres (according to the conservative perspective) and generally play with their conventions through parody, irony, or exaggeration. This is the case of *Sangre*, which playfully dialogues with the vampire narratives, contextualizing them within the particularities of the Cuban social context. In this way, the film becomes a highly intertextual narrative due to the inclusion of references to other movies (such as *Vampiros en La Habana*) and reflections on myths and cultural archetypes (Mathijs and Mendik 3), like the figure of the vampire.

My analysis and the reaction of the Paquete-consuming public are all based on an interpretation protocol that Jeffrey Sconce calls "paracinema" (101). This aesthetic attitude assesses the types of "trash cinema" explicitly rejected or ignored by the legitimized film culture, and all manifestations of exploitation cinema. Paracinema celebrates the "failures" and "distortions" caused by material scarcity or technical ineptitudes; it values the stylistic deviations and anomalies born from failure when trying to obey the prevalent codes of cinematic representation (Sconce 111-112). Paracinema appreciates defective special effects, histrionic or unconvincing acting, anachronisms, and lack of plausibility. These are all manifestations of an excess that enable a defamiliarized and ironic perception of the exploitation, trash, and cult object (112, 113). Along with this ironic perception, a paracinematic critical sensibility values the "radical potential of material poverty and technical ineptitude" (Barefoot 17) peculiar to an amateur film such as *Sangre*.

A raving plot with millennial vampires: monstrosity and otherness as political categories

At some point in 2018, the Paquete's consumers discovered a new file in the folder labeled "Cuban films." *Sangre* was distributed in this way and presented with a promotional poster that highlighted some of its most outstanding features: a film with many people involved, all of them amateur; marked by humor; conceived as a rewriting of a classic Cuban film and made using very few resources, but with the eagerness of young cinema lovers. The poster said:

> *Sangre cubana* is a movie full of characters and humor. It is a tribute to the classic cartoon J. Padrón's *Vampiros en La Habana*. A work achieved by young amateurs with just a camera, a PC and the damn urge to make cinema. (qtd. in Eimil Reigosa).

Sangre thus became the first Cuban film with vampires of flesh and bone (Eimil Reigosa).

In a previous article (Dorta, "Narcos"), I analyzed *Corazón cubano* (*Cuban Heart*) (Maikel Liyuen Valdés, 2014), another amateur and exploitation film made by fans of narco cinema, mostly young Black reparteros[4] and reggaeton artists of the Jesús María neighborhood in Havana, which is marked by inequality and lack of access to basic resources. Unlike this film, *Sangre* was made by young college students, although both groups of creators share a lack of academic training in cinema. *Sangre's* director and actors live in the outskirts of Havana

4. The inhabitants of the repartos, Havana's peripheric and poorest neighborhoods, are called reparteros.

(Marianao), in which inequality is racialized much like the Jesús María neighborhood, but in a less concentrated way. The budget they had to make the film was almost non-existent compared to that of *Corazón cubano*, which had a relatively small group of amateur actors. For its part, more than 40 actors appear at *Sangre* (among protagonists, extras, and secondary characters) (Eimil Reigosa), which is commendable for an amateur product made with scarceresources.

The simplicity of *Corazón cubano*'s plot (two gangs vie for the control and profits from drug trafficking in a neighborhood in Old Havana) contrasts with that of *Sangre*, full of characters and plot twists. *Sangre*'s story can be summed up as follows: Lester and William are good friends. The former suspects that the latter is gay because he does not have a girlfriend. However, William meets Elizabeth, who turns out to be a vampire and turns him on their first night of sex. William awakens as a vampire with an emo, Goth appearance. From this moment on, the story focuses partly on the identity conflicts of William, who does not want to be a vampire, as well as the internal struggles of the group of vampires, due to the authoritarian nature of Dorian. He is the first Cuban vampire who frequently travels to Transylvania to communicate with Dracula. A group of vampire hunters (including Midas) wants to exterminate Dorian.

Although this storyline follows many of the topics of other narratives about vampires, such as the identity conflicts of the protagonist or the fight between humans and vampires (good vs. evil), *Sangre* introduces some variations that give the story a delirious character, typical of some exploitation narratives. Cuban vampires are resistant to the sun because they take the vitamin complex Polivit. There is an antidote to stop being a vampire: the pru oriental. In a previous life, the vampire Elizabeth (who was born in 1864) was William's lover and his slave on a plantation, but he died under the orders of Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez in the 19th-century war of independence. After 120 years of searching, Elizabeth finds William in the 21st century.

Dorian, the head of the Cuban vampires, is on a mission to ensure that The Red Night takes place: a phenomenon that vampires have used in other places to increase their population on a large scale, but this is the first time that it could happen in Cuba. The mass conversion of those attending the Rolling Stones concert in Havana into vampires will occur specifically when the group is playing "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," a song composed by Dracula himself, who donated it to the rockers, according to *Sangre*'s outrageous narrative. The notes of the Rolling Stones' song will cause an orgy of blood. The mission of the vampire hunter Midas and other renegade vampires is to prevent this catastrophic event. Mick Jagger is kidnapped by some of these vampires and other human boys to convince him not to have the Red Night: one of the most far-fetched moments in SC since the amateur actor who plays Jagger does not even ressemble the singer.

Sangre's characters are not psychologically complex (although there is intent to make the protagonist William more profound, with his identity conflicts and his renunciation of being a vampire). Its special effects are of dubious quality; they are part of the film's low-budget spectacularity. Its verisimilitude patterns are capricious and bizarre. The performances of the amateur actors are mostly unconvincing. These non-diegetic elements of exploitation and trash films are positively valued for a paracinematic sensibility (Sconce 113). They are manifestations of the excess typical of exploitation and trash objects: it is what interrupts the illusionist aesthetic. It makes the audience aware of the non-diegetic aspects of the image. The excess manifests itself in the "film's failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude;" it "calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document" (Sconce 113).

Sangre confronts the thematic hegemony of Cuban cinema and its representation models, which have been mostly based on realist esthetics (Fehimović 250; Pérez, *Burlar* 145; Reyes, *El gobierno* 198). The film exhibits its referential variety: mainstream cinema, the pop world, Cuban popular culture, and narratives about vampires (Pérez, "Mentes"). Unrepeatable moments of what Jeffrey Sconce calls "badtruth" proliferate in the film. The "badtruth" provides a defamiliarized point of view by combining "the transcendentally weird and the catastrophically awful" (112). The "bad," "a nodal point of paracinematic style," becomes a tool that is "aesthetically defamiliarizing and politically invigorating" (12). Those moments include, among many others, a spider witch hanging from trees on a Havana street who possesses the only existing antidote to kill Dorian and Chinese-made lanterns that shoot ultraviolet rays to destroy vampires (*Sangre* 1:40:00 and 0:49:52)

Moments of social criticism questioning the Cuban political reality coexist in *Sangre* along with the "badtruth" and the excess, and are sometimes indistinguishable from the latter. There are non-emphatic and non-didactic comments on evangelical religions, Cuban medical missions abroad, homophobia, medicine shortages, alcoholism, and nostalgia for Soviet culture.

The young amateurs of *Sangre* chose the vampire to represent their cinematic personas among an extensive repertoire of possible incarnations, which can be justified by its symbolic productivity and conceptual implications for the film's imaginary. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (7) argues, any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part, the monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, and sexual. Political or ideological difference especially is a catalyst to monstrous representation (8). In this way, *Sangre*'s young vampires are strongly marked by alterity and difference as distinctive traits of any monstrous entity. This decision opens up a powerful horizon in representation and symbolic developments since the monsters are "secondary bodies through which the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs can be explored" (Cohen 18). Specifically, the vampire as a metaphor operates as a "catch-all for representations of distance from cultural norms" (Campbell 100). Its liminal nature "renders it available as a metaphorical figure for the representation of otherness" (100).

Foreignness and disruptive energy are represented through the vampire. As Erik Butler (3) argues, the vampire threatens a series of homologous social units: the individual, the community member, and the state and embodies the possibility of spreading chaos (11). It also represents the undisciplined forces of desire that exist outside of cultural networks of socialization (Weinstock n.p.). By becoming vampires, William and Elizabeth begin to break the rules of socialization and endanger the stability of the community in *Sangre*. "Since you were bitten, you became a threat to the whole world; you should be tied up," Midas, the vampire slayer, tells William.

The vampire becomes a political category, referring to ambition of indeterminate proportions that stands to remake the world in ways that victims cannot even imagine. The Red Night in *Sangre* and the threat of a massive conversion of humans into vampires is a variation of this uncontrolled power, which is opposed by the vampire slayers and some vampires who reject Dorian's despotism. Dorian coordinates the nefarious event together with the Rolling Stones.

One feature of vampire films is significant in assessing the meanings that this monstrous figure acquires in *Sangre*. According to Jeffrey Weinstock (n.p.), these films unusually emphasize the topic of geographic and transnational mobility. The space inhabited by the

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vampire is a smooth space in which thought overcomes distance and movement is unimpeded by either material obstacles or national boundaries. Stacey Abbot (217) argues that a "quest for spatial liberation and freedom of movement" drives the vampire and that this "spatial liberation extends across the globe and undermines national boundaries or identities" in the twenty-first century.

The strong presence in contemporary Cuban literature and art of various tropes about immobility, confinement, and no escape due to natural and, above all, political circumstances, contrasts with the choice to use the vampire as the protagonist of *Sangre*.[5] Such a choice is a gesture that aims at reimagining those dystopian tropes through the symbolization of other alternatives, such as the absence of temporal or spatial borders and unfettered mobility. Those who hunt vampires face this freedom of movement at a disadvantage, as they are subject to physical and temporal laws and regulations imposed by governments. Instead, the vampiric motion reflects the desire to transcend the limitations of time and place and become something other (Weinstock n.p.).

The young millennial vampires of *Sangre* proliferate by being infected by others that bite them. They form a community of others that must be eliminated because it threatens the stability of the unconverted and because they need blood to continue 'unliving.' The vampire slayer Midas embodies the figure of the law and the restoration of violated order; he calls vampires "beasts" and is dedicated to curbing their proliferation. However, the opposition between vampire slayers and monstrous entities is not the only source of conflict. Within the group of vampires, schisms occur, due to Dorian's despotism, a figure of power who must authorize the "conversions" of the new vampires. He is the only one who has direct communication with Dracula when he travels to Transylvania. Elizabeth disobeys Dorian by turning William into a vampire without the boss's authorization. Hence a strong opposition arises between the couple William-Elizabeth and Dorian. These variations on the struggle for power and community stability broaden *Sangre*'s thematic arc, thus including allegorical comments on the risks of difference and the stigmatization of dissidence; the imposition of false community unity and homogeneity among equals, and criticism of the verticalism of power: all of these are frequent topics in Cuban art and literature that are explicitly or metaphorically political.

Part of my analysis of *Corazón cubano*, the film mentioned previously, is based on the use of Mark Edberg's concept of "cultural persona." I argued in my article that the Cuban reparteros created a projection of the narco's cultural persona to performatively demonstrate their fantasies of social climbing, consumption, and possession of material goods within an environment of economic marginalization (Dorta, "Narcos" 155). Edberg's concept is relevant to understanding the choice of the vampire by *Sangre's* young amateurs, although with different values from those of the *reparteros* and the narcos. The vampire has become a culturally-constructed and flexible representation disseminated over time; a polysemic symbol that has been widely appropriated beyond the figure's geospatial and cultural roots (Edberg 110-111, 123).

The vampire is the cultural persona chosen by *Sangre*'s young millennials to project their anxieties amid deep identity and social transformations, which include key events necessary to understanding Cuban society in the first decade of the 2000s, such as Barack Obama's visit to the country (2016); Fidel Castro's death (2016), or the Rolling Stones concert in Havana (2016), to mention just a few. *Sangre* symbolically manages the crises of the Cuban millennial generation taking advantage of the monstrous and liminal figure of the vampire's potential. In this way, young amateurs continue a long tradition of dialogue with the vampiric cultural persona, in which this persona

5. As Désirée Díaz (254; 275) argues, the analogy between the island of Cuba and prison is present in all periods of Cuban literature. The "symbol of insular geography as a space of oppression" has been used by several generations and ideological groups as a symbol of the conditions of political oppression, the struggle for freedom, and insular pathos" (255). Several scholars have studied the literary and cultural representations of the experience of confinement and imprisonment that marked Cuban society during the 20th century. See Cuesta (143-160), Díaz (239-278), Marturano, Rivera-Rivera (91-140), and Saumell.

mirrors a changing world and the subject's anxieties about shifting identities: the vampire becomes an object onto which general anxiety can be displaced (Butler 12-13). At the same time, this dialogue features adaptations of the vampire as a cultural persona within the Cuban context through several strategies. *Sangre*'s millennial vampires become overdetermined bodies that condense culturally specific anxieties and desires into one super-saturated form (Weinstock n.p.). When the vampiric archetype is inserted into a particular cultural context and is also "sexualised, technologised, and othered," what emerges is a "supercharged, overdetermined surplus of meaning," a "symbolic supertext operating on multiple levels simultaneously" (Weinstock n.p.).

Tropicalization and globalgothic

The vampire archetype as a symbolic supertext works on multiple levels in *Sangre*, and the young amateurs in the film engage with this archetype in different ways. They use strategies such as the tropicalization of the vampire and the thematization of the dual nature of globalization, taking the gothic genre as a reference.

Sangre symbolically relocates the vampiric trope in the Cuban context, incorporating elements specific to this context, and updates the traits of the trope as they have been canonized in other cultural contexts. This relocation channels local content and conflicts, which are made visible through their framing in the vampire narrative. In this way, the film appropriates representational models of the gothic genre, which are adapted to an amateur, exploitation, and trash production, complemented with native elements. In such cases, the canonized Gothic models are transformed with comic features that divert the effect of terror and sublimity towards cheap and sometimes parodic narratives, which trivializes the transcendence of Gothic (Moraña 339-340). *Sangre* dialogues in this way with an extensive corpus of texts and visual narratives, which, according to Inés Ordiz and Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno (7), engage with the Gothic in several forms, such as transposition, tropicalization, appropriation, and parody, while examining local issues.

One of the mechanisms through which *Sangre* engages with vampire narratives is the so-called tropicalization. Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos (2) define it as

> a process of troping and infusing a particular space, place, region or nation with an assortment of qualities, metaphors, ideas, and principles that are disseminated and maintained through literary texts, historical narratives, film, and media. (2)

This process aims to reverse the fixation of the southern Other through definitions and stereotypes by resisting the externally driven discourses of exoticization (2). This is relevant for the Cuban context and its real and symbolic subjects, represented through an exotic gaze that prefixes their developments according to political, racial, or gender stereotypes. *Sangre*'s tropicalization of the vampire is a strategy of de-exoticization and authorship of the image of the young amateurs who make the film.

For his part, Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez (*Selva* n.p.) addresses the tropicalization of Gothic as a mechanism that recycles and transforms that genre in Latin America, putting characters and themes out of place to enhance their artificiality, dynamics of construction and enunciation of otherness. According to the author, this enables the enunciation of what "cannot be talked about," which depends on each context. In this way, the gothic genre is honored and parodied to exercise social criticism. The transposition of gothic characters and situations to tropical settings absorbs their powers of representation (*Selva* n.p.). Both homage and mockery of the Gothic are intertwined in the

tropicalization. As in the case of *Sangre*, the vampires are presented as transformed but recognizable beings, despite the marks left on them by the mechanism that tropicalized them (*Selva* n.p.). For the transformation of the vampiric figure to be more visible, its tropicalization still makes it possible to recognize some conventions of the Gothic genre, such as the figure's behavior. However, these already appear strongly marked by the new representational context.

A scene from *Sangre* (0:16:31-0:20:05) exposes some of the variations that the film introduces as part of the tropicalization of Gothic. Marcos is Elizabeth's vampire "brother" who was also turned by Dorian (hence this vampiric kinship). He suddenly shows up at William's house to answer all of his questions. William is perplexed and tormented after being turned into a vampire. Marcos' speech in this pedagogical scene has a dual audience: William and the film's viewers, who must be educated about what it means to be a Cuban vampire. *Sangre* fulfills, in this way, some characteristics of all vampire films, according to Jeffrey Weinstock (n.p.). Vampire films are always about defining the vampire, which is a necessary preliminary to destroying it. Similarly, vampire movies always define themselves in relation to previous cinematic representations of vampires. They often are quite explicit about the revisions to the mythology they are making, argues Weinstock (n.p.).

These characteristics of vampire films turn us viewers into "textual vampire nomads", who are always watching many vampire movies simultaneously, comparing the old and the new representations,

> recognizing the extent to which the new portrayal conforms to or diverges from the sedimented conventions of the vampire cinema and looking for the seemingly inevitable winks to the audience at the moments that a new vampire film metatextually acknowledges itself as participating in and revising an established tradition. (Weinstock n.p)

The challenge for filmmakers, including young Cuban amateurs, is to tell a familiar story differently. This objective is explicitly manifested in contemporary vampire films through their metatextual awareness.

At one point in the conversation between William and Marcos, the latter asks the former if he has watched *Vampiros en la Habana*. The intradiegetic objective of the question is to make William understand that Polivit is the equivalent of "vampisol," the formula that allowed vampires in Cuba to expose themselves to the sun in Padrón's film.

In the tropicalized gothic universe of *Sangre*, vampires can expose themselves to the sun because they take Polivit, a vitamin complex. This advantage is not without problems because the vitamin is frequently in short supply in pharmacies, as William comments, as has been the reality. Polivit was first supplied to the population in Cuba in the 1990s, amid the food crisis of the Special Period, which caused a severe nutritional deficit and diseases related to it. The multivitamin supplement cannot be consumed regularly today due to the scarcity that William's character alludes to.

He also has doubts about the fact that he has seen himself reflected in the mirror. The character contrasts his cultural knowledge of vampire narratives with the unusualness of that reflection. Marcos explains that Cuban vampires have "evolved" from "ancient vampires," which allows them to see themselves in mirrors. The reason for this is not explained. *Sangre* exhibits its confidence in the plausibility of its tropicalized vampiric universe. The film also introduces a term to explain the length of time William was asleep before waking up as a vampire. Marcos explains that the "sueño de muerte" (dream of death) takes place between the death of the human and his awakening as a non-living creature. Also, William must give up sleep as part of his new condition.

From this meeting with Marcos, in which William resists even taking blood, the latter begins a desperate search for something that will allow him to return to being human. He rejects the inhumanity of vampires and their dependence on blood, which leads them to murder innocent humans. William goes to a library, hoping to find a book that will help him. He pulls from a shelf a copy of *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1924), the epic poem that Vladimir Mayakovsky dedicated to the Russian revolutionary. William looks at the book for a few seconds while parodic martial music plays. Abruptly he rejects it and returns it to the shelf. The Soviet archive is no longer a source of knowledge; its place is reduced to the decorative inactivity of a library shelf (0:16:31-0:20:05). This contrasts with the "pervasive presence" of "the spectre of Marx and Marxism" throughout both Juan Padrón's *Vampiros en La Habana* (1985) and its sequel *Más vampiros en La Habana* (2003), which Fehimović identifies in "Pepe's anti-totalitarian struggles, his uncle's internationalist, socialist desire to distribute Vampisol around the world for free, and the community of vampires invoked by "Radio Vampiro Internacional"" (Fehimović 55).

In this search, William meets Isidro, a vampire of Asian descent who offers him pru, a fermented drink extracted from the root of the Bejuco Ubí plant (princess vine or seasonvine), which is very popular in the East of Cuba. Its origin is traced back to the 1800s, the period after Haitian Revolution, when French settlers migrated to eastern Cuba, bringing with them their customs and traditions, including oriental pru. The drink has been believed to possess antihypertensive, stomachic, depurative, and diuretic properties. *Sangre* changes the irreversibility of the vampiric condition by introducing the oriental pru as the antidote to that condition, according to its tropicalization of the vampire narratives' tropes. The choice of pru as an antidote for vampirism in *Sangre* could be due to the perception of this drink as one with excellent medicinal properties, making it suitable for reversing this condition. According to oral tradition passed down by Haitians living in Cuba, the pru gave enslaved people the strength to complete hard farming tasks by lifting their spirits and healing their illnesses. *Sangre* would reproduce this vision by introducing pru as an antidote since it would allow millennial vampires not to be dependent on human blood to survive. In addition, the homemade preparation of this drink and its relatively easy acquisition would help make it an antidote at hand.

Sangre is an example of a dynamic of appropriations and reattributions of meaning that Glennis Byron (6) calls "globalgothic," through which gothic tropes and narratives travel with the movement of people and the flow of cultural production, becoming dislocated from specific regions or places while at the same time connecting with new narratives. What characterizes globalgothic is its dual response to globalization: the exploitation of what it enables and produces combined with the frequent demonization of its processes (5). In this way, the combination of the responses enacts two codependent mechanisms: "gothic is globalized –reproduced, consumed, recycled– and globalization is gothicked –made monstrous, spectral, vampiric" (5). Sangre takes its representation strategies and the distinctive features of its plot from this codependency. The Cuban amateur filmmakers recycle vampire tropes globalized by multiple narratives and the figure of the vampire as a cultural persona while addressing globalization as a monstrous incarnation.

These young people create an entertainment fandom narrative fueled by their preferences for vampire stories. Thus, the products made available through globalization are eagerly appropriated. Still, at the same time, they are exploited to articulate the processes of globalization as monstrous, spectral, and cannibalistic: they become objects of anxiety and suspicion (Byron 5). Globalization "becomes a gothic manifestation, a material and psychic invasion, a force of contamination and dominance" (5). All vampires in *Sangre* could

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embody these gothic manifestations of globalization, but the symbolic force of globalgothic is concentrated in the Rolling Stones.

The main event that mobilizes the film's action is Red Night. The despotic vampire Dorian has traveled to Transylvania to coordinate the event with Dracula and ensure its success. The visit of the Rolling Stones to Havana is imagined as a psychic invasion that will conquer the minds of those attending their concert and turn them into vampires, to increase the vampire population on a large scale. The event "has never happened here in Cuba, but times are changing," says the vampire hunter Midas. This is an allusion to Cuba's openness to global products of cultural consumption and to the country's place in that global imaginary. The end of *Sangre* stages the massive transformation into vampires of those attending the Rolling Stones concert: a monster, the result of a low-budget spectacularity, bites everyone who listens to "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," which turned into a lethal vector of vampiric contagion (*Sangre* 1:46:39-1:46:56).

What could be celebrated as a benefit and opening to new symbolic horizons is imagined within the dynamics of globalgothic: the exploitation of the transnational flows to give form to anxieties attendant upon the processes of globalization (Byron 5). In the case of *Sangre*, these anxieties refer to issues such as the stability of local or national identities and cultures or the impact of transnational capitalism on Cuban social, political, and cultural life. Young Cuban millennial amateurs project their anxieties about their identities and futures onto the figure of the vampire. In a range of globalized products and cultural personas, the vampire allows these anxieties to be embodied as a haunting and liminal figure of disturbance. The symbol of a globalized cultural product, the Rolling Stones, is gothicked as a vampiric figure that invades young Cubans' minds and converts them into vampires. A combination of attraction and dread marks the representation of the musicians in *Sangre*. They are the vector of changes and new experiences but also of an uncontrolled contagion. The exposure to their influence and dominance leads to a massive conversion with unforeseeable consequences.

Dialogues with *Vampiros en La Habana*

Sangre is a film with high levels of intertextuality, not only because of its tropicalization of the vampire and its dialogue with the Gothic as a genre, but also because of its relationship with one of the most popular films of Cuban cinema, *Vampiros en La Habana* (*Vampires in Havana*) (henceforth *Vampiros*) by Juan Padrón (1985), Cuba's first feature-length animation (Fehimović 43).[6]

In the aforementioned conversation between William and Marcos, the relationship between *Sangre* and *Vampiros* becomes explicit when Marcos asks the recently converted William if he remembers Padrón's film, as William will better understand the power of the Polivit (which allows Cuban vampires to expose themselves to the sun) if he remembers that the Vampisol fulfilled a similar function in *Vampiros*. The film becomes for SC a blueprint for designing a vampiric narrative that is simultaneously innovative and indebted to previous representations. *Sangre* acknowledges itself as a revisionist narrative while remaining aware of its metatextual nature.

Both *Sangre* and *Vampiros* adapt European and North American vampire narratives and create new representations linked to the peculiarities of the Cuban context. In both films, the Cuban vampires destabilize the conventions of the gothic genre but, at the same time, remain recognizable within those conventions. In the case of Padrón's film, its protagonist Joseph (Pepito) represents a new breed of mestizo vampires, who resist the sun thanks to the consumption of Vampisol, a special formula created by his uncle Von Dracula. The Vampisol is

6. Juan Padrón directed *Más vampiros en La Habana* (*More Vampires in Havana*) in 2003, and is considered to be "the first explicitly identified "sequel" in Cuban cinematic history" (Fehimović 43). Dunja Fehimović extensively analyzes *Vampiros* and *Más vampiros en La Habana* in her discussion of national identity in twenty-first-century Cuban film. In the present article, I focus on *Sangre* and its relationship with *Vampiros* because their intertextual links are stronger than those that might be established between *Sangre* and *Más vampiros en La Habana*.

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coveted by groups of vampires from Europe and the United States, who want to take the formula from Von Dracula, so they move to Havana to start a war for its possession. In *Sangre*, the Polivit vitamin that allows Cuban vampires to expose themselves to the sun is not the product of the ingenuity of a scientist. Instead, the State provides it to the general population, from which the vampires take advantage, but for this same reason, the vitamin is scarce in the country. The consumption of the vitamin complex becomes a question of individual survival. It is a product like so many others that are scarce in the daily consumption of Cubans. Foreign powers do not covet it the same as in *Vampiros*, so its quest is not epic. In this sense, the didactic, "patriotic use of history" by Padrón in both *Vampiros* and *Más vampiros en La Habana* incorporates the films' plots "into a Cuban narrative of nationalist, anti-totalitarian lucha" (Fehimović 56). Pepe's and his friends' resistance against fascists, Fulgencio Batista, and Gerardo Machado, contrasts with the lacking air of heroism displayed by the protagonists in *Sangre*.

Pepito is not aware of his vampiric condition in Padrón's film. He is a musician in an orchestra and fights against the tyranny of Gerardo Machado.[7] His uncle makes him aware that he is a vampire, and, with this awakening, the duty to protect the Vampisol and prevent foreign vampires from taking over the formula emerges. Pepito assumes a heroic role; he fights evil in all its manifestations and is faithful to the filial bonds that bind him to his beloved and the political cause that he defends. He is fully a friend, a patriot, and a heterosexual (Reyes, "El etnocentrismo"). He is a multifaceted Cuban macho who combines equal parts of hedonism and fulfillment of duty in his personality. Pepito's heroism in *Vampiros* is radically transformed with William, *Sangre*'s protagonist, an emo-style millennial in perpetual identity crisis who doesn't want to be a vampire and projects himself from non-heroic withdrawal and non-belonging.

As Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez (*The Migration* 28) states, vampirism in Padrón's film is a metaphor "for economic exploitation, drainage of natural resources, as well as racial and class anxieties." This metaphor works as a continuation of the exploitation of early European colonizers, bloodsuckers of the material resources and the islands' inhabitants (*The Migration* 31). The extractivist metaphor of *Vampiros* is part of a highly ideological plot, in which themes such as colonization, the ridicule of the other dominating foreigner, and the resistance to domination profoundly mark the tropicalization of Gothic and vampire narratives. For its part, *Sangre* transforms the extractivist trope of *Vampiros* into one about contagion, multiplication, and contamination, according to its approach to globalization as a gothic, monstrous, and spectral manifestation. The Rolling Stones embody this trope in the film because they are responsible for the vampire conversion of their concertgoers. At the end of *Sangre*, a monster bites the listeners of "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" at the climax of the Red Night, consummating the mass contagion and continuity of the vampiric race in Cuba. The film leaves no room for resistance to this lethal event, no matter how much the vampire slayers and some vampires have tried to prevent it throughout the entire plot.

This closure contrasts with the ending of *Vampiros*, in which Pepito defeats the evil colonizing vampires and altruistically discloses the Vampisol formula. The character redeems himself ethically with this liberating gesture, opposing the European vampires who want to exploit the product and the Americans who want to destroy it (Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *The Migration* 28). Padrón's film proposes, through characters like Pepito, what Dean Luis Reyes ("El etnocentrismo") calls a "soft ethnocentrism," which celebrates the authentic fullness of one's own, confronting the control of the forces that seek to subjugate those characters and systematically devaluing the authority of the colonizers.

7. Gerardo Machado's government lasted between 1925 and 1933.

The relationship of *Sangre*'s characters to these dominating forces (particularized in the Rolling Stones as super vampires) is more ambiguous. It is a relationship that mixes fascination and fear. It sees in these forces the vectors of a contagion whose developments are unpredictable since they will potentially destabilize the certainties of identity, otherness, the limits of inside and outside, and the meaning of the local and the global.

New blood for Cuban amateur cinema: the productive crisis of millennial vampires

Sangre tropicalizes the figure of the vampire and uses this tropicalization as a tool of social criticism. The film is also an example of the dynamics of globalgothic. It recycles globalized vampiric tropes and the cultural persona of the vampire while addressing globalization as a monstrous and gothic manifestation (as embodied in the Rolling Stones). *Sangre*'s metatextual awareness takes form in the dialogues it establishes with the film *Vampiros en La Habana*. The amateur movie rewrites the symbolic and ideological legacy of *Vampiros* transforming its extractivist trope into a trope of contamination and contagion. In addition, the protagonist of *Sangre* (William) reverses the heroic profile of the protagonist of *Vampiros* (Pepito) by becoming a millennial in identity crisis who refuses to be a vampire. *Sangre* has invigorated the audiovisual panorama of Cuban amateur cinema with its freshness and aesthetic and narrative choices. Its young director and actors made an exploitation and trash film that satisfied fans' desires for vampire movies. At the same time, it symbolically staged the anxieties of a generation placed amid profound transformations. As a monstrous and liminal figure and as a cultural persona, the vampire perfectly mirrors these young people's personal and social universe, an ever-changing and uncertain environment. *Sangre cubana* playfully addresses these circumstances and comments on the stigmatization of dissidence, otherness, and the verticalism of power using the vampire narrative.

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The Spanish Civil War through the Phantasmagorical Lens of Guillermo del Toro

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Abstract

Mexican director Guillermo del Toro is probably best known for his English-language horror and fantasy-genre films. In 2001 however, Del Toro's work began to move in a new direction, with the release of *El espinazo del diablo*, a ghost story set in Spain in the final year of the Spanish Civil War. Five years later in 2006 he directed his second Spanish-language film to be set in Spain, *El laberinto del fauno*, a fairy tale narrative set in the post-war of 1944, foregrounding the horrors of life under fascism and the resistance to the Francoist regime. Given the popularizing and mainstreaming effect of Del Toro's "magical treatment", it would not be unreasonable to suspect that his ghost story and fairy tale might have produced a simplistic view of Spain's conflict. I will argue that such is not the case. Employing the refractionary lens of the phantasmagorical, Del Toro's representation of the violence and oppression of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath through the eyes of orphaned and traumatized children presents Spain as an incomprehensible and monstrous *madre patria*, a counter-narrative to any nostalgic or longed for vision of the mother country as a unified and all-embracing nation.

Key Words: Guillermo del Toro; Spectral; Fantasy; Spanish Civil War; Transnational film

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> Adults lie to themselves and to others. They endorse their concerns and inventions—the ones they all agree to (money, power, war, repression)—as real. But fantasy is frowned upon as childish. For some of us, it is not.
> Guillermo del Toro, Foreword, *At Home with Monsters*.

Through his impressive body of work to date, the prolific and multi-talented Mexican film director Guillermo del Toro, also a successful screenwriter, special effects artist, producer and novelist, has managed to cross geographic, linguistic and genre borders and has emerged as one of the most creative and successful transnational filmmakers of our generation. By 1993 Del Toro had already made his first Spanish-language feature film, *Cronos*, a vampire tale set in Mexico, but he made his name in the global market with English-language fantasy ventures such as *Blade II* (2002) and *Hellboy* (2004). He has secured his reputation in the global film scene with the following feature films in English: *Mimic* (1997), *Hellboy II:The Golden Army* (2008), *Pacific Rim* (2013), *Crimson Peak* (2015), *The Shape of Water* (2017) which won four Oscars, *Nightmare Alley* (2021) and *Pinocchio* (2022).

With previous experience in illustration and in the creation of video-games, comics, and special effects, Del Toro's credentials for making fantasy-genre films were unquestionable. In 2001 however, Del Toro's work began to move in a new direction, with the release of *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*), an eerily beautiful but disturbing ghost story set in Spain in the final year of the Spanish Civil War. Five years later in 2006 he directed his second Spanish-language film to be set in Spain, *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*), a fairy tale narrative set in 1944 also foregrounding the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. When I say Del Toro moved in a new direction I do not mean to suggest that he left behind the phantasmagorical and horror elements of his previous films; on the contrary, *Espinazo* and *Laberinto* are richly crafted within the aesthetics and technological sophistication of present-day fantasy films. What is remarkable though, is that a Mexican director, based in Los Angeles, working mostly in English and known for horror and fantasy films should have made, with *El laberinto del fauno* one of the most critically successful films to date on the Spanish Civil War and the immediate postwar period, and that he did so with a Spanish-language film on a global level. Nominated for six Academy Awards in 2006, *Laberinto* won three Oscars in 2007 for cinematography, art direction, and makeup, putting the Spanish Civil War on the map for audiences outside of Spain, especially a new generation of film viewers already familiar perhaps with Del Toro's reputation in the fantasy and horror genres, but not knowledgeable about the history of Spain and her conflicts. Historically grounded on aspects of the Civil War and the postwar resistance to the fascism of the Franco regime, both *Espinazo* and *Laberinto* have undoubtedly mapped this war in terms that have made it synonymous with Spain and the conflict her citizens had to endure. At the same time though, the fairy tale and magical elements of these films situate them unmistakably within the genre of fantasy ventures. I am interested in exploring Del Toro's use of the fantastic, the monstrous and the spectral as a refractionary lens to focus on the violence and horror of the war and subsequent fascist regime, and to highlight the importance and long term impact of resistance, particularly from the perspective of the most powerless.

While *Laberinto* is not the only contemporary popular film made about the Spanish Civil War, it did have a much wider distribution and became more mainstream than any other film on the subject, thanks in large part to Del Toro's collaboration with EL DESEO, the production company of Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar. But what can be said about the current practices of global cinema when viewers through platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon and the like can stream national and international films into their homes, onto the large or small screens of TVs, computers, tablets or smart phones? What is gained and what is

lost in the translations and transferences when directors, producers, actors and other film professionals now cross borders, languages, genres and markets with more fluidity than ever before in the history of film? Are historical contexts and political conflicts adequately problematized within the financial demands and cultural dynamics of transnational cinema, or are they trivialized or at best misread? Can a blockbuster movie reveling in the conventions of fantasy or ghost story genres excavate an intellectual project and engage an audience on a level beyond cliché?

Given the popularizing and mainstreaming effect of Del Toro's "magical treatment", and in light of the fact that he is a Mexican director, living in the US with no particular ties to Spain, it would not be unreasonable to suspect that his ghost story and fairy tale might have produced a simplistic view of Spain's conflict. In fact, there has been criticism in the past towards non-Spanish directors taking on the complexities of the Civil War without a sufficiently nuanced socio-political approach. A case in point is Stephen Schwartz's dismissal of Ken Loach's 1995 film *Land and Freedom* which he considers to be arrogantly simplistic with regard to the modus operandi of the anarchist resistance within the Republic. Discussing the paradoxes of film and the recovery of historical memory, Schwartz argues that *Land and Freedom* is "deeply flawed" adding that "it aggravates the […] error of analyzing the war through foreign, rather than Spanish eyes" (503). Schwartz holds up for special criticism a scene which many of the film's fans and Loach himself found to be remarkably powerful and affecting, well acted and delivered, employing professional actors alongside local villagers and drawing out masterful improvisation techniques:

> Loach himself said this setup comprised the summit of the work, when it is, in reality, 'cringe-making', in the present-day idiom. Spanish and, especially, Catalan anarchist peasants had read, discussed, and thought about collectivization for three generations, and did not need to stumble through inarticulate colloquies about it. Nor was it probable that they would pay attention to the views of outsiders, except for a handful of well-known foreign anarchists. (503)

This is a problematic argument. In the first place, analyzing the civil war from "foreign eyes" rather than "Spanish eyes" does not automatically imply an "error" or less authenticity or realism. Furthermore, Loach was then as he is today an experienced, successful director known for his political commitment and rigorous research into his subject matter. Nevertheless, whether we agree or disagree with Schwartz's critique of *Land and Freedom*, the fact remains that the subject matter of the Spanish Civil War is so emotionally and politically charged that it draws any artist into difficult territory where the best intentions can lead to representations of cliché and nostalgia (from within Spain the novel *El nombre que ahora digo*, by Antonio Soler, albeit the 1999 Premio Primavera prize-winner, in my opinion, falls into this trap). I propose that such is not the case with the two films under discussion, and that Del Toro successfully activates the radical possibilities within the popular genres of the fairy tale and ghost story.

Del Toro has explained that *Espinazo* and *Laberinto* should be considered as companion pieces (*Espinazo* as brother to *Laberinto*'s sister) in their exploration of war and fascism through the eyes of children and through a lens that blends hyper-fantasy with hyper-reality. The specter of the Spanish Civil War made itself known to him while growing up in Mexico, one of the few countries that offered support to the Spanish Republic and her refugees. In an interview in Spain just after the release of *Laberinto*, Del Toro explained that he had met many exiled Republicans in Mexico and heard their stories. He lauded the exiled Spanish community as "gente que cambió el arte y la cultura del país" and he went on to explain how Spain's recent history

began to enter his conscience:

> Una de esas raras ocasiones en que empiezas a tomar conciencia de algo que en un libro de Historia no es más que una fecha. Descubrí que la escisión entre las dos Españas existía antes y después de la guerra. Y que era una característica fundamental del carácter español. Leí testimonios sobre padres fascistas y sus hijos republicanos, que se mataron entre sí en el campo de batalla. Llevarte bien con tu padre o con tu hermano es difícil en la vida real, […] [p]ero esto era exacerbarlo a todo un país, la más grande representación de los odios más íntimos como seres humanos. (Del Toro, 2006).

With *El espinazo* Del Toro creates a microcosm of the Civil War as a domestic trauma that rents asunder the most intimate structure of the family. Set in an orphanage in the middle of nowhere, most of the action and characters are situated within its walls, or just outside in the deserted and dry plains. This mise-en-scène evokes the characteristics of the Gothic genre but it also responds to the director's desire to represent the war as an intimate, family conflict. In spite of the best efforts of the benevolent adults who stand in for the boys' dead parents, who are fallen Republican heroes, the elderly and kind Professor Casares (Federico Luppi) and the co-director Carmen, (Marisa Paredes) cannot provide the refuge and care they hope to, as they are overpowered by the physical strength and malevolence of one of their own, the orphan Jacinto (Eduardo Noriega), now the school janitor. Jacinto's greed and cruelty in his relentless pursuit of the gold that Carmen has saved for the Republican cause, turn the orphanage into a site of monstrous violence and trauma. The powerlessness of these stand-in parents in the face of overwhelming force and violence is written symbolically on their bodies in the form of Casares' sexual impotence and Carmen's amputated leg. Although she obviously loves Casares, Carmen satisfies her desire with the virile but treacherous Jacinto, all the more painful for the impotent Professor Casares to bear.

As a story focused on boys, the film is marked from beginning to end by icons and symbols of masculinity: the father-figure of Professor Casares, a man of science who has in his study a collection of miscarried fetuses in jars; the unexploded bomb in the middle of the school yard, a huge phallic icon that forms part of the backdrop for many scenes, but like Casares, it too is impotent; the interaction of the boys themselves in their classrooms and in their dormitory; the constant menace of former student Jacinto; and finally the spectral presence of their dead schoolmate, Santi, (Junio Valverde) who haunts the orphanage and in particular the newest arrival, Carlos, (Fernando Tielve). Santi is known to the boys as "el que suspira" since his belabored breathing and sighing announce his presence. These representations reveal a masculinity that has become impotent, deformed, mutilated and monstrous. In her study of *Espinazo* Ann Davies considers virility as a symbol of national strength so that its dissolution into the monstrous and abject renders the masculine "unfixed, in inherent danger of collapsing in on itself" (135).

Espinazo is framed by the ghostly: at the beginning of the film the voice-over of Casares tells the viewers that a ghost is a tragic event condemned to repeat itself over and over. This accompanies a montage of images of the deformed fetuses preserved in jars of amber liquid that Casares keeps in his study, the liquid being sold in bottles to locals as a folk remedy for impotence. We also see in this initial montage images of the dead orphan, Santi, floating in the amber liquid of the cistern in the orphanage cellar, where he was drowned by Jacinto. We do not yet know, however, what these images signify. The film also closes with a similar voice-over and montage of images: Casares now, like Santi, is a ghost, having also been murdered by Jacinto. Casares repeats his

comments about what a ghost is and adds that it is like an insect caught in amber. This voice-over and the visual montage frame the entire film so that the story is presided over by this disturbing imagery of deformed embryos and the ghost of Santi floating inexplicably in an amber-hued water. Davies reads these suspended forms as regressive bodies signaling "a return of the regressed to challenge and ultimately destroy the male virility to which they also give rise"; she further contends that

> these degenerate bodies both make and unmake the man: while the villagers might believe that they restore virility, these bodies also signal the threat of male dissolution that goes beyond the more obvious but also the more localized threat of castration. (138)

I would add that the deformed, spina bifida fetuses and Santi's bleeding and decomposing ghost are the spectral embodiment of the unrealized dreams of the young Republic, a republic whose liberal citizens were themselves considered by Francoists as a deformation of the true Spain and who were left floating in a murky past to which they were prohibited access in a postwar culture of silence and anti-intellectual mythology. Jo Labanyi's work on the ghostly and her development of a theory of hauntology in Spanish culture, drawing from Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994), gives further context for the spectral in Del Toro's films under consideration here (Labanyi, 2002). In fact she argues that "the whole of modern Spanish culture--its study and its practice--can be read as one big ghost story" (1). Through the presentation of such abject images and the cruelty suffered by the young boys at the hands of Jacinto, Del Toro deconstructs the myth of the benevolent, all-embracing *madre patria* offered by Francoist historiography, instead revealing it as grotesque, brutal and monstrous.

It is telling that the new arrival to the orphanage, Carlos, sees the ghost of Santi immediately and in broad daylight, before he enters the building. Del Toro has expressed on many occasions that the ghosts and monsters that populate his imagination are very much part of his creative world and his understanding of reality (*Guillermo del Toro at home*, 6). He therefore wanted to portray the ghosts as part of the everyday and not just as creatures that loom up from the darkness. He contends that while others look to religion and the idea of God to make sense of and persevere through the pains of life, he relies on his vampires, ghosts and monsters (Guillermo del Toro: «Mi abuela»). We will see that he uses the same domestic presentation of the fantasy creatures in *Laberinto*.

Despite the hyper-violence and destruction of lives in *Espinazo*, there is also a glimmer of hope as the surviving orphans finally band together in order to resist and ultimately outwit Jacinto. In the classroom their teacher, Carmen, tells them of early men and how they hunted together in order to protect each other. Carlos listens attentively and, inspired, asks his older classmate, Jaime, (Iñigo Garces) if he would like to share his drawings with him. Since Carlos likes to write he suggests that they might make their own stories. The young writer and illustrator coming together presents a coping mechanism in the face of trauma, "an aid to healing" as Cheri Robinson has suggested, (*Children and Trauma*) but it also constitutes an important creative act in storytelling as crucial to a fuller understanding of history. At first the taciturn Jaime refuses, but after the increasingly violent attacks from Jacinto and the annihilation of all the adults in the orphanage, Jaime finally comes to understand that solidarity is the only option in facing oppression. Jaime, the former bully, joins Carlos and the younger boys to launch their final attack on Jacinto, luring him to the cellar pool where the ghost Santi awaits. Lacerated with scars and burns, and the youngest orphan, Buho, limping on his broken ankle, the boys finally leave the orphanage with Carlos and Jaime now enacting the parental roles.

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Julian Savage sheds light on Del Toro's genius in blending elements of the horror genre with the historical in order to produce a subtle and beautiful masterpiece. He argues that while most successful horror movies rely heavily for their overall impact on the cinematic aesthetics of spectacle and sound effects, only a few exceptions achieve excellence in narrative and cinematography, where the storytelling and language are as important as the visual and sound aesthetics. He makes the following observation about Del Toro's film-making with *Espinazo*:

> In provocatively going beyond mere narrative and genre via a suggestive mise-en-scène, it imbues every detail with residual nuances that relate to other cultural objects such as poetry, literature, painting, film and by implication and explication, historical and contemporaneous issues concerning memory, family, society and the political. (2)

The presence of these "residual nuances" and exploration of other socio-political issues activate the possibilities of the conventions of genre to make more visible and more readily accessible to a new global audience the issues Del Toro wishes to shed light on. This film aesthetic is also apparent in *El laberinto*, made five years after *Espinazo* and which reflects the changes that occurred in the five years between the setting of the two films, 1939 and 1944, but also between the making of the two films in 2001 and 2006. In his commentary on the DVD of *Laberinto*, and in numerous interviews, Del Toro explains how his world was turned upside down two days after the premier of *Espinazo* at the Toronto film festival on September 9, 2001. After September 11, 2001 he felt the need to address the new atmosphere of fear and paranoia that was taking hold, especially in the United States:

> Rodé *El espinazo del diablo* hace cinco años. Aquella película se ambientaba en 1939 y ésta en 1944. Me impresiona que en cinco años, tanto en la realidad como en la ficción de esas dos fábulas, el mundo ha cambiado totalmente. (Del Toro, 2006).

Del Toro continues that if *Espinazo* was a ghost story that illuminated the Civil War, *Laberinto* was a film that focused on choice and disobedience, and he adds that

> Estados Unidos es un gigantesco imán de polarización política. Vivimos en un mundo que se está dividiendo brutalmente, y que nos exige en cada país casi una obediencia civil a lo que es bueno y es malo. Esta película dice que la desobediencia es necesaria, porque conduce a la responsabilidad. (Del Toro, 2006).

Unlike *Espinazo* with its recurrent symbols of masculinity and virility, *Laberinto* is imbued with an imagery of the feminine, the uterine and the maternal. Whereas *Espinazo* unfolds within the aesthetics of the Gothic and ghost story genres, *Laberinto* blends elements of fantasy and fairy tale narratives with the historical reality of postwar Spain in 1944.

The young girl, Ofelia, (Ivana Baquero), travels with her mother, Carmen, (Ariadna Gil) to the barracks of her new step-father, El Capitán Vidal (Sergi López), a fanatical and sadistically cruel army officer of the Franco regime. At this moment the army is engaged in a mission to capture and wipe out the Maquis rebels who are hiding out in the surrounding forest. The film will tell the story of how Ofelia aligns herself with Mercedes, Vidal's housekeeper but also the sister and helper (or enlace) to one of the Maquis insurgents, and how she resists and escapes through the fantasy world, the horrors of the new order under fascism. The film begins at the end, with the death or birth of Ofelia, depending on how the viewer chooses to interpret the intersecting fairy tale and historical narratives. Del Toro's intention was

to make the film ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations, as that is, of course, the hallmark of any fantastic tale. Having said that, though, the viewer's interpretation will depend upon historical knowledge of the Spanish Civil War and its outcome. As the young girl lies dying, the blood flowing from her nose stops and flows back into her body signaling a reversal in the order of things, and her decision to re-cast her life.

Del Toro states in his commentary on the DVD of the film that once he had finally created this opening scene, he could visualize and fully understand what the film meant for him. He remarks that this framing device shapes the whole narrative to mean that it is not about a girl dying but rather giving birth to herself. (*Laberinto*, Director's commentary). Just as she makes difficult and brave choices throughout the story, so too does Ofelia decide at the end what she wants her life to be and to mean. The opening voice-over montage relates a fairy tale about a princess who was lost and had forgotten that she was a princess and had, in fact, been severed from her memories. In order to return to her kingdom, where her parents, the king and queen await, she will have to go through a series of trials and tests. And so the fairy tale on fascism begins as Ofelia, reborn, climbs up through the concentric circles of the labyrinth and commences her journey of resistance to the cruelties, oppression and hypocrisy of the dictatorial regime.

The rhythm of the interweaving fantasy and reality narratives is established from the outset as the insects and other creatures from the world of Ofelia's fairy tales make an early appearance, leading her into the subterranean world of fairies, fauns, toads and a faceless, child-eating monster. As with *Espinazo*, the fantastic and magical creatures are introduced right at the beginning of the film, in daylight, as part of the mundane and the everyday—another hallmark of Del Toro's approach to storytelling. Throughout the film, scenes and ambiances from the fairy tale alternate with the real world. Del Toro describes the symbolism and imagery as exaggerated as he is interested in being able to relate the story visually as well as verbally. The color palettes and geometries of both worlds are very different and help signpost for the viewer Ofelia's intersecting journey. The fantasy scenes are imbued with the greens and blues of the forest and the rich reddish/brown tones of the earth, which also invoke the womb. There is a profusion of circular and uterine-like imagery, from the faun's horns to the magic tree, the vaginal opening and passages to the underworld and the passage to the pale-man. Even the spaces that Ofelia occupies in the real world are defined by circular shapes and curves perhaps giving her imagination access to the fantasy world, such as the round windows in the bathroom where she goes to open and activate her magical book that the faun gave her. Juxtaposed to these shapes and the warm color palette are the straight lines and angles of the captain's world, where cold blues and steely grays predominate. One of the most violent scenes in the film in which Captain Vidal murders two innocent peasant hunters, comes early on and directly follows a scene from the fairy tale realm, a juxtaposition created by Del Toro in order to create maximum shock for the viewer, as it brings both the fantasy and reality sequences into sharper focus.

At first these two worlds run parallel to each other and Ofelia moves between both, but soon they start to intersect, with characters and creatures from the fairy tale interacting with and influencing elements from the real world. Del Toro suggests this inter-relation between the two worlds with the use of vertical and horizontal camera wipes. The first one of these occurs when Ofelia is lying in her mother's bed with her head upon her pregnant belly telling the baby in the womb one of her fairy tales. The camera moves vertically through the womb and down into the fantasy world of the tale in one single, uninterrupted shot, establishing from the outset the ease with which Ofelia moves

from the real to the fantastic, but also leaving no doubt that her forays into the fantastic are also a return to the maternal imaginary. The return to the maternal is of course impossible, nonetheless it constitutes an important, imagined journey that sustains Ofelia and helps her to bear the horrors of her reality. The second example shows a horizontal wipe and serves to create the impression that the world of the Maquis deep in the forest, while part of the real world, is in fact connected to the realm of the fantastic, and by extension the feminine. The lush green of the forest and the brown, earthy cave where the rebels live are visually reminiscent of the faun's labyrinth and the feminine space of the womb, but also symbolically the Maquis, like Ofelia in her fantasy world, and Mercedes as a marginalized woman, undermine the real world with their relentless attacks on the fascist machine.

In her insightful essay on the Maquis and their desertion by international forces, Mercedes Camino argues that films like *Laberinto* serve to recuperate the memory of some of the unsung heroes of the war and its aftermath. As we see in this film, the Maquis did in fact operate as insurgents in forest and mountainous regions of Spain, but they could do so only thanks to the collaboration and help given to them by friends and family members (enlaces), who very often were women. They gave this help at great risk to their own personal safety and were frequently tortured, raped, imprisoned or murdered for their efforts. In this particular narrative of the war and postwar periods, it is the feminine world and the role of women which is foregrounded. The Maquis, along with Ofelia and Mercedes, are associated with the feminine, a realm of bravery, disobedience and active resistance to the masculine world of obedience, oppression and cruelty embodied in Captain Vidal. As Camino points out, focusing on characters like Mercedes and Ofelia, Del Toro "pays homage to those who supported the guerrilla, making them active and integral parts of the fight itself" (49).

One interpretation of the film is to read the fantasy tale as Ofelia's creation in order to explain to herself the inexplicable cruelty and violence of the fascist regime. A sense of mystery prevails, however, as there are enough unexplained elements from the fantasy that encroach upon the real world as to leave us asking "what was real and what was fantasy", which is the desired effect created by any fantastic narrative. It is worth remembering that Del Toro has expressed on many occasions that it is not monsters and magic that frighten him, but reality. Along these lines Kim Edwards indicates,

> [as] in Wonderland, the creatures in *Pan's Labyrinth* function as distorted reflections of and satirical commentary on adults in the real world: Monstrous as the Pale Man is, his propensity for horrendous violence is limited by magical rules and literally pales next to the sadistic unchecked war and domestic crimes of the Captain. (144).

This point is brought into focus with the juxtaposition of two similar scenes of a banquet with a faceless monster at the head of the table—it is Captain Vidal, and not the Pale Man, who is the real monster and who causes real damage to those who dare to disobey him.

Similarly the faun, an ambiguous character throughout—is he good or evil?—can be understood as the representation of Captain Vidal in Ofelia's fantasy world. This becomes clear at the end of the film when Ofelia has escaped with her baby brother in her arms, and because she is in the imaginary realm, has successfully negotiated her way through the labyrinth. In the final moments of her escape, however, the faun faces her with a knife, asking her to sacrifice her brother in order to save herself. She refuses to do this and instantly we are returned to reality where it is Captain Vidal who now faces her, with a gun. He

snatches the baby from her and shoots her at point-blank range. As she lies dying we realize that we are back at the beginning of the film and that everything we have seen could have been a flashback or rather Ofelia's attempt in the last few seconds of her life to make sense of the violence and oppression that she witnessed. As an avid reader of fairy tales, Ofelia has interpreted many of the difficult experiences in the latter part of her life through the language, symbols and formulae of this genre, blending elements of fantasy with reality. As Savannah Blitch has argued, "Pan's Labyrinth becomes a film about a girl who amalgamates a new fairy tale out of those given to her; rather than conforming herself to their often strict rules, she creates her own narrative" (5).

Alternatively, Kim Edwards has read this final scene as a disappointing return to a traditionally passive role for the female protagonist:

> ...it is unsettling that such an active, rebellious and subversive heroine is finally reduced to a traditionally passive female role: like her Shakespearean namesake. Ofelia becomes the pawn, the sacrifice, the paraclete. (146).

While Ofelia does die at the end of the "real" narrative, we should not consider her as a meaningless pawn or sacrifice. Whether we read it as real or fantastic, Ofelia's journey was characterized by resistance, disobedience and choice, in direct confrontation to Captain Vidal's world of oppression, obedience and control, and it is these character traits that allow her, in her final moments, to re-cast and understand the importance of her short life. This young girl witnessed and experienced unspeakable trauma and violence, but she chose action over passivity. She knows what the consequences of her actions will be but she chooses to defy Captain Vidal and the oppressive power that he represents and she does so at every stage of her journey and trials. To seek meaning within the realm of her favorite fairy tales does not reduce her to a traditionally passive role, rather it empowers and inspires her to resist and persevere.

Despite the Republicans' call to action with "no pasarán", the reality is that the Nationalists prevailed and they did pass. The Republicans lost the war and suffered enormous hardship and oppression in the postwar period, but these films, and I would suggest a film like *Land and Freedom*, do not present a utopian, idealized version of the past, rather they ask us to consider the importance and legacy of those who resisted. As Savannah Blitch reminds us

> The fantastic thrives upon in-betweens and suspension of disbelief […] Del Toro's film is driven by the becoming of its two main characters, Ofelia and Mercedes, which means that what is of most interest to the story is that they end beyond where they began, not necessarily where that point specifically is. (Blitch).

For all its phantasmagorical elements, the film ends with the truth of historical reality: Ofelia, like so many of her countrymen and women, was murdered, but her understanding of her short life and her violent end was that bravery and resistance matter. Her life was defined by action, agency and disobedience so that she stands metaphorically for all those who were captured, tortured and murdered and whose family members continued to keep their memories alive in the postwar period, albeit in silence and behind closed doors. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the voices of second and third generation families of tortured and murdered Civil War Republicans began to clamor with ever more force and conviction that the past must be revisited and interpreted and that the disappeared must be unearthed, reclaimed and honored. Since the passing of the Ley de memoria histórica in 2007, the opening of mass graves and the identification and claiming of

victims has become a reality for many families.

Ofelia, the protagonist of *Laberinto*, and Carlos and Jaime, the protagonists of *Espinazo*, are associated throughout both films with the hermeneutical agency of history: reading, writing, drawing, and telling stories in defiance of a corrupt and oppressive power. As far as Del Toro is concerned, this reckoning with the past is necessary for the citizens of any society that will function as a democracy, but in the case of *Espinazo* and *Laberinto*, it is the children and the supposedly powerless housekeeper, Mercedes, who best exemplify the urgency of disobedience. Del Toro firmly believes that filmmakers and story tellers who create fantasy or magical worlds have an obligation to harness the radical potential of imagination and make their audiences think:

> Me encantaría haber reflejado en *El laberinto del fauno* el pacto de silencio que el mundo hizo para ignorar lo que pasaba en España. ¿Qué habría pasado si los aliados hubiesen parado a Franco? 1944 era un momento muy propicio para hablar de monstruos y de opciones. Y hoy los que vivimos un mundo imaginario tenemos la responsabilidad de mantener la imaginación y la libertad vivas. (Del Toro, 2006).

Despite the fact that Del Toro set out to make a ghost story about war and a fairy tale about fascism, his representation of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath through the eyes of children and from the perspective of those who operated and survived from the silence of the margins works against a nostalgic or flattened out portrayal of Spain and her opposing factions. On the contrary, as Paul Julian Smith has suggested, Del Toro "has been able to make use of an extraordinarily handsome mise-en-scène in such a way as to reinforce rather than reduce the horrors of history" (Smith). In Del Toro's Civil War films, Spain bears down as an incomprehensible, ghostly and monstrous *madre patria* presenting a counter-narrative both to the idealistic representation of Spain's Republicans as part of a "belle epoque" and to the nostalgic Francoist vision of the mother country as a unified, peaceful and all-embracing nation, a vision still held by present-day pro-Francoist sympathizers.

The paradox that exists within the dynamics of transnational film is that global audiences can access through the large screens of the cineplex or through the small screens of their devices the most banal, sensational or simply entertaining visual culture, but they can also view more complex, marginal or fractured representations of global culture. For today's generation, the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Francoist oppression, and for the integrity of history, one cannot overstate the importance of films, documentaries and stories which shed light on the lives and deaths of those who were relegated to silence for over forty years, whether in mass graves, behind walls in their own homes or surviving in the forests and mountains. Both *Espinazo del diablo* and *El laberinto del fauno* through a highly creative blending of the phantasmagorical with reality engage the audience in an ethics of commitment. They make important contributions to Spain's recent political and philosophical move to recuperate historical memory, and they pay special homage to the voices and actions of the most marginalized and silenced members of the struggle, voices which very much resonate today.

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Monstrous Desire in Samanta Schweblin's and Claudia Llosa's *Distancia de rescate*

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Abstract

Peruvian director Claudia Llosa's most recent feature is the Netflix-produced *Distancia de rescate* (2021), an adaptation of Argentine Samanta Schweblin's eponymous novel. Both the original text and the English-language translation by Megan McDowell, titled *Fever Dream*, were widely praised by readers from around the world. Since its publication in 2014, literary critics have written prolifically about the novel, hailing it as a psychological thriller that illustrates the ecological horrors of twenty-first-century climate change and its consequences for daily life. Yet there has been a remarkable lack of scholarly attention to the "mutual fascination" between the fictional Amanda and Carla, two young mothers who meet when Amanda arrives for a family holiday in the Argentine countryside (Schweblin 12). Informed by Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous-feminine, I argue that Llosa's distinctive directorial style, in conjunction with cinematography by Spaniard Óscar Faura, makes conspicuous what readers may have overlooked in Schweblin's novel. In the film, viewers cannot escape Carla's beauty nor can they deny Amanda's attraction to her. I invite readers and spectators alike to acknowledge the existence of Amanda's desire for Carla, and to consider how that desire relates to her own fate as well as that of her young daughter.

Key Words: Argentina, Samanta Schweblin, Claudia Llosa, homoerotic desire, monstrous-feminine

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Introduction to *Distancia de rescate*

Peruvian director Claudia Llosa's intimate filmmaking style centers the stories of compelling female protagonists in works like *Madeinusa* (2006), *La teta asustada* (2009), and *Aloft* (2014). Llosa's most recent feature is the Netflix-produced *Distancia de rescate* (2021), an adaptation of Argentine Samanta Schweblin's eponymous novel. Readers from around the world widely praised both the original text (2014) and the English-language translation by Megan McDowell, titled *Fever Dream* (2017). Since its first publication, literary critics have written prolifically about the novel, hailing it as a psychological thriller that illustrates the ecological horrors of twenty-first-century climate change and its consequences for daily life. What has not been sufficiently addressed is the presence of female desire in the novel. There has been a remarkable lack of scholarly attention to the "mutua fascinación" between the fictional Amanda and Carla, two young mothers who meet when Amanda arrives for a family holiday in the Argentine countryside (Schweblin 12). In this study, I argue that Llosa's distinctive directorial style, in conjunction with cinematography by Spaniard Óscar Faura, makes conspicuous what readers may have overlooked in Schweblin's novel. On screen, viewers cannot escape Carla's beauty nor can they deny Amanda's attraction to her (note: Carla becomes Carola in Llosa's adaptation[1]). I invite readers and spectators alike to acknowledge the existence of Amanda's desire for Carla/Carola and to consider how that desire relates to her own fate as well as that of her young daughter.

Barbara Creed's foundational work on the monstrous-feminine serves as the theoretical basis for my examination of the literary and cinematic versions of *Distancia de rescate*. Creed maintains that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (7). The mothers in this film are not presented as monstrous in the way the town's poisoned children are: they are healthy, intelligent, and physically attractive. They are, however, attributed with the horror that befalls their offspring, due to both their parental neglect and the fact that their "bodies represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality" (3). Creed's work serves as a vehicle for approaching Amanda (María Valverde) and Carola's (Dolores Fonzi's) homoerotic relationship, a relationship that, while undoubtedly present on the page, blossoms in Llosa's film adaptation.

I propose that what makes *Distancia de rescate* a horror film vis-à-vis Creed is the monstrous nature of Amanda and Carola's desire. Horror films have the potential to "separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. In this sense, signifying horror involves a representation of, and a reconciliation with, the maternal body" (Creed 14). Amanda and Carola's attraction to each other leads them to neglect their children, a horror that is not secondary to but rather on par with the ecological threat of agrotoxins poisoning their community. In both the novel and the film, the mothers' mutual desire threatens the stability of a symbolic order that demands they dedicate their full attention to protecting their children at all times; when they put their own impulses ahead of the maternal abnegation demanded of them, not only do their children suffer consequences, they too must be punished for their "attempt to escape from patriarchal domination" (Subero 113).

With respect to Schweblin's novel in particular, Paulina Palmer's concept of lesbian Gothic informs my interpretation of a text that has been read predominantly through the lens of ecocriticism as a sort of cautionary tale emblematic of twenty-first-century ecogothic fiction. Close examination of *Distancia de rescate* makes clear that the desire between the fictional Amanda and Carla, perhaps subtle at first, is

1. For the remainder of this study, I refer to Schweblin's character as Carla and to Llosa's as Carola. When not distinguishing between the two, I include both names, Carla/Carola.

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indeed present and sustained throughout.[2] I therefore approach the novel as a text that, like those Palmer analyzes, "recast[s] Gothic conventions in order to investigate the oppressed position of women who form primary relationships with members of their own sex and to represent the transgressive effects of lesbian desire" ("Genre" 128).

Existing Scholarship on *Distancia de rescate*

In Schweblin's novel, Spaniard Amanda, her husband, and daughter Nina rent a vacation house in the Argentine countryside, where mother and child spend their days outdoors while the father is working nearby. In this idyllic space, they meet Carla, ten years Amanda's senior but "tanto más hermosa" (15), and her husband Omar, a struggling horse breeder. The couple live on a neighboring farm with their nine-year-old son David, who as a toddler was contaminated by streamwater that also poisoned a prize stallion Omar was breeding on their land. After she realized David had been contaminated, Carla rushed her son to a local healer, known as "la mujer de la casa verde" (23), in hopes of preventing his death. In order to save the child, the healer performed a sort of transmigration in which she split David's spirit—and thereby the poison—into two bodies. The narrative takes shape via nonlinear conversations between Amanda and David, as Amanda lies dying in a hospital from exposure to the same agrotoxins that had infected the boy years earlier. Amanda, whose illness manifests as if worms have taken over her body, tries to identify for David "el punto exacto en el que nacen los gusanos" (11). The boy implores her to remember "las cosas importantes" (38), suggesting that what is really important is the exact moment at which Amanda was contaminated and interrupting her when she strays off-topic. Amanda's memories, however, repeatedly return to her fascination with Carla and her constant preoccupation with Nina's safety.

Academic scholarship on *Distancia de rescate* focuses primarily on the ecological horror of living in a modern-day rural Argentina ravaged by industrial agriculture. Thus, the novel has been ascribed to microgenres like "Anthropocene fiction" and "environmental gothic." In fact, Allison Eleanor Mackey calls it "a gothic, anti-pastoral example of what Gisela Heffes identifies as the 'rural turn' to non-urban spaces in Argentine novels of the second decade of the twenty-first century" (6). Various scholars grapple with the ever-present anxiety and uncertainty that arise when exposure to toxins is commonplace and disaster is imminent (see, for example, Mutis, McConnell, and Salva), as well as posthumanism and the Anthropocene more broadly (Ferebee, Mackey), and the narrative aspects and strategies that distinguish Schweblin's treatment of these themes (De Leone, Heffes, Pindel, Oreja Garralda). In particular, analysis often centers on the anxious mothers and monstrous children that inhabit this toxic space (Cárdenas Sánchez and Parra Londoño, Sánchez, Forttes, González Dinamarca), without exploring the homoerotic subtext that links the two.[3] Reviews by literary critics in some of the world's most acclaimed publications similarly approach the novel, praising the treatment of the ecological components and familial entanglements of *Distancia de rescate* without addressing the desire between Amanda and Carla. Ellie Robins of the *LA Times*, for example, calls the novel "destabilizing," "a deeply Argentine work," "a novel about childless parents and parentless children, about split identities and living on land you can't trust" (Robins). Carlos Pardo of *El País* calls the text an "inteligente variación del tópico del 'monstruo exterior igual a monstruo interior'" but refers to only "dos posibles lecturas de su novela" (Pardo). And while Jia Tolentino in *The New Yorker* mentions that "a low, sick thrill took hold of me as I read it," she too avoids the visceral desire between the two female protagonists to hail Schweblin's narrative as "so enigmatic and so disciplined that the book feels as if it belongs to a new literary genre altogether" (Tolentino).

2. The lack of critical commentary on Amanda and Carla's mutual attraction itself warrants further scrutiny. See Palmer's work, which builds on the original scholarship of Terry Castle, on lesbian desire as culturally invisible.

3. This is in no way meant to be an exhaustive list of the scholarship on *Distancia de rescate*.

Elsa Drucaroff's brief reflection on *Distancia de rescate* is one of the few to address the subversive nature of the attraction between Amanda and Carla in Schweblin's novel. Drucaroff points out that, just moments before Amanda and Nina are contaminated by the agrotoxins, Amanda actually voiced her maternal desire: a desire not to be a mother nor desire to love or protect her child. On the contrary, "el deseo de la madre es deseo de persona [...] Amanda ama a su hija pero también desea – casi imperceptiblemente – a otra mujer. Su mirada/voz narra a Carla con un erotismo intenso, velado y sutil" (5). Drucaroff proceeds to cite the passage in which Amanda visits Carla at Sotomayor's farm and, as she watches the soy plants around them, she imagines not leaving Carla but rather running off on a beach vacation with her:

> —Carla —digo.
>
> La soja se inclina ahora hacia nosotras. Imagino que dentro de unos minutos me alejaré [...]. Dejaré el pueblo y año tras año elegiré otro tipo de vacaciones, vacaciones en el mar y muy lejos de este recuerdo. Y ella vendría conmigo, eso creo, que Carla vendría si yo se lo propusiera, sin más que sus carpetas y lo que lleva puesto. Cerca de mi casa compraríamos otra bikini dorada [...]. (Schweblin 84, quoted in Drucaroff 5)

For Drucaroff, this maternal desire is the most radical aspect of the novel, the transgression that merits punishment due to its scandalous violation of phallogocentrism and patriarchal culture (5-6). Meanwhile, the most egregious transgression of a phallogocentric society, she suggests, is its refusal to care for the planet, a sort of "repetición ciega de lo que hace con sus madres, su negado origen, su primer hogar" (6).

Atilio R. Rubino and Silvina Sánchez expand on Drucaroff's argument in their comparative analysis of *Distancia de rescate* and Schweblin's 2012 short story "Conservas." While they acknowledge the interpretation of the novel as an eco-dystopian narrative, they employ a "sex-dissident perspective" to promote a more nuanced reading: "the non-heteronormative desire among the protagonists as an escape from the imperatives of motherhood and care, which becomes fantastic from the heteropatriarchal perspective" (108). Informed by the work of Sarah Ahmed and Lee Edelman, Rubino and Sánchez emphasize that the lack of heterosexual reproduction in Scheweblin's texts threatens the heteronormative concept of the "happy family" and the promise of reproductive futurism (109-110). Using examples of the gold bikini as the locus of Amanda's desire for Carla, they show that Amanda's "dissident sexual desire" leads her to neglect the *distancia de rescate* and the "natural" bond between mother and child (122). She fails to sacrifice herself completely for her daughter's needs, pursuing pleasure and meaning through her developing relationship with Carla, which Rubino and Sánchez describe as "un pecado que debe ser castigado" (123). They also point out that what allows Amanda and Carla's lesbian attraction to flourish is the absence of their husbands, which converts their situation into a sort of utopia when considered from a sex-dissident perspective (123).

In what follows, I highlight various ways in which Amanda and Carla/Carola's mutual attraction is represented on the page and on screen. Moreover, I build on Drucaroff's and Rubino and Sánchez's analyses to propose that Amanda's lesbian desire is precisely what causes her daughter's monstrosity. Although Amanda did not give birth to a monstrous child, her desire for Carla/Carola prompts her to neglect Nina, which leads to the girl's contamination, which in turn results in her monstrosity. The desire to form a makeshift family amongst themselves—that is, a family that disrupts the patriarchal order in its violation of reproductive futurism (Rubino and Sánchez 123)—results in

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a dystopian nightmare in which, I argue, maternal failure gives rise to monstrous children and ecological disaster.[4]

***Distancia de rescate*: On the Page and On Screen**

Schweblin has called *Distancia de rescate* a novel written in extreme close-up: "desde la primera, primerísima persona, de punta a punta… Pasa en la cabeza de una mujer" (quoted in Benavides). Claudia Llosa, then, is the perfect auteur to tell this story on screen. Her aesthetic draws heavily on close-range cinematography to capture emotion, as well as long shots that engender a distinct sense of place for her predominantly female characters. In fact, her major works—*Madeinusa*, *La teta asustada*, *Aloft*, and the short film *Loxoro* (2011)—all feature complicated mother-child relationships, as does *Distancia de rescate*. Moreover, Llosa began to center openly LGBTQ characters in her Teddy Award-winning *Loxoro*, which depicts the bond between a travesti mother and daughter and transgender kinship in Lima, Peru (see Cornejo). Although Schweblin had received various offers to adapt her novel, Llosa was the filmmaker to convince her that they should tell the story together (*CultoLT*). In an interview with *La tercera*, Schweblin affirmed that "La mirada de un director siempre es una relectura del libro," and she discussed the precision with which she and Llosa approached the film:

> Con Claudia lo pensábamos todo, hasta el vaso que se veía en el fondo de la cocina de Amanda. Todo estaba tan pensado, que llegar al set y ver la casa de Amanda es brutal. Es muy fuerte. Está aquí. Es real y ya no es mío. Es algo que ahora les pertenece a todos. (*CultoLT*)

What results is an on-screen adaptation that not only demonstrates the depth of collaboration between novelist and director, but also evinces the unique contributions of Schweblin's and Llosa's individual styles.

Throughout the film, Llosa illuminates the relationship between Amanda (María Valverde) and Carola (Dolores Fonzi) via frequent close-ups and detail shots of the two women. This meticulously shot portrayal keeps viewers' attention on the protagonists, rather than what is going on around them. In fact, there is little screen time devoted to their children, Amanda's daughter Nina (Guillermina Sorribes Liotta) and Carola's son David (Emilio Vodanovich), and almost none to their husbands. By staying hyperfocused on Amanda and Carola, Llosa enables viewers to immerse themselves in the budding relationship between the two, as well as their experience attempting to raise children in an environment that is ever more isolating and threatening to their survival.

Just as literary scholars have primarily neglected to examine the same-sex desire in the novel, there is a noticeable dearth of analysis of Amanda and Carola's attraction in Llosa's adaptation. One critic calls the film "una película conjugada en femenino, con dirección, guion e interpretación hecha por mujeres," without mentioning the desire between the female characters (Rubio Pobes 116). Another alludes to their sexual chemistry without engaging in further analysis: "Casi desde el inicio, se observa una atracción mutua entre ambas jóvenes madres, Amanda y Carola, que se mantiene pese a sus distintos enfoques de vida y sobre la maternidad" (Beteta). Yet the film's tagline itself hints at Amanda's obsession with Carola, even before the action begins. The movie poster features a close-up of Amanda's face in profile as she lies dying, and the tagline that appears below—"Hay que estar atento," or "Pay attention" in English-language promotional materials—employs a tone that is both warning and scolding. The film's tagline thus presages Amanda's wandering focus, alerting viewers to her lack of regard for "what really matters:" her motherly duties.

4. I support Rubino and Sánchez's (among others') assertion that the moment of "fracaso materno" is when Amanda cannot/does not save Nina from contamination by agrotoxins (120).

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Llosa introduces both Amanda and Carola in the form of detail shots. We first see Amanda's ear, then her mouth with lips and teeth in profile in a somewhat sensual image, followed by an extreme close-up of her eye with a single tear. We first see Carola's bare feet walking across a yard, then a glance of her shins fluttering in a swimming pool, followed by a shot of her hair and shoulders, then her thighs, all before she turns her head and we finally see her face in profile [00:02:00].[5] In Schweblin's novel, Amanda recalls this afternoon together: "[Carla] Se cuelga la cartera al hombro y se aleja en su bikini dorada hasta el coche. Hay algo de mutua fascinación entre nosotras, y en contraste, breves lapsos de repulsión, puedo sentirlos en situaciones muy precisas" (12). Llosa transforms this encounter on screen, thanks in large part to the embodiment of Carola as a blond bombshell who is at once relatable and inscrutable. In the words of musician and director Fito Paez, "Es muy difícil no enamorarse de Dolores Fonzi. ¿Cómo hacés? Hombre, mujer, travesti, planta, lo que coño seas. Te enamorás, punto" (Larrea and Balmaceda). Fonzi's Carola stuns the viewer; she is magnificent, and she elicits desire that we not only see but also hear through Amanda's breathy voice. If there were any uncertainty, the camera cuts to a close-up of Amanda's eyes as she intently watches Carola [00:02:09]. The scene ends with Amanda turning to check on Nina in what I interpret as a premonition that her attraction to Carola could threaten her daughter's safety by distracting her and physically distancing herself from her child.

Despite its early position in the novel and the film, this is not the first encounter, chronologically speaking, between the two mothers. Amanda, in response to David's insistent questioning, recalls the first time she saw Carla: "Me gustó [Carla] desde el principio, desde el día en que la vi cargando los dos grandes baldes de plástico bajo el sol, con su gran rodete pelirrojo y su jardinero de jean" (14). Towards the end of the novel, Amanda again remembers the first time she saw Carla:

> Era alta y delgada, y aunque cargaba con el peso de un balde a cada lado, ahora aparentemente llenos, avanzaba erguida y elegante. Sus sandalias doradas dibujaron una línea caprichosamente recta, como si estuviera ensayando algún tipo de paso o de movimiento. (100)

Llosa's on-screen interpretation of the women's initial meeting veers somewhat from the original text. Although the director respects the essence of Amanda's memory, she chooses to depict Carola as a short woman (at 5'2" Fonzi is several inches shorter than Valverde) with luscious blond curls in a close-fitting denim sundress, and she adds Amanda's comment that Carola is like a vision ("es como una aparición," [00:07:03]). Llosa's Carola does not replicate Schweblin's Carla, with "sus blusas coloridas y su gran rodete en la cabeza" (29), but she does wear gold sandals and large gold jewelry to reflect the sophistication Amanda mentions in the text, a quality that makes Carla/Carola "tan simpática, distinta y ajena a todo lo que la rodeaba" (29).

Throughout the movie, the camera discloses a number of private moments between the two women, which permit the viewer to vicariously gaze upon Carola's face, body, and belongings from Amanda's point of view. In an early scene in Amanda's car, we see Carola's elegant arms and red nails waving outside the window, as we hear Amanda in voiceover: "Me acuerdo del movimiento de su mano en el auto. Sus brazos, el ruido de sus pulseras. El perfume de su protector solar cuando se mueve en el asiento" [00:08:30]. Later in the film, Llosa's attention to detail exposes the viewer to Amanda carefully examining the objects in Carola's purse and applying her lipstick, pausing on a sensuous extreme close-up of her mouth. Another example appears after Amanda becomes infected by agrotoxins, when

5. Timestamps are given in hours, minutes, and seconds for the approximate time the relevant quotation, conversation, or scene begins on the original film version, available via Netflix's streaming platform.

Carola takes her to rest at the farmhouse she shares with David and Omar (Germán Palacios). As she lies in Carola's bed, Amanda caresses the older woman's bracelets on the bedside table. While the fragmentation caused by detail shots can be employed to objectify the female body, I argue that Llosa's close-range shots emphasize Amanda's agency and humanize her fascination with Carola. Intimate camerawork also captures Amanda's desire in a scene in which the women take their children to play at the river. Here, the detail shots do not disempower Carola, rather they communicate her ability to command Amanda's attention. The camera tilts up the length of Carola's body, ending in a low-angle shot that clearly illustrates her psychological power over Amanda. Throughout Schweblin's novel, Amanda's desire is evident in her descriptions of Carla's appearance, her scent, the movement of her hands, but the sensual nature of her memories is even more vivid on screen thanks to Llosa's painstaking direction and Faura's photography.

In the novel, we begin to suspect that Amanda's attraction to Carla might become destructive the first time she abandons her commitment to the *distancia de rescate* that she usually maintained between herself and her daughter. Amanda explains: "Lo llamo 'distancia de rescate', así llamo a esa distancia variable que me separa de mi hija y me paso la mitad del día calculándola, aunque siempre arriesgo más de lo que debería" (22). Her neglect of the rescue distance follows Carla's account of rushing David to the green house, the home of a local spiritual healer, after the boy was contaminated. Carla described the emergency intervention to Amanda as follows: "La trasmigración se llevaría el espíritu de David a un cuerpo sano, pero traería también un espíritu desconocido al cuerpo enfermo. Algo de cada uno quedaría en el otro" (28). Even though Amanda considers Carla's beliefs to be "una gran barbaridad" (28), she fixates on her friend's tale and convinces herself that she must find the green house in order to "medir el peligro" and calculate the rescue distance needed to keep Nina safe (44). Amanda thus abandons her sleeping daughter to go in search of the building and, when she returns from her walk, an anxious Carla is waiting, fearful that David is alone in the summer house with Nina. Realizing the possible consequences of her actions on her daughter, Amanda has "una espantosa sensación de fatalidad" and tells herself "Tengo que alejarme de esta mujer" (47, 48). Once they discover that Nina is safe, Amanda shouts at Carla, "estás completamente loca" (50), failing to acknowledge that she herself had bought into Carla's "locura" (50) by wandering in search of the green house.

While the novel hints at the danger inherent in Amanda's fascination with Carla, in the film adaptation, Llosa more explicitly links Amanda's negligence to her desire to be with the older woman. Amanda leaves Nina alone with a caregiver for the first time, so that she and Carola can take a day trip without their children. Again, we glimpse Carola's glorious hair, her hands out the window, and the women's physical proximity in the front seat as Amanda teaches her friend to drive. Amanda hits her head when Carola slams on the brakes, and when Carola reaches over to check on Amanda, the gesture results in another charged moment between the two [00:51:39]. After they get out of the car, the camera lingers on a wistful Amanda as we hear Carola's voice say, "si hubieras llegado antes a mi vida" [00:52:27]. Like the flash of genuine concern on Carola's face when her friend hit her head, here we see that Carola too is drawn to Amanda. Amanda is shot with a shallow depth of focus, in natural lighting and with the wind in her hair, and we begin to understand that the attraction is indeed mutual. They spend the rest of the day swimming and sunbathing, lounging in their underwear on the bank of the river, and the cinematography makes it difficult to dismiss their mutual affection for one another. María Mutis contends that the novel's idyllic setting "inverts the traditional association of the countryside retreat as a space of leisure and recreation to one of oppression and mortality" (42), and while I

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certainly agree with this assertion, it is worth noting that that Llosa manages to create a cinematic space imbued with vitality and desire, despite the dangers lurking in the rural landscape.

A second indication that Amanda's attraction is perilous resides in her insistence on saying goodbye to Carla/Carola before leaving town with Nina. In the novel, Amanda decides she doesn't want to be at the vacation house anymore, because the rescue distance "está ahora tan tensa que no creo que pueda separarme más de unos pocos metros de mi hija. La casa, los alrededores, todo el pueblo me parece un sitio inseguro y no hay ninguna razón para correr riesgos" (53). She does take a risk, though, and heads towards the Sotomayor farm where Carla works. There, Amanda and Nina sit outside in the grass waiting for Carla to appear. This is "the moment" that David warned us about and, paradoxically, it transpires when Amanda is in Nina's immediate vicinity. Mother and daughter both realize that their clothes and bodies are soaked, but Amanda insists that it is dew that will dry as they walk with Carla to her husband's nearby stables (64). Amanda remembers this walk as "un momento casi perfecto" (67), and begins to doubt her decision to leave. Nina runs off to explore the property, and Amanda's thoughts are again interrupted by the image of Carla in her bikini: "Dónde están sus breteles dorados, pienso. Carla es linda. Tu mamá, es muy linda, y hay algo en el recuerdo de esos breteles que me enternece" (69). While Amanda and Carla are deep in conversation, Nina is playing near a well and attempts to catch her mother's attention, but Amanda focuses solely on Carla. Later, Amanda will admit to David that she feels the rescue distance contract as she realizes that Nina does not trust Carla (85), likely as a result of Amanda ignoring her daughter's complaints that her hands were burning after playing at the well.

In the film adaptation of Amanda's departure, and in turn "the moment," she divulges to David that she needs to apologize for having yelled at Carola the day before. As Amanda drives to the office at Sotomayor's farm, the camera pans across workers spraying pesticides in the soybean fields. Amanda and Nina sit in the grass outside the building, waiting for Carola to come out, when Nina notices that her dress is wet. Amanda dismisses the child's concern, saying "Es rocío, mi amor" [01:06:20]. As Nina gets up and runs from view, Amanda's voiceover informs us that "Nunca la había visto [a Carola] con su uniforme. Me distrae por un momento" [01:06:40]. Just like in the novel, Amanda is watching Carola, not watching her daughter. While Amanda tells Carola that they are leaving for Spain and asks for forgiveness, a backlit long-shot distracts our focus from the industrial space and highlights the beauty and tenderness of this exchange. In the novel, what follows is the friends' conversation as they walk to the stables. Llosa, however, adapts the subsequent sequence into a sort of breakup scene. The women's facial expressions, body language, and positioning in a field drenched in toxic chemicals hint at the finality of their time together. Their conversation resembles a lovers' quarrel more than a poignant conversation between friends. Carola admits: "Hace tiempo que no pienso en lo que quiero. Que solo pienso en lo que hubiera querido [...] ¿Vos pensás que no fantaseo con irme? ¿Con empezar otra vida? ¿Con tener a alguien que cuidar y que se deje?" In response to Amanda's retort, "¿Y eso qué tiene que ver?", Carola says defeatedly, "Que no vas a volver, Amanda" [01:08:16].

In Schweblin's novel, Amanda returns time and again to Carla's sensuality: her arms, her legs, her hair, her movements, the way she smells, the sound of her clinking bracelets. Although she is in an altered state, Amanda's obsession with Carla is evident in both the quantity and quality of the memories she shares with David.[6] Yet there is also textual evidence—albeit narrated from Amanda's perspective—of Carla's reciprocated attraction. For example, in one of Amanda's many

6. Other noteworthy examples include: "Está descalza y con su bikini dorada [...] siempre me acuerdo de Carla descalza" (90); "Tu madre se desarma el rodete del pelo, usa las manos como dos grandes peinetas, los dedos finos abiertos y estirados [...] Se airea el pelo con un gesto distraído" (95); "Se siente en la cama, muy cerca. Otra vez el perfume dulce del protector solar [...] Y el ruido de sus pulseras" (111).

references to her friend's gold bikini, she adds: "cuando se mueve en el asiento el perfume de su protector solar también se mueve en el coche. Ahora me doy cuenta, ella hace el gesto adrede, es ella la que deja caer el bretel" (77-78). Near the end of the novel, Carla's attentive treatment of Amanda suggests that her feelings are indeed requited. As soon as she finds out Amanda was taken to the emergency clinic, Carla rushes to visit (109-110), and when Amanda asks her friend to call her husband, Carla responds with urgency: "Carla prácticamente corre hacia mí. Me agarra las manos, me pregunta cómo estoy" (110). When it becomes clear that Amanda will not recover, Carla performs a final act of love by trying to save Nina through a transmigration, as she once had done for her own child.

In Llosa's adaptation, the camerawork animates the images that Amanda repeatedly recounts in her dialogue with David, and for much of the film, the young mother's desire for her new friend is palpable. The camera primarily portrays Carola from Amanda's point of view, emphasizing Carola's physical beauty as well as her magnetism. Yet just as we see glimpses of Carla's feelings for Amanda in Schweblin's narrative, we also witness Carola's affection for Amanda in Llosa's film. In a previously mentioned scene, for example, Carola shows concern when Amanda hits her head, and reveals her wish that Amanda had come into her life sooner. Further evidence of Carola's devotion to Amanda appears towards the end of the film, beginning with the aforementioned breakup conversation. We hear the dejection in Carola's voice as she discusses Amanda's departure. Then, once Amanda has been infected and starts to show signs of illness, Carola again attempts to comfort her via a physically intimate gesture. We learn through Amanda's voiceover that "[Carola] Me acomoda el pelo y sus dedos están helados. Pero es un placer" [01:11:30]. Shortly thereafter, Carola takes Amanda and Nina into her own home to care for them as they grow weaker and, once Carola realizes that mother and daughter both have been poisoned, she makes a final grand gesture of trying to save Nina by rushing her to the green house, heeding Amanda's earlier plea that "No dejes sola a Nina" [01:10:27].

Monstrous Desire in *Distancia de rescate*

Numerous scholars have expounded upon the gothic elements, both stylistic and thematic, of Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (e.g. Mutis, Forttes, Mackey, etc.). Mutis, for one, classifies the short novel more specifically as environmental gothic, due in part to the fact that it "calls on the maternal instinct and the protector function of the mother to give us the drama of environmental destruction within a maternal discourse" (43). For Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz, the novel is a quintessential example of contemporary Latin American Gothic that "tackles issues of environmental degradation using an intensely claustrophobic mode of narration which reproduces gothic tropes such as the anxieties of motherhood, fear of death, the possibility of life after it, and the interconnection of present and past" (44).

I propose, however, a re-reading of *Distancia de rescate* that extends beyond previous discussions of gothic horror to examine the novel through the lens of Paulina Palmer's concept of lesbian Gothic. In her pivotal text *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999), Palmer draws on work of theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler to approach lesbian subjectivity and the abject in late-twentieth-century novels that she ascribes to this new sub-genre. Palmer claims that one of the defining features of these narratives—"including ghost stories, vampire narratives, Gothic thrillers, and texts centering on the witch"—is their utilization of gothic motifs to explore lesbian subjectivity and experience ("Genre" 118). These motifs are certainly pertinent to an analysis of a novel that includes the transmigration of children's souls and a local (witch) healer who inhabits a mysterious green house, as is Palmer's discussion of the concept of excess as "a point of connection

between the two terms [Gothic and lesbian]" ("Genre" 118). I maintain, then, that the gothic provides a means for Schweblin to tackle not only ecological fears about environmental catastrophe and societal panic around maternal neglect, but also the monstrosity of female desire and excess that supposedly threatens the heteropatriarchy.

In addition to proposing a reading of Schweblin's novel as an example of lesbian gothic, I recommend a screening of Llosa's *Distancia de rescate* through the lens of Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine. According to Creed, the horror film relies heavily on the trope of the maternal figure as abject, one who transgresses boundaries and threatens the stability of the symbolic order (11, 49). The horror film "attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human" (14). Rife with the psychological terror of being unable to protect one's child from the hidden dangers of modern life, *Distancia de rescate* is indeed a horror film. Creed's work enables another understanding of the film's horror as well, one that lies not in the monstrous children deformed by agrotoxins but in the monstrous desire between two women who are drawn to each other emotionally and physically. Amanda and Carola align with Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine because their relationship emerges at the border "which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (49).

For Creed, the concept of the monstrous-feminine "as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (2) and "emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (3). The "problem" of Amanda and Carola's difference is two-fold: it is simultaneously excessive and ambiguous. Their desire for one another "functions as excess in within the heterosexual economy" (Zimmerman 4), and it transgresses boundaries, both of their marriages and of a society that expects them to be singularly focused on protecting their children. Moreover, their mutual attraction leads to a relationship that is ambiguous and therefore abject and monstrous. For Kristeva, the abject lies in "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (3). If ambiguity makes women truly horrifying, then Amanda and Carola's ambiguity is especially monstrous: Are they hetero- or homosexual? Are they in committed marriages or plotting an affair? Are they watching their children or are they watching each other? Are they protectors or destroyers of the young lives they have created?

Amanda and Carla/Carola embody monstrosity differently than the poisoned and disfigured children of the town do. As Kelly Oliver has noted, "a beautiful woman or adorable child can be more terrifying, particularly in a pedestrian way, than a hideous monster because they are seemingly innocent and attractive; and they are more dangerous because they can pass themselves off as good when they are really evil" (125-126). Carola is especially dangerous, not only because of her beauty but also because she works at Sotomayor's farm and is therefore in close contact with the chemicals poisoning their children.

In similar fashion to Schweblin's novel, Llosa's film adaptation portrays an Amanda distracted by Carola's beauty, watching her friend instead of watching her daughter; in this way, the camera reflects Amanda's textual confession to David that "si yo realmente no me dejara engañar por los miedos de tu madre, nada de esto estaría pasando" (58). For much of the film, the cinematography captures Amanda's point of view as she longingly gazes upon various parts of Carola's body, but there are some scenes in which Carola is not sexualized. Most of these occur when Amanda is not looking at her, such as the sequences in which

Carola has flashbacks of caring for David in the days before he became infected, and later taking him to the healer at the green house. In fact, in the series of shots at the green house, Carola looks terrible: her clothes are soiled from carrying David through the woods, and her swollen eyes and disheveled hair reflect her exhaustion. Neither is she sexualized in the scenes between her and her husband. Carola is still attractive, yet she is not warmly lit, suggestively dressed, nor physically alluring as she is in the camerawork that represents Amanda's way of viewing her. In other words, Llosa's cinematic depiction of Amanda's gaze makes clear that she is "an abject creature not far removed from the animal world and one dominated totally by her feelings and reproductive functions" (Creed 47).

Left unattended by their husbands, Amanda and Carola not only seek pleasure in each other's company but also in the formation of their own sort of family unit that comprises the two of them and their children (Rubino and Sánchez 123). In this way, their same-sex desire is inextricable from motherhood, and they thus embody Creed's figure of the archaic mother: "She is the mother who conceives all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation. She is outside morality and the law" (Creed 27). In both the novel and the film, Carla/Carola controls the future of the children and functions as a "primeval mother [who] does not need the male as a 'father'" (28). She does not need Omar to save her son: she takes David's life—and later, Nina's—into her own hands, resorting to transmigration in order to preserve some semblance of the child(ren) she knew. In breaking from her traditional role as dependent on her husband, Carla/Carola manages to ensure "the continuation of the species" and therefore threaten "a patriarchal order that can never confine such power" (Oliver 125).

In the novel, Amanda reflects on her possible culpability in Nina's fate when she wonders, "¿Es porque hice algo mal? ¿Fui una mala madre? ¿Es algo que yo provoqué?" (116). Amanda perceives the threat to Nina too late to prevent harm, and she never fully admits her willingness to break the rescue distance when Carla is around nor accepts that her attraction to Carla is to blame. In choosing to disregard the rescue distance, Amanda precipitates her and her daughter's contamination by agrotoxins, which ultimately leads to her own death and Nina's partial displacement into someone else's body. While neither Amanda nor Carla may have given birth to monstrous children, their refusal to ignore their attraction to each other is directly linked to their children becoming monstrous.

Due to their mothers' supposed carelessness, Nina and David both are left motherless and both end up as "figures of abjection" like those that recur in horror films; the children are monstrous hybrid creatures like vampires or zombies (Creed 47-48), when they should be the picture of health and vitality. At least half of David's soul and half of Nina's has been transported to another body, a body that likely also shows physical symptoms of their poisoning. As monstrous children, they embody societal fear of the destruction of the traditional family (González Dinamarca 92). In horror films, a mother who cannot produce a healthy, "normal" child is terrifying, as is a mother who cannot protect her offspring. Yet it is an entirely different type of horror when a mother's excessive desire leads to her inability to fulfill the role of traditional, self-sacrificing parent. In both the literary and cinematic versions of *Distancia de rescate*, the mothers' lascivious behavior does not culminate in physical intimacy. Nonetheless, their desire is toxic, and much like the chemicals poisoning their natural resources, it "seep[s] and spread[s], transgressing boundaries and barriers we believe will keep them contained" (McConnell 13). In the process, it threatens the current safety of their own children, as well as the future well-being of rural Argentine families like their own.

For Catalina Alejandra Forttes, the most unsettling aspect of the novel is the inability of the mother to protect "la nueva vida" from the toxicity of soy monoculture that pervades the Argentine countryside (147, 149). She claims that "La madre, en esta novela, encarna el miedo ancestral de no ser capaz de ver, oler, sentir o intuir los peligros que acechan a la descendencia" (149), and while I do not reject this claim, I propose that the real danger is the mothers' monstrous relationship. Their intimacy is at once excessive (with respect to desire), insufficient (in terms of protection), and ambiguous (crossing gender boundaries and roles). Amanda and Carla/Carola break "established mariana codes" and therefore must be destroyed (Subero 113). At the end of the novel and the film, Amanda dies and Carla/Carola abandons her family in search of a new life elsewhere. The film thus exemplifies Gustavo Subero's assertion about a specific type of Latin American horror cinema: "By killing women whose behaviour has clearly challenged the basis of normativity, the films seem to reify the notion that traditional paradigms of female sexuality cannot be questioned or altered by female subjects unless they are willing to pay (with their own lives) for attempting to undermine patriarchal authority" (113).

In the last line of the novel, Amanda says of her husband: "No ve lo importante: el hilo finalmente suelto, como una mecha encendida en algún lugar; la plaga inmóvil a punto de irritarse" (124). She fails to add that the rope is slack precisely because she allowed herself to become distracted by Carla. Amanda's last words of the film, however, suggest that she has begun to understand the connection between her behavior and the destruction that followed:

> El hilo tira demasiado. ¿Es Nina? ¿Tira del hilo para encontrarme? Es como si me atara el estómago desde afuera. Lo aprieta. Lo parte. ¿Es porque no vi el peligro? La distancia de rescate. ¿Es eso lo que querías que viera? … El hilo. [01:21:05]

Conclusion

Throughout the novel and the film, David pushes Amanda to remember what is "important," and a close reading of both texts substantiates that Amanda's priorities are two-fold: fear for Nina's safety and her attraction to Carla/Carola. These are two concerns, not one. David repeatedly rejects Amanda's memories of Carla as not being "lo importante" (89) and minimizes Amanda's longing to be near her. Previous studies of Schweblin's novel address the invisible threats of toxic chemicals but, like David, ignore that the other invisible threat to Nina's safety is indeed Amanda's desire for Carla. The homoerotic subtext suggests that the mothers' environment is not just unsustainable ecologically, it is also unsustainable personally because they cannot exist as fully realized individuals. The patriarchal familial structure that surrounds Amanda and Carla is oppressive, and a society that imposes unrealistic expectations for motherhood prevents these women from fulfilling their own desires and traps them in a cycle of frustration, fear, and impotence. So while literary critics concur that the novel's horror lies in environmental threats and the mother's inability to protect her child, I propose that horror is also found in this monstrous "fascination" between two mothers. The result is the same, regardless of how or why the mothers can't save their children: both women abandon their children in the end, Amanda through her passing and Carla through fleeing from her husband and son.

In the surreal ending of both texts, Amanda and Carla/Carola are figuratively united as mothers. The woman from the green house "saves" Nina by migrating part of her spirit into David's already divided, already monstrous body. Through their transmigration, boundary-crossing David and Nina are both figures of abjection, as is Carla/Carola, who is now a mother to both of the children who have merged inside

the boy's small frame. Pieces of Amanda and Carla/Carola have intermixed in one body, yet it is a body that Carla/Carola cannot tolerate and therefore abandons, presumably to return to the capital city. The monstrous-feminine has been "repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order" (Creed 70), and the bodies and divided spirits of the children are left for their seemingly oblivious fathers to handle. In making obvious the feminine desire that was present in the novel, Llosa's film enables a deeper understanding of Schweblin's representation of the mothers' relationship, which I read as a critique of a patriarchal Argentine society that is equally as fierce as the novel's rebuke of industrial agriculture.

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RESEÑA

Éric Morales-Franceschini. *The Epic of Cuba Libre. Mambí, Mythopoetics, and Liberation*. University of Virginia Press, 2022.

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Para los lectores que no conocen el significado de la palabra "mambí" hay que decir que este fue un término utilizado en el siglo XIX por los soldados españoles para referirse a los cubanos independentistas, un término en su origen derogatorio, que, no obstante, los cubanos adoptaron como una insignia de honor. El libro de Éric Morales-Franceschini *The Epic of Cuba Libre Mambí, Mythopoetics, and Liberation* se apoya en la importancia histórica de este hecho y destaca las apropiaciones del legado mambí por parte de diferentes actores sociales entre finales de siglo diecinueve y principios del siglo veintiuno. Con este objetivo, divide el libro en cinco capítulos y un epílogo en los cuales desarrolla temáticas diferentes de la guerra, según esta aparece en las obras de escritores, cineastas y escultores cubanos. En lo que sigue haré un breve resumen de cada uno de estos capítulos y al final daré mi opinión del ensayo.

En el primer capítulo: "The Epic of the Marromed: Blackness and the Desired Called Cuba Libre" se define la palabra mambí y su conexión con los sujetos afrodescendientes. Se discuten textos escritos al calor de las guerras de independencia (1868-1898) y otros textos realizados despuésde triunfar la Revolución de 1959. El autor se enfoca en las narraciones cinematográficas de Sergio Giral que hablan de los esclavos cimarrones, y establece la conexión a través del discurso de la raza y la opresión. Esta conexión ya había sido destacada por críticos cinematográficos que reseñaron estas películas cuando se estrenaron, que muestran que los revolucionarios tomaron la rebeldía de los esclavos como una acción en contra del sistema colonial. Fueron, en las palabras del propio Giral, la "vanguardia" de la gesta emancipadora que liderearon décadas después Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, Máximo Gómez, José Martí y Antonio Maceo.

En el capítulo dos, titulado "¡Empínate!: Of Motherhood, Mimicry and the Mambisa", Morales-Franceschini destaca la importancia de la mujer en este proceso. Comienza analizando la obra de teatro de José Martí "Abdala" (1869), y continua con la de Francisco Sellén "Hatuey" (1891), y el libro de Manuel de la Cruz, *Episodios de la revolución cubana* (1890). Estas obras le sirven de contexto para ver la importancia de la mujer en el periodo revolucionario, ejemplificado por la cinta *Lucía* (1968), de Humberto Sola, que comienza justamente con un cuadro de la guerra de 1895, y *Mambí* (1998) de los directores Santiago y Teodoro Ríos. En el capítulo siguiente, "The Epic trasvestied Choteo and the Mambí as Populist trickster", el autor comenta el popular animado cubano "Elpidio Valdés" (1970), de Juan Padrón, basado en el mismo suceso histórico. Para explicar dicho animado se apoya en la historia del teatro bufo (1868) y la definición del choteo que da Jorge Mañach. El capítulo 4, "¡Al machete! On Epic Violence", habla sobre del arma principal que usaron los independentistas y discute la representación de la violencia en otra película revolucionaria: La primera carga al machete (1968), de Manuel Octavio Gómez. Asimismo, discute la obra de teatro de García Pérez "El grito de Yara" (1874), el libro de poemas de Bonifacio Byrne *Lira y Espada* (1901), y temas como el del patriotismo, las referencias helénicas y la frustración republicana. Finalmente, en el capítulo 5, "The Epic (De)Sacralized: Sacrifce and the Specter of the Camp", el autor destaca el tema del sacrificio derivado de la contienda, la creación de símbolos como el del padre y la madre de la patria (Céspedes y Grajales) y afirma que a partir de la década de 1990 surge una crítica a la "épica mambisa", que se manifiesta a través de la crítica a los referentes que han sido fijados a partir de estas representaciones en el imaginario cubano nacional. Según Morales-Franceschini dicha crítica desacralizadora aparece en películas como *Fresa y Chocolate* (1990), que, afirma, es una "crítica a la violencia" y al "sublime Mambí" (160), centrado en valores morales como la virtud, la camaradería, la dignidad, el heroísmo y el sacrificio. Desde este punto de vista, cualquier película, poema o dibujo que critique estos valores critica también al mambí y la gesta emancipadora. De ahí que, en el último apartado del libro, el epílogo, Morales-Franceschini mencione o discuta filmes tan diversos y distanciados de la temática guerrera como *Madagascar* (1994) y *José Martí, el ojo del canario* (2010) de Fernando Pérez.

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Coincido con Morales-Franceschini cuando afirma que el tema de la representación narrativa o pictórica de la guerra independentista ha sido escasamente estudiado en Cuba. Coincido además en que es un tema medular para entender el imaginario simbólico de la Revolución y de generaciones de cubanos que lucharon y sobrevivieron estos conflictos. Sugiero, sin embargo, que en el futuro se preste mayor atención a trabajos que ya existen sobre el tema, para evitar repeticiones y confrontar puntos de vistas diferentes sobre alguno de los aspectos estudiados en este libro. A veces da la impresión de que la lectura de estos textos se desvía por caminos innecesarios y es difícil de entender, por ejemplo, qué relación hay entre el teatro bufo y el animado infantil de Juan Padrón o entre los poemas "Tengo" o la "Balada de los dos abuelos" de Nicolás Guillén y las gestas del 68 y el 95. Si bien la cuestión racial -que enfatiza este libro- es imprescindible para comprender estas apropiaciones, la épica mambisa no puede reducirse a la participación de los afrodescendientes en ambos conflictos. En los treinta años que duró el proceso independentista murieron hombres, niños y mujeres de diversas razas y nacionalidades.

Por otro lado, considero que debieron incluirse otras obras narrativas, pinturas y esculturas del periodo republicano y revolucionario cuyo análisis podría apoyar o contradecir la tesis del autor. Como ejemplo valga mencionar tres novelas representativas de diferentes sectores de la población cubana: *Episodios de la Guerra*, de Raimundo Cabrea, publicada en Filadelfia en 1898; *La manigua sentimental* (1910) de Jesús Castellanos y la monumental *Generales y doctores* (1920) de Carlos Loveira. Esta última novela cierra el ciclo celebratorio de la guerra de independencia en Cuba al poner al descubierto la decadencia y corrupción de los gobiernos republicanos fundados sobre el pacto de los poderes médico y militar. Por eso no creo que los cubanos tuviéramos que esperar a los años noventa del siglo veinte para ver una crítica del ideal guerrero, de la violencia o del sacrificio que produjo el conflicto armado. Esas críticas aparecieron antes en testimonios como *A pie y descalzo* (1890) de Ramón Roa y la mencionada novela *Generales y doctores*. Igualmente, al analizar la "desacralización" del ideal mambí durante los últimos años 30 años, debemos incluir, además, la llamada "desacralización" de Martí en la literatura, la plástica y el cine cubano, de lo que es un ejemplo el filme de Fernando Pérez. Dicha desacralización tiene orígenes muy diversos algunos que van más allá de la Revolución cubana y en general tiene que ver con la pérdida del aura de los antiguos próceres en la sociedad moderna.

En síntesis, el libro de Morales-Franceschini puede darle al público norteamericano una idea general de la importancia que tuvo la épica emancipadora en la historia de Cuba y su recepción después, especialmente durante la Revolución de 1959. Puede ayudarlo a entender cómo estas referencias sirvieron para definir un tipo de revolucionario que respondiera a los objetivos políticos del gobierno cubano cuando este se propuso construir una nueva sociedad y un sujeto modélico, el llamado Hombre Nuevo. Este Hombre Nuevo era una repetición del héroe independentista y guevariano (aguerrido, virtuoso, heroico, sacrificial y fraternal), que compartía su "rebeldía" con los esclavos cimarrones y con caciques como Hatuey a pesar de que ninguno de ellos aspiró a crear una nación. Tampoco, por supuesto, los mambises del 68 y del 95 querían fundar un país comunista. Por tanto, debemos leer dichas apropiaciones como gestos legitimadores que tienen el objetivo de fundar la mitología revolucionaria en la historia. Es un discurso teleológico que recupera el pasado para crear su presente y justificar un nuevo proyecto social. En tal sentido tanto los esclavos cimarrones, los indígenas como los mambises que aparecen en estas narraciones no son más que muertos útiles, muertos resucitados por el discurso revolucionario para que sirvan a su ideología redentora. Para nada es un gesto original y único porque esta ha sido la forma tradicional de legitimar la nación después de la independencia y la formación de los estados nacionales en Latinoamérica

No es extraño por eso que siglos después los independentistas utilizaran la figura del cacique Hatuey para justificarse, y que los revolucionarios del 59 incluyeran en su panteón de mártires resucitados a todas las víctimas del sistema colonial entre ellos, a los propios mambises.

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REVIEW

Eleni Kefala, *Buenos Aires Across the Arts. Five and One Theses on Modernity, 1921-1939*,

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022

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The city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, experienced numerous social and economic changes during the first decades of the 20th century, including industrial growth, railroad expansion, and economic consolidation of the agro-export model. Additionally, mass immigration from Europe—mainly from Italy and Spain—transformed the city into a vibrant cosmopolitan metropolis. However, in subsequent years, two important events—the Great Depression and the first military dictatorship, both at the beginning of the 1930s—marked the way of understanding Buenos Aires in its modern context. While comparing rural Argentinian towns to urban Buenos Aires, Beatriz Sarlo suggests that the term "city" implied modernity in all aspects, from physical descriptions to ideologies. As a result of development in the early 20th century, as well as of avant-garde groups and aesthetics, literature in Buenos Aires embraced modernity in political and artistic spheres, leaving its mark on the culture of the city (16).

Eleni Kefala's book *Buenos Aires Across the Arts: Five and One Theses on Modernity*, 1921-1939 investigates the connection between literature, culture, and modernity within Buenos Aires, observing different sociopolitical and cultural reactions to modernity by analyzing creative materials, mediums and genres, namely: poetry, prose, film, painting, and photography (Kefala 4). The book comprises in-depth analyses of the intellectuals and artists Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Roberto Arlt, José Agustín Ferreryra, Xul Solar, Horacio Coppola and Alfonsina Storni, and of their respective major works in relation to the city. Kefala explains that most writers and artists in question either belonged to, or were connected with, the avant-garde literary-artistic clique "Grupo Florida" and/or the literary magazine *Revista Sur*, with the exceptions of Ferreyra, a filmmaker who was part of the tango scene, and Alfonsina Storni, a feminist writer often ostracized by "Grupo Florida." Kefala's thorough analysis of modernity in Buenos Aires during the 1920s and 1930s, alongside an impressive compilation of creative artists hailing from various backgrounds and traditions that are not often studied together, is commendable. She displays an understanding of how the artists both defined and reflected modernity within the city through their artistic contributions, as each presents a different aspect of modernity, demonstrating the complexity and sometimes conflicted aspect of this phenomenon.

The book is divided into "five and one" theses (chapters) that focus on aspects of modernity as viewed by creative artists: the last "one" encompasses various elements of the previous five. Conclusions within each chapter are supported by several studies; however, Kefala prefers the social theories of German authors, such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and some from the Frankfurt School. In her comprehensive research, she combines these theories with Argentinian literary and cultural analysts who specialize in the avant-garde interwar period, such as Beatriz Sarlo, Jorge Schwartz, and Adrian Gorelik.

The first chapter, titled "Utopian City," analyzes Jorge Luis Borges' collection of poems *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) and other essays from the period. This collection reflects a transition in Borges' intellectual work: he abandons the ultraism of his European experience to embrace *criollismo*, Argentina's most "enduring narrative" (Kefala 8), in order to reconnect with his hometown. His attempt to recover this relationship was, however, "disrupted by accelerated urbanization" that had taken place during his 1914–1921 absence (Kefala 22). Borges eventually locates *criollismo* in the utopia of the city's *orillas* (borders), which were devoid of modernity expressions like immigration or industrial development. Kefala understands the creation of this space as an innovation of the author in the sense that he transforms it in a national *topos* restoring the patria, whose traditional values were threatened, to the *criollo*, albeit in an urban variation.

In contrast to this nostalgic perspective, but also relating to the interaction of space and time, Chapter 2, "The Atopian City," analyzes *Veinte poemas*

para ser leídos en el tranvía (1922) by Oliverio Girondo. Instead of searching for a new space as Borges did, Girondo's collection of poems presents, as a succession of photography and cinema snapshots, diverse and random cities like Rio de Janeiro, Venice, Dakar, Mar del Plata, and Buenos Aires. According to Kefala, the collection challenges both "progressive linearity" (61) and "temporal or special order" (37). Speed, crowds, anonymity, and "non-places" (Marc Augè) like hotels or train stations catalyze the alienation and commodification of people: technological progress—which Girondo often personifies in his poems—does not necessarily lead to personal fulfilment. In contrast to Borges, who is preoccupied with space, Girondo portrays the people within the landscape. He does not, however, explore the inner self. In the next two chapters, Kefala explores how José Agustín Ferreyra and Roberto Arlt extend Girondo's observations of humans in a modernized city to include personal morality.

Chapter 3, "Melotopian City," analyzes the only film referenced in book, *Perdón Viejita* (1927), by José Agustín Ferreyra. The setting, on the outskirts of the city, reflects Borges' poems discussed in Chapter 1. But, in contrast, Ferreyra introduces working-class characters as victims of the "social and moral innovations of modernity" (Kefala 63). The characters' low socio-economic status (a result of modernization) correlates with their moral decline, especially in the case of the women who are bound to be sexually corrupted. This chapter is the only one in which Kefala studies the representation of the working classes in industrial neighborhoods, recurrent characters in the popular culture of the city, and of the formation of the "Grupo Boedo" that distances itself in aesthetics from the Grupo Florida writers and artists, proposing an interesting thematic connection between the two avant-garde groups. However, in contrast to Grupo Boedo, *Perdón Viejita* did not seek to provoke personal outrage and political reaction in audiences. Instead, as Kefala notices, it restores bourgeois values through melodrama, much like other films, radio dramas (*radioteatros*), and *novelas semanales* of the period. By the end of the movie, when the protagonist family moves to the countryside, they embrace the traditional values of the *criollo* and *nostalgia*. Ferreyra's film reflects political reforms of the 1910–1920 period previous decade that, from electoral law to urban reforms, aimed to integrate the working classes to the city and the nation.

The novels *Los Siete Locos* (1929) and *Los Lanzallamas* (1931) by Roberto Arlt, analyzed in Chapter 4, "The Dystopian City," also focused on marginalized groups but do not address the consequences of capitalism for the working classes. Instead, the novels focused on groups morally opposed to this social class, operating—in most cases—outside the rule of law. A critique of the unfulfilled promises of capitalism and technological progress can be found within the novels: the city becomes uninhabitable for the human, who is considered only a cog in the machinery that moves the city forward. José Romulo Erdosain, the protagonist of both novels, wanders around different neighborhoods, observing the effects of industrialization and discovering the emptiness of consumerism and of the self (Kefala 109). This exposes a "cognispace of the enlightened turned inside out" (Kefala 101), which is reflected in the social and existential crisis of the characters. As these novels outline an unexplored part of modernity, Kefala also proposes a decolonial approach, an original interpretation of Arlt's work as a way of understanding avant-gardes in Latin America.

In Chapter 5, "Eutopian City," Kefala analyzes Xul Solar's paintings from the 1930s as well as some excerpts from his book *Los San Signos*. Kefala claims that Solar's work imagined possibilities for the near future instead of offering an escapist outlet, as others like Jorge López Anaya have argued (137). Like Georg Simmel (1903) in his analysis of mental life in the metropolis, the emotional void of the modern city offers a powerful force to explore other ways of transcendental life (Kefala 134). Solar's city (in his

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paintings as well as his writing) can be understood as "eutopian" in that it could be a good "realizable" place within the new modern and technological world—something that Arlt, Ferreyra, and Borges rejected in their portrayals of Buenos Aires. Moreover, Solar revolutionized the subject of modernity by highlighting his spiritual life, an aspect often ignored in the industrial and materialistic world.

The last chapter of the book, "Objective City," examines the photo album *Buenos Aires 1936: Visión fotográfica* (1936) by Horacio Coppola, presenting several portrayals of Buenos Aires and revisiting many aspects of the previous theses. The "Atopian City," for example, is implied in the picture of a car factory, and the photo depicting a line of cars and commercial buildings from the angle above Diagonal Norte. In other pictures, the rationalist architecture, exaltation of machines and consumerism, and non-places like soccer fields and racetracks, reflect partly Girondo's poetry and Arlt's dystopian city (Kefala 166–167). Within some photos, signs of modernity are interrupted by the emergence of elements from the past, like a horse-drawn carriage among cars and trams. This multi-temporality can be interpreted as a *recriollización* of the city center (Kefala 178–179). Certain pictures address urban liminality, like those of Ferreyra and Borges. Following the "return to reality" of New Objectivity from the Bauhaus, some depict industrial neighborhoods like La Boca; others focus on Borges' casitas on the *orillas*, standing in clear contrast with the tall buildings of the city center. In all cases, Coppola focuses solely on the topography of the city and not on the people, which distinguishes him from Arlt and Ferreyra (Kefala 171–172).

The "Epilogue" of the book recovers and expands upon some of the explorations throughout the book. Kefala analyzes the poems of Alfonsina Storni's *Mundo de Siete Pozos* (1935), which merges "atopian" and dystopian features already mentioned in Girondo and Arlt, respectively, allowing the possibility of connecting authors beyond avant-garde groups and differing intellectual and political interests. A further analysis of Storni's poetry (or even *crónicas*) could have been added as a seventh thesis of modernity. Although male writers and artists dominated the cultural sphere of Buenos Aires during the interwar period, the activity of women writers like Storni, who thematize modern urban women's roles and work with the contradictions of urban modernity (Kefala 191), could have been further analyzed. Nonetheless, despite excluding women authors and artists from her main analysis, Kefala did address women roles in the city throughout the book: first in connection to women's morality in *Perdón viejita* and then with the depictions of modern women and consumerism in Coppola's album.

In conclusion, Kefala's book offers a fresh perspective of modernity in Buenos Aires, focusing on specific figures across the arts, and establishing connections between literature, cinema, and visual arts during the interwar period. In Argentina, the decades between 1920 and 1940 were marked by the first coup d'état and the consequences of the Great Depression. These two events, which heralded the failure of democratic and capitalist projects alike, frame the conception of modernity as a struggle of the subject between integration or displacement within society, as many of Kefala's analyses suggested. A more in-depth analysis of women and their place in Buenos Aires during this time could have further enriched the book.

Positioning the city of Buenos Aires as a contested concept of multiple temporalities and spatialities demonstrates not only the "implications" between the city and modernity (Sarlo 8), but also the instability of both, even when the authors refer to similar material spaces. The five and a half theses presented in Kefala's book mirror the openness and complexity of Buenos Aires that, alongside theoretical framework regarding modernity, permit a broader dialogue about urban modernity in Latin America.

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REVIEW

Carlos Gardeazábal Bravo and Kevin G. Guerrieri (eds.), *Human Rights in Colombian Literature and Culture: Embodied Enactments*, Routledge, 2022.

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Carlos Gardeazábal Bravo and Kevin G. Guerrieri's edited volume *Human Rights in Colombian Literature and Culture: Embodied Enactments* begins with the fundamental contradiction that while human rights "have become the hegemonic language of human dignity at an international level," most of the world's population remain "not subjects of human rights but rather objects of human rights discourses" (xix). This tension is especially apparent in Colombia, where the state is both the guarantor of human rights and a main perpetrator of human rights violations, and where multiple social movements and collectivities have elaborated political grammars that frame rebellious subjectivities beyond liberal notions of "rights" and "the human." How have Colombian writers, filmmakers, artists and activists engaged the field of human rights and articulated alternative languages of human dignity? Can these alternatives be studied productively through the analytical lens of human rights? What do microhistories of human rights in the Global South reveal about the emergence of this universalist discursive regime? Is it possible to imagine a pluriversal framework of human rights rooted in more-than-human subjectivities that encompass relations to the environment, communal modes of living, and the non-human?

Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri investigate these questions by treating cultural products as "embodied enactments" that do not merely reflect or contest hegemonic human rights narratives, but actively perform, stage and represent other visions of subjectivity, memory and justice. The contributors to the volume approach a wide range of novels, films, performances, art installations, songs and graphic narratives as "engaged texts, counter-narratives, and sometimes material and corporal entities that seek to interrogate common-sense assumptions made about both the universal human rights regime and multiple overlapping forms of violence in Colombia" (xx). The concepts of embodiment and enactment illuminate the ways in which cultural products limn "the tension between the abstract universality of human rights and the materiality of violations on individual human bodies and on determined groups" (xx).

Recognizing that Western human rights genealogies have often obscured the contributions of Indigenous, Black, non-Christian, colonized and gender non-conforming communities to social justice struggles and theories of the human, Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri insist on the necessity of interrogating "the predominant historiography […] through different local and regional narratives from the standpoint of the study of cultural production" (xxiv). To this end, their introduction offers an informative synthesis of the specific development of Colombian human rights discourses from the 19th century to the present. Microhistories of human rights in Colombia complicate many of the narratives found in by North Atlantic historiographies, as well as some popular interpretations of the rise of human rights in Latin America. While Joseph Slaughter notes that the predominant Euro-American genealogy of human rights traces "a direct line of descent from the American Declaration of Independence and the 1789 French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* to the 1948 UDHR [Universal Declaration of Human Rights]," Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri recuperate key moments in the Colombian human rights tradition, such as the 1863 Rionegro Convention that abolished the death penalty and "enlarged tradition of liberal humanitarianism" at the same time as the Geneva Convention (xxv). And in contrast to recent historiographies by scholars including Samuel Moyn, Randall Williams and Patrick William Kelley that "position the 1970s as a key moment in which human rights displaced other utopias," the editors expand on Jorge González Jácome's argument that the emergence of Colombian human rights activism coincided with the ongoing ascent of revolutionary utopian discourses (xxviii).

The individual chapters are divided into four "assemblages" organized around common thematic concerns. The first, "Human rights narratives, micronarratives and subjectivation," begins with Luis Fernando Restrepo's

study of literature, human rights and historical memory in the 19th century. The next chapters by Miguel Rojas-Sotelo and Carlos Gardeazábal Bravo discuss the articulation of traumatic narratives in the work of contemporary visual artist Doris Salcedo and the questioning of established human rights discourses in Daniel Ferreira's novel *Rebelión de los oficios inútiles*, respectively. Carlos Mario Mejía Suárez concludes this section with an analysis of subjectivation, victimhood and the perception of past in present in novels by Laura Restrepo, Evelio Rosero and Azriel Bibliowicz.

"Land environment, commodity: The human and the non-human" explores human rights narratives in connection to land, memory, extractivism, displacement and interspecies relationality. This section includes Daniel Coral Reyes' study of "multidirectional memory" in Ciro Guerra's film *El abrazo de la serpiente*; a chapter by Ligia S. Aldana on rebellion and testimonio in the songs of the Afrodescendant cantadora de bullerengue sentao Ceferina Banquez; Felipe Gómez Gutierrez's analysis of "embodied enactments" in recent graphic-narrative representations of forced displacement; and Vanesa Giraldo Gartner and César Ernesto Abadía Barrero's ethnographic study of plants' memories in the Amazon region. One of the most methodologically innovative contributions, Giraldo Gartner and Abadía Barrero's chapter is exemplary of the volume's intention to think both with and beyond the human rights framework.

In "Structural, political, and gender-based violence and resistance," Constanza López Baquero investigates representations gender-based violence in recent novels, films and art installations by Colombian women including Laura Restrepo, Jineth Bedoya and Doris Salcedo; Eunice Rojas and Carlos A. García Pinilla examine the denunciation of human rights violations in contemporary urban music, focusing on social cleansing, "false positives" and the killing of teenager Dilan Cruz by police in November 2019; and Carolina Sánchez analyzes the connections between public and private violence in Laura Restrepo's novel *Delirio*.

The final cluster on "Transitional justice, grassroots activism, and problematizing victimhood" begins with chapters by Cherilyn Elston and Nicolás Rodríguez-Idárraga that examine the tensions around human rights, memory and transitional justice narratives as they appear in the play *Antígonas, tribunal de mujeres* and the House of Memory in Tumaco. In both cases, the authors argue that grassroots cultural productions and memory spaces disrupt official narratives of human rights, victimization, historical memory and transitional justice. These interventions are followed by Juan Camilo Galeano Sánchez's study of ex-combatant reintegration in Flor Romero de Nohra's 1968 novel *Mi Capitán Fabián Sicachá*, arguing that it was "pioneering the concept of 'reintegration'" decades before this term became part of the Colombian transitional justice lexicon (249).

By untethering human rights discourses and practices from "conventional registers of human dignity that have been universalized around Western conceptions of the human and linked to the morals and logics of the market," these chapters suggest that human rights "can and must be continually reformulated and embodied through alternative, non-hegemonic languages and grammars within the pluriverse" (xlvii). In doing so, the volume makes important contributions to multiple lines of inquiry. First, it extends and nuances previous works in critical human rights scholarship by investigating Colombia's specific histories of human rights discourse and activism. Within the vast literature on representations of violence in Colombian cultural production, this is also the first book to explicitly take up "human rights" as its primary analytical framework (Fanta Castro et. al; Herrero-Olaizola; Martínez; O'Bryen; Suárez). Finally, it expands upon recent scholarship on Latin American human rights histories and cultural forms by modeling novel ways of studying

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Human rights narratives, practices and representations as "embodied enactments."

Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri's introduction is refreshingly self-reflexive, inviting readers to question the book's "implicit assumptions" (xlii), recognize "new lines of inquiry" and create "new assemblages" (xxxviii). Taking up this invitation to think beyond the book, a few areas of future research come to mind. Despite this volume's attention to matters of race and gender, it is light on LGBTQ experiences. The work of queer and trans performance artists such as Analú Laferal, Pasión Cusqueña, Nadia Granados and collectives like the Red Comunitaria Trans [Trans Community Network] would dialogue productively with the questions about humanity, political subjectivity and embodiment raised throughout the chapters. Future studies might also question the usefulness of human rights as an analytic lens in certain contexts. While the introduction's inclusion of Afro-Colombian intellectuals Amir Smith-Córdoba and Manuel Zapata Olivella within Colombia's human rights genealogy is an important corrective to human rights narratives that erase the contributions of Black thinkers, no mention is made of Zapata Olivella's own critical comments on human rights as a discursive regime (Zapata Olivella, 22). These absences should not be understood as shortcomings of Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri's illuminating volume, but rather as signs of its value as a point of departure for new investigations into the complex history of human rights vis-à-vis other political imaginaries.

The individual chapters and introduction draw upon a rich theoretical corpus, including decolonial, biopolitical, ecocritical and memory studies approaches. Combined with the wide range of topics and cultural expressions covered by the contributors, this theoretical breadth makes Gardeazábal Bravo and Guerrieri's book an excellent resource for researchers and educators in Latin American cultural studies and subfields such as performance, ethnic studies, women and gender studies and the environmental humanities.

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REVIEW

Montero, Óscar J. *Azares de lo cubano. Lecturas al margen de la nación*. Almenara, 2022.

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Azares de lo cubano illuminates the suppressed voices that shape Cuba's national narrative, opening the way to a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of identity. Analyzing Luisa Pérez de Zambrana's elegies, the encounter between Julián del Casal and Antonio Maceo, Rafael Serra's antiracist writings, and José Martí's diary, Montero centers writers excluded from the "official" discourse of Cubanness epitomized by Cintio Vitier's lectures given at the Lyceum between October and December of 1957 and later published as *Lo cubano en la poesía* (1958). Anti-essentialist in its form and content, Montero's study models a reading that neutralizes the hold of a hegemonic concept of nation.

One of the most compelling and distinctive features of the book is its interweaving of memoir and close reading. *Azares* opens with "Preámbulo cienfueguero," the author's recollection of walking the streets of Cienfuegos where an old man yells a homophobic slur (9). Montero describes the scene as "la manifestación callejera de lo cubano," an essence sustained by prejudices and exclusions (11). The author's wish to disrupt oppressive constructs of nation sets the book in motion, but the scene is notable also for its portrayal of the author as an itinerant subject whose "brújula desvencijada" charts an uncertain path traversing Cuba's 19th century and his own present (9). Montero studies *lo cubano* at the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, exposing both the fundamental and foundational role of marginalized writers like Zambrana, Casal, and Serra, and the contradictions and possibilities of an iconic text of Cuba's national story: Martí's diary. It is this ambulant reading that makes Oscar Montero's *Azares de lo cubano* such a provocative and indispensable study of what it means to be Cuban.

An aside about Arcadio Díaz Quiñones's *Cintio Vitier. La memoria integradora* (1987) and the polemic that followed its publication further orient Montero's study. If Vitier's *lo cubano* resonates with Díaz Quiñones because it posits poetry as a way of knowing the nation, the author recognizes the perils of theorizing a national culture in terms of essences that "minimize internal historic, social and racial differences," thus precluding "the real integration of the heterogeneity and difference of a plural and conflictive society" (17, my translation). Montero's title announces these less harmonious and more human vicissitudes of Cuba's becoming, *azares* signifying both misfortunes and happy accidents of fate. This indeterminacy is deliberate, and Montero's study does not resolve the paradoxes of Cuba's national culture. Calling to mind Theodore Roethke's "The Waking," Montero's "shaky compass" elucidates a steadying and restorative interpretation of Cubanness in its advocacy for an open and flexible concept of identity.

Chapter one, "Elegías osiánicas. Luisa Pérez de Zambrana," is an affecting and richly layered analysis that reframes Zambrana's poetry beyond the sexist prejudices and Romantic clichés that cement her exclusion from the national conscience in Vitier's *Lo cubano en la poesía*. Montero elucidates the intellectual heft of Zambrana's poetry by centering her dialogue with Macpherson's Ossianic elegies, an aspect of her work disregarded by Vitier and others. Religious interpretations of the elegy to her husband, "La vuelta al bosque" (1868), overlook the daring eroticism of their imagined reunion in which the pulsating natural landscape replicates the couple's passion. Channeling Ossian –the alleged author of a series of ancient Gaelic texts translated and published by the Scottish poet James Macpherson (1736-1796)– Zambrana evokes her deceased husband and five children against the misty, moody scenes of a hidden underworld, in which the lyrical "I" finds solace in communion with the Celtic bard. Her grief, which is rendered through visionary poetic landscapes and cathartic dialogue with Macpherson's Ossian, transforms Zambrana's lyrical subjects into dynamic, wandering and shadowlike beings, containing "other voices" and contradicting static notions of the Romantic lyrical "I" (28). In this way, Montero argues, Zambrana's poems surpass the *ubi sunt* and lamentation characteristic of the Romantic elegy: her sentimentalism

blurs the boundaries between life and death, presencing her lost loved ones. The chapter's most significant insight, however, is showing how Zambrana elegizes a universal loss that is germane to the feeling of expatriation registered in the book's epitaph by Albert Camus ("There are no more islands, and yet we feel their desire"), suggesting that Zambrana's poems are also a source of healing for the bereft citizens of a lost island.

In the second chapter, "Cicatrices. Julián del Casal y Antonio Maceo," Montero turns his attention to the encounter between the venerated hero of Cuba's independence movement, and the ostracized poet. Their meeting takes place at a *tertulia* in the Hotel Inglaterra, where Maceo shows his battle scars. Casal and Maceo would have shaken hands, imagines Montero, and this thought propels a careful and compelling analysis of how critical constructs have distorted both figures, diminishing Maceo's intellectual acumen and Casal's national conscience. Statues of the "Bronze Titan" emblematize Maceo as a strong and virile but one-dimensional warrior, illustrating how the establishment promoted a fixed concept of national identity. Montero argues that the way Maceo is remembered forecloses a deeper understanding of this dynamic hero and "visionary cultural agent" (48). In his letters, for example, Maceo recounts the discrimination he faced as an Afro-Cuban general and affirms his proud Black identity, offering a more nuanced view of his role as a leader in the independence struggle (48). Touching hands with his foil, Casal, whose personality was at odds with the heteronormative constructs of nation that equated patriotism with vigor, stimulates a reappraisal of both figures beyond the binaries of arms and letters, action and evasion, virility and impotence. Montero shows how Casal's chronicles are themselves powerful acts of resistance, laying bare the paradoxes of *fin de siècle* society where industrial progress, the avid consumption of European imports, and abject poverty coexisted. Casal critiques an economy "that already points to the exclusions of contemporary globalization," shoring up his identity as a separatist and prescient Cuban thinker (56). The major revelation of the chapter, though, is that "toxic mechanisms of exclusion still operate" through acts of cultural gatekeeping. Casal's scars are internal (visible in his writing), whereas Maceo's are external (written on the body); both undermine the concept of a unified nation by affirming identities excluded or neutralized by those in power. Together, Maceo and Casal anticipate the ills that will plague the Republic and illuminate a path toward an inclusive cultural identity founded on the "both/and" rather than the "either/or," a redemptive discourse symbolized by their fraternal handshake.

Race remains a central theme throughout the book, and chapter three evinces the more insidious reality of Martí's ideal, deployed by Whites in power in order to suppress civil rights efforts and accuse Black Cubans of being racist themselves (cf. Helg). In "De niño yo vi. Rafael Serra," Montero reframes the ambiguities of Serra's antiracism in dialogue with his compatriots Juan Gualberto Gómez and Evaristo Estenoz as well as prominent leaders in the African American community including Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, showing how Black intellectuals navigated a perilous landscape predicated on a tenuous racial harmony in their fight for full citizenship. Serra's antiracist protest parallels the struggle for independence including the aspiration of national unity (and its implicit racism). Like the Afro-Cuban poet, José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926), Serra risked a more overt and openly critical "I" in the subjective territory of poetry. The chapter's title is an allusion to "A Cuba," in which Serra's lyrical "I" witnesses the horrors of racial injustice. This self-presentation contrasts with the tactics of self-erasure, including euphemistic and metonymic references to race, that characterize Serra's prose. Montero means for us to understand the necessary ambiguity and paradox of Serra's antiracism in this context: "a more visible African cultural legacy can't be part of the strategy of Black intellectuals" facing racist violence (79). Montero's key point is that Serra's works are not artifacts of

an era that has been overcome but texts "capable of dialoguing with our [current] prejudices" (83).

In "Yo, en un rincón. José Martí," the longest and most challenging chapter of his book, Montero asks whether the apostle can redeem us one again. Montero argues that the marble statues and ritualized acts that immortalize Martí paper over a dynamic, multi-faceted, and fragmented subject whose two-part diary reveals a more plural concept of Cuban national culture. Using self-effacing and self-erasing tactics, Martí's diary elevates the voices of everyday residents from the Dominican and Haitian towns that he passes through on his campaign to Dos Ríos. Notable examples include the "loquacious barber" whose repudiation of a fixed national origin ripples and resurfaces in Martí's own doubts concerning the ideals of national unity and racial harmony. Montero deftly analyzes diaries, letters, journalism, and political manifestos to elucidate Martí's wide-ranging registers and styles, evidence of both his pragmatism and the contradictions of his personality. In part 2, rather than recounting Martí's heroic deeds, Montero centers scenes that expose the inequality and divisiveness marring society, and details the racism of liberation army leaders who relegated Afro-Cuban freedom fighters like Quintín Banderas, and even Maceo, during and after the campaign. Martí does not nuance these testimonies but makes space for citizens like Narciso Moncada to speak for themselves: "le digo que en Cuba hay una división horrorosa" (113). Uncovering the multi-voiced discourses of Martí's diary, Montero disrupts the mechanisms of exclusion and oppression that underwrite monolithic narratives constructed on the ideals of unity and racial harmony. The significance of the chapter rests on Montero's contrapuntal reading of the diary's two parts, exposing the paradoxes of a foundational document that at the same time questions the limits of the nation.

Montero's epilogue returns to Cruces, between Cienfuegos and Santa Clara, a "place of history" where streets are named after major historical figures, including Dr. Juan G. Camero. Walking through the city once again, Montero reprises an anecdote about Camero's son and the open secret of his homosexuality. Juanito's status as town doctor who provided free care to his patients insulates him from the ostracism he might have faced, were it not for his venerated position in society. Montero argues that Juanito's custom of sitting on the porch issued a challenge to passersby, compelling them to wave to him, thus becoming complicit in the performance of his sexuality. Like Juanito, the figures that Montero analyzes in *Azares de lo cubano* embody besieged, fragmented and multifarious subjectivities that resist assimilation into a monolithic narrative of national culture. Honing in on borders, thresholds and doorways, Montero's indispensable study is an act of restorative justice that reckons with the prejudices of *lo cubano* through a plural and inclusive discourse that expresses what it means to be Cuban from the in-between spaces, making it a fundamental reference for scholars of race, gender and nation in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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