



# Cuerpos y Fronteras en América Latina

## Bodies and Borders in Latin America

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Institute of  
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## Bodies and Borders in Latin America

### Introduction

This publication is the result of the 8th Workshop for Haina – Nordic Network for Gender Studies in Latin America that took place on the 19-20 of August 2010 in collaboration with the Institute of Latin American Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden. Researchers from different disciplines and academic positions—participated and contributed to the workshop and to the present publication.\*

The theme “Bodies and Borders in Latin America” focuses on the interaction of bodies and borders as social and cultural constructions and sites of meaning. The body is approached as a key site at which cultural and social identity are expressed and articulated. Ideas around the body affect how society and culture are structured. Culture and society affect how people make use of their bodies.

Bodily metaphors may be used to symbolize and de-limit groups of people. Gender symbols play significant roles in order to maintain and ideologically reproduce the unity of “imagined communities”. Persons often embody in their “proper” behavior and clothing the boundaries of the collectivity.

The purpose of writing about “Bodies and Borders in Latin America” is to explore how geographical, social, cultural, economic, and political borders are placed and displaced around the body, and how bodies resist, manage and contest borders put up around them.

The texts gathered here approach this topic in a variety of ways: as symbolic and concrete borders that classify bodies and bodily practices; as literary representations of bodies and gendered borders; as borders and processes of identification and mobilization.

Approaching the topic of bodies and borders in terms of social classifications, the article “Cheiro bom, cheiro ruim – On Bodies, Senses and Social Classifications” by Thaís Machado-Borges, discusses how smells and olfactory borders are bound up with social classifications that mark positions in term of gender, class, and skin color. The article takes on the links between cleanliness, good and bad smells, morality, dignity, or even humanity as they are negotiated among middle-class and lower-income women in southeastern Brazil.

Remaining in the Brazilian context, in “The fluidity of sexual preference and identity: A challenge for social movements and AIDS prevention programs in Brazil,” Maj-Lis Follér and Simone Monteiro add

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an extra dimension to the discussion on borders and the classifications of bodies and bodily practices as they discuss the importance of taking into account the process of sexual identity formation and variations in sexual preference within programs for HIV/AIDS prevention. Since individuals transgress and challenge established sexual identity labels, it is argued that agencies working with prevention should also consider transgressing cultural, sexual, and economic boundaries in their struggle for sexual and human rights.

The intricate classificatory choreography of dancing bodies in Cuba is discussed in "Shaking that ass. Reggaetón as an embodiment of 'low culture' to mark difference and privilege in contemporary Havana." In this article, Silje Lundgren discusses the popularity of reggaetón music in contemporary Havana, in order to trace hierarchies between different expressions of female eroticism. A key example is the portrayal of the dance style of reggaetón as an embodiment of 'low culture'. The discussion shows how the ascription of 'low culture' to some reggaetón dancing bodies runs parallel to the ascription of 'incorrect' gendered values.

Exploring literary representations of gendered borders, Hólmfriður Garðarsdóttir and Soffía Jóhannessdóttir examine, in "El mundo femenino en la "antipoesía" de Nicanor Parra," the Chilean poet's depiction of women. The authors identify a clear moral divide between representations of women belonging to Parra's family and representations of women outside of the poet's kinship circle.

Deborah Rottenberg's contribution\* has the literary work of Washington Cucurto (Santiago Vega's pseudonym) as the basis for a discussion on literary representations of bodies. In "Cuerpos grotescos en la narrativa de Washington Cucurto" Rottenberg reflects on the concept of the grotesque in literary pieces whose narratives put bodies at the center of all attention.

The topic of borders and processes of identification and mobilization is approached in this issue's next three articles.

In "Labor organizing among women workers in maquiladoras: Crossing the border of gender and class in the cases of Matamoros, Mexico, and San Marcos, El Salvador" Edmé Domínguez and Cirila Quintero set out to make a comparison between two experiences of labor organizing among women workers within maquiladora (outsourced assembly-plant) industries. Maquiladoras have traditionally recruited mostly female workers, that is to say, cheap and unskilled labor. With the case-studies they present, they want to illustrate the diversity of experiences in the crossing of borders and to delineate the factors that affect this crossing. In "The Impact of Guerilla Participation on K'iche' Women's Collective Identity

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\* Not available online.

Formation Process,” Tine Destrooper shows how decisions related to women’s bodily expressions of identity - such as laying down the traditional garb - have affected the dynamic of identity formation in the post-war period in Guatemala. The article discusses obstacles for constructing an empowered gender identity throughout this process, but also the way K’iche’ women’s activists have explored niches to critically reflect on their own emancipation on the basis of Mayan cosmovisión.

Related topics are brought up in Charlotta Widmark’s “Embodied pluri-national identities in the urban highlands of Bolivia” where she discusses how we can understand the gendered embodiment of national identities and borders in the Andean area. In a comparison with the historical ways of gendering nationalism in Bolivia she focuses on the ways pluri-national ideals are embodied by Bolivia’s new leadership; organized women and men of indigenous background.

The second part of this publication comprises contributions to the 2010 Haina workshop presenting the results of the research project “*Women, Indigenous, Poor? The Construction of Gender in Latin America from the Perspective of Intersectionality*” from the University of Helsinki (2008–10). This project explored how the concept of intersectionality can be applied in Latin American gender studies. After a brief introduction of the project, Elina Vuola sets the common theoretical ground for the two other contributions, as she discusses the potential use of intersectionality in Latin American gender studies and especially in the case of religion studies. In their following articles, both Auli Leskinen\* and Sarri Vuorisalo-Tiitinen apply this very concept in the study of literature: Leskinen in contemporary Cuban women’s writing produced in the island, and Vuorisalo-Tiitinen in her approach to the work of the Mexican novelist Rosario Castellanos.

*Silje Lundgren, Thaïs Machado-Borges and Charlotta Widmark*

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\* Not available online.





# 1 *Cheiro bom, cheiro ruim* – On bodies, senses, and social classifications

Thaís Machado-Borges

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“I’m poor but I’m clean” is an expression currently used in Brazil, uttered by a person who wants to emphasize that her moral qualities weigh more than her economic position. Different versions of this saying can be found not only in other Latin American countries but in other parts of the world as well. Indeed, the links between cleanliness, good and bad smells, morality, dignity, or even humanity have received considerable attention within the social sciences. Based on past and ongoing ethnographic fieldwork among middle-class and lower-income women in southeastern Brazil, I propose to discuss the way smells and olfactory borders – *cheiro bom, cheiro ruim* [good smells and bad smells] – are bound up with social classifications that mark positions in terms of gender, class, and skin color.

“Sou pobre, mas sou limpa” é uma expressão correntemente utilizada no Brasil e proferida por uma pessoa com o intuito de enfatizar que suas qualidades morais pesam mais do que sua posição econômica. Várias versões desta expressão podem ser encontradas em outras partes da América Latina e também em outras partes do mundo. De fato, o elo entre noções de limpeza, cheiros bons e ruins, moral, dignidade ou mesmo humanidade têm recebido atenção considerável dentro do âmbito das ciências sociais. Baseada em diversos períodos de trabalho de campo entre mulheres de renda média e baixa no sudeste brasileiro, proponho discutir o modo como barreiras olfativas e cheiros (bons e ruins) – estão ligados com classificações sociais que marcam posições em termos de gênero, classe e cor de pele.

Stockholm, May 2003. Spring was in the air. I was walking with my then seven-year-old daughter, on the way to her school. As we passed by the outdoor shelves of a flower shop, we were hit by a cloud of exhaust fumes coming from a truck that had just delivered fresh flowers. My daughter commented, “This smells exactly like Brazil! *Flores e fumaça* [Flowers and traffic fumes]!”

Smells can trigger memories and feelings, bringing flashes of past sensations up to the surface of our consciousness (Guggenheim and Guggenheim 2006; Shulman 2006).

Smells have been a constant presence in my latest research projects. But they has been a presence that I did not have time, until now, to investigate. They were simply there and then they vanished from my perception.

Let me briefly introduce some of my research interests. After writing my doctoral thesis in anthropology about the reception of Brazilian *telenovelas* (Machado-Borges 2003), in 2006, I started a project that aimed to look at bodily practices among urban women living in southeastern Brazil. The idea was to map out and compare the way women from different social classes think about and use their bodies in everyday life. I looked at plastic surgeries, diets, the production of beauty, and beauty ideals and tried to understand how these practices intersect with the context of social inequality that is so pervasive in contemporary (and past) Brazilian society (Machado-Borges 2007, 2008).

My ongoing research project<sup>1</sup> (Machado-Borges 2010) is a spin-off from the topic of consumption. In it, I am looking at consumerism and the production of garbage. A question summarizing the project is: What is garbage and for whom? Once again I adopt a comparative perspective between classes and have urban women from southeastern Brazil as informants.

Many friends and colleagues have laughed at the apparent gap separating the world of beauty and physical appearance from that of garbage. I, however, see several points bridging these two fields. Smell, the olfactory sense, is one of them. As Classen et al. (1994: 161) have suggested, “Olfaction does indeed enter into the construction of relations of power in our society, on both popular and institutional levels.”

So, in May 2010, reflecting on the topic of “Bodies and Borders in Latin America” and on my way to a month of fieldwork in Brazil, I decided to pay more attention to the world of smells and olfactory borders – an until then suppressed part of my fieldwork – and discuss it at *Haina*’s meeting in August 2010. My initial idea was that during the first days in the field, I would try to do an ethnography of smells, writing down my olfactory sensations in order to try, later on, to make sense of them. This idea turned out to be much harder than I first thought. It was very hard to be aware of my olfactory sense – it was only when I was hit by a strong (good or bad) odor that I was reminded of

my little experiment. I might say, *en passant*, that anthropologists have been trained to see and hear things – smelling one’s ethnography was not part of any of the methodological courses I ever took. So I decided to leave this subjective experience of the field aside and observe how other people talked about smells. This turned out to be a better methodological approach.

This essay discusses, then, the links between smell (*cheiro bom, cheiro ruim*), gender, racism, and class. Based in part on previous field observations about bodies, the beauty market, and social inequalities (Machado-Borges 2009), the contribution of this essay is to look at these pieces of ethnographic material foregrounding the way smells work as a means to create and reinforce social barriers.

Let me start by introducing a popular saying: “I’m poor but I’m clean” (in Portuguese, *Sou pobre mas sou limpa*) – an expression currently used in Brazil, is uttered by a person who wants to emphasize that her moral qualities weigh more than her economic position. Different versions of this saying can be found not only in other Latin American countries but in other parts of the world as well. Indeed, the link between cleanliness and morality has received considerable attention within the social sciences (Elias 1978; Vigarello 1988; McClintock 1995; Burke 1996; Laporte 2002 [1978]; Masquelier 2005). As Douglas (1966) once pointed out, in a now classic essay on the social meaning of dirt and cleanliness, dirt disturbs the established order as well as continually reinforcing it. The act of classifying goods, practices, and people as dirty and clean is an attempt to classify and structure the world in which people live. As Shove (2003: 85) affirms, these kinds of classification are bound up with social hierarchies of gender, class, race, and age.

Smell, according to Classen et al. (1994: 169),

can play a role in many different forms of social classification. At times it is an actual smell which triggers an experience of difference on the part of the perceiver. Often, however, the odour of the other is not so much a real scent as a feeling of dislike transposed into the olfactory domain.

Let me present some examples from the field in order to illustrate these words: “Could you imagine your daughter married to a black man? Could you?” a middle-class, middle-aged white woman asked her friend as she drank yet another glass of beer. “Can you imagine the smell of that man when he is sweating?” Excerpts of conversations similar to this one were unfortunately not rare in conversations among middle-class women who defined themselves as being white. This kind of racist olfactory discourse depicts groups of people – in

this particular case, black men – as having particular kinds of smell. Already in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the odor of bodies was commonly connected with explanations relating bodies and climate, bodies and diet, bodies and professions, bodies and temperament (Laporte 1978; Courbin 1986). The kind of discourse presented above makes odor into an intrinsic and inalterable trait of a certain group. It creates borders in terms of skin color, gender, and desirability. As other researchers on smell and the social imagination have suggested (Hyde 2006; Manalansan IV 2006), such odors are invoked as a way to justify avoidance behavior. In their explanation, “Social dislike appears first, and is then followed by the perception of a socially constructed odor as being foul” (Classen et al. 1994: 165).

Lena, a forty-year-old manicurist, provided me with yet another example of social classification through smell. This time, it was class, not skin color that supposedly emanated a disagreeable stench. We were on our way to the bus station and passed under the shadow of a huge tree and Lena reacted immediately: “Oh, the stench of beggars! They sleep out in the streets and then the smell remains... Look, how dirty it is here. There are homeless people who sleep in this part of town.” And she walked faster. In both cases, “smell provides a potent symbolic means for creating and enforcing class and ethnic boundaries” (Classen et al. 1994: 169).

As with other norms of social classification regarding, for instance, racism and notions of sexuality, those assuming the power to judge the other take the position of odorless beings. The “taken-for-grantedness” of whiteness or heterosexuality (Dyer 1997; Sheriff 2001; Lundgren 2010) seems also to have an olfactory correspondent in the form of the supposedly odorless (or fragrant?) middle and upper classes.

The experiences recounted by Dona Geralda, a sixty-year-old woman and one of the founding figures of the organized movement of garbage scavengers in Belo Horizonte, whom I met during my ongoing research project on garbage, reveals the point of view of people who are classified as “smelly.” Recalling the period before scavengers organized themselves in movements and cooperatives, she said in an interview:

We were seen as second- or third-class beings. We were not seen as workers, as citizens, as people.... Some people pinched their noses when they passed us. This has really left marks on me. Just because we were there, mixed with everything that surrounded us, mixed with garbage, trying to earn a living... We were not seen as workers. We were seen as garbage. I'm telling you. People pinched their noses, they called us garbage-women. (In Freitas 2005: 81,100)

What upset Dona Geralda most was that little distinction was made between *physical stench* and *moral corruption*. She was not seen as a worker, she was seen as being as disposable and unwanted as the garbage she worked with. Dona Geralda continues to recount her life story and the story of the organization of garbage scavengers in the city of Belo Horizonte:

We used to live in the streets, we were all dirty. People who went by thought of course that we would rob them, because we were there, in the middle of all the waste, living on street corners. I remember we were very unorganized at that time. (Excerpt from an interview with Dona Geralda, in Freitas 2003: 117)

Pacing the work of Classen et al. (1994: 167) on the cultural history of smell, if “you are told often enough that you have a foul odor, you come to believe it.”

How can people act to dispel a prejudice that flourishes on the fluid borders between the physical and the cultural? Can perfumes and deodorants help?

In 2007 alone, Brazilians spent US\$22 billion on hygiene and cosmetic products, making the country the third largest consumer of cosmetic products in the world (ABIHPEC 2008). Still according to these statistics, lower-income women spend, in proportion to the salary they earn, more of their income on hygiene and cosmetic products than women with higher incomes.<sup>2</sup>

Simara, one of the participants in a Brazilian documentary about vanity (Maciel 2002), illustrates the complex links between the body, poverty, and the beauty market:

I think I’m too short and too chubby but everywhere I go there is always someone who says, ‘Gee Simara, you smell so good!’ Why is that? I’m not beautiful, but I have vanity. And the little vanity I have makes me visible to other people. With my appearance, if I didn’t have vanity and take care of myself, I would be lost. So, I’m not beautiful but I do whatever I can to make people see me.

Simara is a woman who earns her living reselling beauty products to people living close to gold-digging settlements in the Brazilian part of the Amazon forest. She travels hours by boat on malaria-infested rivers and arrives with perfumes and beauty products that she resells to women and men who work in the region. But why would people living under very harsh and poor conditions want to buy perfumes and cosmetics? As I have noticed in my previous research (Machado-Borges 2009), different forms of body work are used to gain visibility and to stress and/or erase social differences.

Sandra, a thirty-two-year-old woman who earns her living by working as a hairdresser in her own tiny beauty salon in one of BH's *favelas*, says:

I have a client that has no wardrobe in her home. She stuffs her clothes inside boxes and things like that. It's a mess. But if you see her, you can't tell. (...) She has everything that is in fashion. But she hasn't got a wardrobe. She has lots of clothes and she is really stylish. But no wardrobe.

– And why, do you think, she does that? I asked.

I think it has to do with a certain need... the person wants to be noticed. She wants you to say 'Gee! You look great!' And if nobody says anything, she wants at least to know that she is being looked at. She wants to be seen, to attract attention in one way or another. (...) Otherwise you're completely out. You don't count!

An emphasis on the body and on bodily modification can be a possible means for some people to make themselves visible. Granted, these kinds of practices are indirectly contributing to making the happiness of manufacturers of perfumes, beauty and hygiene products. But the question is still a bit more complex than that.

Let us get back to Dona Geralda, the sixty-year-old waste scavenger and her memories of past experiences and experienced changes:

Nowadays we [garbage scavengers] are welcome, wherever we go. We know how to prepare ourselves, we put on perfume when we are meeting other people. It is so different from the time when we started having meetings many years ago. We couldn't stand each other because we couldn't stand each other's smell. Today you see that everybody smells good when we go to a meeting or a party. But back then, we didn't shower, you know? We couldn't. When we went to a meeting, oh my god, it was terrible! Nowadays we want to be nice and smell the best we can when we go to parties. I think it is because we are more self-confident, we feel we have worth and that we have a value. We have managed to conquer value. Years ago, I didn't have time to look at myself. And I didn't *want* to look at myself. Today I can see myself in the mirror. I couldn't do that back then. I thought I was ugly... I didn't feel I was beautiful. For me, back then, beautiful people were those people who had money. The person maybe didn't look so good, but if she was sitting in a fancy and brand new car, then she was beautiful..." (Excerpt from an interview with Dona Geralda, in Freitas 2003: 267)

A few words to finish: My aim with this short essay was to start gathering thoughts on the blurry and sometimes contradictory ways to think about and deal with the body and its senses. The particular case of smell enhances this confusing blurriness – smell is at the intersection between, on the one hand, the organic and undeniable common nature of bodies (bodies and smell as common denominators among all humans) and, on the other hand, the socio-cultural constructions of difference through taste and senses. I will let the words of Meire, a nineteen-year-old live-in babysitter, sum up this discussion. In a confrontation with an upper-class woman on her right to circulate in certain areas of the building where both lived, Meire said:

Why are you saying this to me? Is it because I'm a mere *empregada*?  
Deep inside our bodies we both stink. The only difference is that you  
have the money, but deep inside, we both stink!

## Notes

- 1 The project “Beneath the surface, we’re all alike” was financed by the Swedish Research Council. My ongoing project, “Degraded Objects, Disposable People” was initially financed by SIDA/Sarec and receives continued support from the Swedish Research Council, Vetenskapsrådet.
- 2 The regulated minimum salary in Brazil was, in March 2008, R\$415 (approximately US\$196). Six kilos of meat were estimated to cost, in September 2007, R\$52.56 and seven liters of milk cost R\$14.18 (<http://www.portalbrasil.net/salariominimo.htm>, accessed October 6, 2008).

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## 2 The fluidity of sexual preference and identity: A challenge for social movements and AIDS prevention programs in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

Maj-Lis Follér & Simone Monteiro

Maj-Lis Follér is associate professor in the School of Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg. She has worked for many years with the politics of AIDS in Brazil and has published several articles related to the field, including studies on South-South Cooperation between Brazil and Africa. She is working at present in a research project in Mozambique, "Governing AIDS through Aid to Civil Society." E-mail: maj-lis.foller@globalstudies.gu.se

The Brazilian National STD/AIDS Program (NAP) is seen worldwide as a "success story" regarding advances in the control of HIV/AIDS and its close cooperation with AIDS-NGOs. Prevention campaigns developed by governmental and non-governmental organizations recognize the importance of supplementing the campaigns directed to the general public with activities for specific audiences that are based on their risk behavior, such as men having sex with men (MSM), injected drug users (IDU), sex workers, or campaigns based on identity labels (i.e., gay). However, based on an exploratory review of the literature, this article shows that the process of sexual identity formation and the variations in sexual preference during a lifetime are rarely discussed in programs (by governments, NGOs, or international donors) related to HIV/AIDS prevention or even in the research on AIDS. The work indicates that sexual identity labels are culturally constructed and arbitrary, as well as a sign of society's need to categorize and create borders, which are then transgressed by individuals. It is concluded that NGOs and government agencies working with prevention and involved in the struggle for sexual and human rights and respect for sexual diversity, as well as studies related to sexual health, should consider transgressing cultural, sexual, and economic boundaries, particularly among young people in the population.

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O Programa Nacional de DST/AIDS (NAP) é mundialmente considerado uma proposta bem sucedida de controle da epidemia de HIV/AIDS de cooperação estreita com as ONG AIDS. Campanhas de prevenção desenvolvidas por organizações governamentais e não-governamentais reconhecem a importância de complementar as campanhas dirigidas ao público em geral com atividades centradas em públicos específicos, definidos em função de comportamentos de risco, como homens que fazem sexo com homens (HSH), usuários de drogas injetáveis (UDI), profissionais do sexo ou em categorias identitárias, como o público gay. No entanto, com base em uma revisão exploratória da literatura, este trabalho assinala que o processo de formação da identidade sexual e as variações acerca das preferências e desejos sexuais ao longo da vida, raramente são discutidos nos programas (dos governos, ONGs e doadores internacionais) relacionadas à prevenção do HIV/AIDS e mesmo na produção acadêmica sobre AIDS. O estudo discute que as categorias de identidade sexual são culturalmente construídas e arbitrarias e indicam a necessidade da sociedade de categorizar e criar fronteiras, que são transgredidas pelos indivíduos. Conclui-se que as ONGs e agências governamentais que trabalham com prevenção, envolvidas na luta por direitos sexuais e direitos humanos e no respeito pela diversidade sexual, bem como os estudos sobre saúde sexual, devem levar em conta as transgressões das fronteiras culturais, sexuais e econômicas, particularmente entre a população de jovens.

## Introduction

Based on an exploratory review of the literature, this article aims to focus on the changeable nature of sexual preferences as expressed by variations in sexual and gender practices and identities during a person's life. Prevention programs and policies in Brazil related to HIV/AIDS, whether run by the government or by civil society organizations, have not considered these aspects.<sup>2</sup>

The Brazilian National STD/AIDS Program (NAP)<sup>3</sup> is viewed worldwide as a “success story” with regard to its advances in the control of HIV/AIDS. The state program has acted in close cooperation with civil society organizations and in partnership with AIDS NGOs (Follér 2005) to implement prevention and educational projects. Compared to the situation in many other countries, it has achieved remarkable results in lowering mortality and reducing new infections of HIV. In addition, people infected with HIV have also survived longer due to the signing into law in 1996 of universal access to treatment for everybody living with HIV/AIDS (Mello e Souza 2007: 40; Follér 2010).

At the same time, the multifaceted Brazilian response to AIDS must be understood within the context of the country's political history. The AIDS epidemic is intimately connected to the process of democratization in Brazil – *abertura*, which refers to the gradual opening of political institutions – that started during the 1980s after more than twenty years of military dictatorship (Galvão 2000; Nunn 2009). Today's AIDS activism has grown out of an earlier popular movement for health reforms that originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and which deserves mention. This was known as the *Movimento para Reforma Sanitaria*, or the Sanitary Health Reform Movement, and it brought together health professionals, bureaucrats, intellectuals, and civil society organizations (Marques 2003; Mello e Souza 2007). This movement called for a radical reformation of the Brazilian health system and became part of the broader movement for democratization of which the social AIDS movement has been a vital part since the 1980s. Different factors have contributed to the “success story” of the AIDS situation; and the broad, cross-sectoral sanitary movement was one important activity in the late 1970s to develop new democratic institutions to achieve improved health care that reaches all members of society (Grangeiro et al. 2009a). Besides the historical influence from the struggle for health reforms, international and national AIDS governance must also be taken into consideration to understand today's situation. The AIDS pandemic has made public health global. It is not just a health risk; it is also perceived as a security concern of global dimensions (see, e.g., Follér and Thörn 2008). Another important factor is the emergence of global civil society during the 1980s. The AIDS movement is closely connected to movements concerned with human rights, the environment, women, gays, and ethnic groups. Members of

the Brazilian gay movement returning home after exile in, e.g., the U.S. brought with them valuable knowledge and experience from the gay movement's struggle for sexual rights – lessons that have affected the political culture in Brazil and become an important part of civil society struggle for social and political change (Follér 2005).

Although Brazil is an unequal society with a wide gap between poor and rich, and with authoritarian and hierarchical traits, the *abertura* and re-democratization have led to efforts to overcome them. The new 1988 Constitution is one vital aspect of the democratization of the society. It designates health care as a duty of the state and a right of citizens. But in a country with persistent inequalities, marginalized and low-income people with deficient living conditions, a shortage of employment, and irregular access to health care face obstacles in claiming their rights through judicial institutions. Social anthropologists João Biehl and Paul Farmer, who have conducted studies in Brazil and Haiti respectively, show within the context of AIDS that inequalities of power ranging from poverty to racial and gender discrimination determine who is at risk of HIV infection and who has access to what services (Farmer 2003; Biehl 2007: 15). The focus of our study is on people's sexual identity and sexual preferences, in particular those who challenge the heteronormativity of contemporary society.

### **Background: The prevention of HIV/AIDS in relation to sexual diversity among young people**

The characteristics of the AIDS epidemic in Brazil reflect patterns of social inequality; the spread is more rapid among the poor, among those with fewer years of formal education, and those who are unemployed or semi-unemployed. In Brazil, HIV is mostly spread through sexual practices. Due to the long incubation period of the virus, young people are a key target for AIDS prevention (Brasil 2011). It should also be taken into consideration that the rate of HIV infections among girls aged thirteen to nineteen is higher than among boys.

The increased vulnerability of socio-economically less-privileged groups and the efforts to prevent HIV infection and to assist people living with AIDS have led to discussion of the idea that a human-rights perspective, including everybody's right to health care, should be inscribed in the national AIDS policy. This focus aims to improve issues related to gender equality as well as to combat stigma and discrimination associated with AIDS and to provide better access to social welfare, including prevention, treatment, and care. This implies that the spectrum of sexual practices and sexual identities, the use of drugs, and the implications of homophobia and other forms of discrimination all must be taken into consideration (Parker and Aggleton 2003; Cáceres et al. 2008).

In Brazil the epidemic is concentrated,<sup>4</sup> but at the same time, the general public has to be aware of the risk of getting infected. Therefore, the NAP (the National AIDS Program) has developed HIV/AIDS prevention programs with the intention of reaching the general public. Among other issues, these deal with the importance of getting tested and provide information about the existing treatment programs (Grangeiro et al. 2009b). The NAP has also developed less prominent STD (sexually transmitted diseases) and AIDS prevention campaigns directed toward men who have sex with men (MSM), injected drug users (IDU), women, professional sex workers, and transvestites.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that NAP recognizes the importance of supplementing the campaigns directed to the general public with campaigns for specific audiences, such as MSM, IDU, sex workers, that are based on their risk behavior. In other words, the campaigns focused on behavior categories, rather than being seen as excluding campaigns focused on the general population, can be seen as complementing them, as they address the different dimensions of vulnerability related to risk behaviors.

The use of the term MSM in prevention campaigns and studies about AIDS was introduced in research and health programming for sexual minorities, as a recognition that behaviors, not identities, place individuals at risk of HIV transmission. Cáceres et al. (2008: S45) explain that “the term MSM is used to refer to individuals born male, who have sex with others who are biologically male, with the understanding of the possible conflation of very distinct groups (based on sexual orientation, gender identity and participation in sexual communities, age, social class, culture) with similarly distinct needs.” However, Young and Meyer argue that MSM, as well as WSW (women who have sex with women) “signify not a neutral stance on the question of identity [... but] imply absence of community, social networks, and relationships in which same-gender pairing is shared and supported” (2005: 1145). This argument indicates that behavior categories, such as MSM and WSW, obscure the comprehension of socio and cultural dimensions of sexuality that are crucial to health research and prevention as well as to political action. The authors came to the conclusion that “the solution resides not in discovering better terminology but in adopting a more critical and reflective stance in selecting the appropriate terms for particular populations and contexts” (2005: 1147).

What we wish to highlight is that the variations (or fluidity) of sexual and gender identities and preferences during the course of a person’s life have not been considered by the governmental health policies or by the NGOs implementing the AIDS prevention programs. In other words, society, in this case Brazil, sets the “border” for how many genders and sexual categories exist and which body practices are accepted. This many times rigid classification might prevent

information and prevention from reaching certain parts of the population. The outline of the article is as follows: a theoretical framework and definition of vital concepts; an exploratory literature review on HIV/AIDS risk behaviors with a focus on men and women with bisexual and same-sex practices; and finally, some concluding remarks.

### **Theoretical framework: Concepts about sexual identity and sexual preferences**

We all want to know who we are, establish ourselves in relation to others, and find sameness and differences in our own being and in the social and political reality we live in. These aspects will be discussed as challenges in today's society, both in terms of individual and collective (sexual) identity, and how identity markers are set up by society and civil society organizations and how they are transgressed.

In general terms, following Stuart Hall, we view identity as a construction, a process, which is “never completed – always in process” (1996: 2). Sexual identities are part of this process of changing belongingness and transgression of borders.<sup>6</sup> However, in most Western societies, individuals, social movements, and health institutions categorize and define sexual preferences into fixed boxes such as heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, transvestite, or transsexual. These definitions are both individual and collective identity markers; they are used as self-identification by the individual and as a categorization by society. The expressions of sexual identities and sexual preferences display variations throughout the life trajectories of the individuals. Some people express sexual identity in the private spheres of life;<sup>7</sup> others express it openly in both public and private contexts. This can be seen as an intention to exert an influence for social change and/or a resistance against prevailing sexual politics, and it results in a proactive participation in the LGBTTT movement to fight for human and sexual rights (Fry 1982; Parker 1991; Heilborn 2004). But there are also people who refuse any sexual identity or create an alternative sexual identity; others assume a sexual identity that does not correspond to their sexual preference and practice.

Hall also makes a distinction between identity and identification. He wants to stress that the concept of identity is more static, and that identification encloses space for change. Individuals frame and produce a self-identification and are at the same time identified by others, or are struggling against them as a form of resistance (Hall 1996: 13). In other words, people have various identities, which are changing over time, and the fluidity of sexual identities and preferences are part of this tendency. We live in a post-traditional time, and the traditions that in earlier days directed our lives have decreased in significance.

Most societies in the world have heterosexuality as the norm. Early social anthropological studies in non-Western societies illustrate sexual fluidity through a transition from same-sex to other-sex, which highlights that Western notions of fixed sexual identities are culturally specific (Herdt 1984; Blackwood 1985). It also demonstrates that sexual identities are not fixed types but are created and given meaning through social interactions and cultural ideologies (Foucault 1980). Throughout history, variations of sexual identity and sexual preferences have – in countries, cultures, and religions – been seen as perverse, criminal, and deviant; and individuals displaying them have been distanced as the “other,” exoticized, discriminated against, and stigmatized.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, social identity can be understood as a set of social marks (dashes and attributes), not static, ordered by values, which classify and locate the individuals in the social world; sexual identity refers to social categories that are attributed to people based on their erotic orientation (homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual). Sexual preference is related to wishes and/or sexual practices of a person but do not always correspond to his/her sexual identity (Heilborn 2004). The construction of identity is dependent on the circumstances and can be seen as marking a state of difference, a position of exclusion, and/or a resistance. In other words, in the specific case of any given individual, desires, sexual practices, and sexual identities may not directly correspond, as has been indicated in studies conducted in Brazil (Fry 1982; Parker 1991; Heilborn 2004), and also in international contexts (Richardson 2000; Dolan 2005). These studies indicate that in different social contexts men or women who are sexually active with both sexes could define themselves publicly as exclusively heterosexual or exclusively homosexual.<sup>9</sup>

### **Some examples of how HIV/AIDS prevention is handled**

In our analysis we want to highlight the situation of young people with a sexual life that does not fit with the expectations and viewpoints at the NAP, or in civil society organizations and among international donors. The government works in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations working with HIV/AIDS (AIDS-NGOs) to reach young people for HIV/AIDS prevention. These are not a homogeneous entity but various organizations with diverse target groups, strategies, and issues. They might be women’s, black, human rights, and faith organizations with HIV/AIDS on their agenda, but many times they focus mainly on broader identity questions. Since the 1980s, and with the process of democratization and greater transparency in Brazil, a rapid growth of different CSOs has taken place.

What has been debated in recent years is the professionalization of activism, and critical questions are raised about whom the NGOs represent, their political

autonomy, and whether they are undermining state control or acting as the prolonged arm of the state. The borders between the state and NGOs are rather blurred, and this is a controversial topic within the AIDS-NGO movement. Civil society organizations cooperate and create diverse constellations with governments and international organizations. These links exemplify a global development pointing to a new model for how health issues are dealt with. Many NGOs are part of a form of “outsourcing” of health care, and thereby act as service providers fulfilling the responsibility of government (Biehl 2007).

The reason why governments “outsource” health issues is that civil society organizations are perceived as having better networks at the community level, which makes it easier for them to mobilize and reach vulnerable groups with prevention campaigns. The questions raised are as follows. Who are the NGOs representing when they are commissioned by the government to fulfill a task, or use funds from international donors to implement a prevention program? And is there a risk of “exclusion” of individuals or the groups that we want to study: those with sexually fluid identities and preferences?

### **HIV risk perception among gays and lesbians: An exploratory literature review**

A review of studies related to AIDS prevention among gays and lesbians has been carried out in order to determine whether sexual identity fluidity is being discussed in relevant social science literature. We do not include studies with denominated heterosexual populations related to AIDS prevention and risks. Regarding transvestite and transgender studies, there are a large number of studies on transvestism, transsexualism, and transgender issues,<sup>10</sup> but few in relation to prevention programs. Social anthropologist Don Kulick writes about transvestites in Brazil and highlights the gender implications for this group (Kulick 1998).<sup>11</sup> We discuss the LGBTTT movement and its role in making these sexual identities visible, and some of the literature on transsexualism is included in research with gay and lesbian populations.

Sexual practices and perceptions of the risk of becoming infected with HIV among gay men have been studied since the beginning of the epidemic, due to the historical and controversial definition of AIDS as a “gay cancer” and due to the HIV vulnerability of gay men around the world (Baral et al. 2007).<sup>12</sup> International and Brazilian studies among MSM in diverse contexts have highlighted that HIV risk perception does not necessarily result in preventive practices. Investigations based on qualitative and quantitative approaches indicate that choices of less safe or less risky sex among gay men have different rationales and motivations. Some qualitative studies conducted in Rio de Janeiro found that HIV risk practices in the gay population are related to the stability

of relationships and agreements about trust and loyalty, as well as the desire to obtain maximum pleasure during sexual intercourse within erotic-affective contexts (Rios 2003; Monteiro et al. 2010). A study undertaken by Gondim and Kerr-Pontes (2000) with 400 homo/bisexual men in Fortaleza (Northeastern Brazil) found the following factors to be related to unprotected sexual relations: insufficient information on HIV transmission; sexual intercourse with more than one partner (man or woman); being sexually aroused by unprotected sex; not knowing anybody with HIV/AIDS; and not being active in gay organizations.

Other aspects related to HIV risk-taking behaviors among MSM have been analyzed in international studies, such as the impact of effective antiretroviral treatment and decreased perception of the threat of HIV infection, since multidrug treatment was available.<sup>13</sup> This assumption was discussed by Kalichman et al. (2007) based on surveys with gay and bisexual men and by Van der Snoek et al. (2005) based on a longitudinal study of 151 HIV-negative homosexual men. The consequences of community involvement (e.g., volunteerism, activism) for the adoption of safer sex behaviors were also studied, based on a study of Latino gay men in Chicago (Ramires-Valles and Uris 2003). Although there were few Latino volunteers at the organizations, the conclusions are that community involvement resulted in increased self-esteem, empowerment, and safer sex behaviors. Another aspect investigated was the relationship between a history of child abuse (perpetration and victimization) and unprotected intercourse among gay/bisexual men (Bogart et al. 2005).

In the literature about risky behavior among MSM, the consequences of use and abuse of drugs for less-safe sexual practices is examined. Koblin et al. (2007) identified a relationship between unprotected receptive anal intercourse and amphetamine use among self-identified gay or bisexual men who attended public venues in New York City. Other qualitative study among gay and bisexual methamphetamine users in New York City (Halkitis et al. 2005) suggests that “while an individual may already be participating in risky sexual behaviors, they engage in methamphetamine use to enhance their sexual experience even further” (715), indicating that there is “a synergistic interrelationship between methamphetamine use and sexual risk behaviors” (715). The practice of “barebacking”<sup>14</sup> (Adam 2005; Grov and Parsons 2006) and experiences of social discrimination (Hucks 2005; Dodds 2006) are also described as contexts of HIV vulnerability among gay and bisexual people.

These studies indicate the importance of renewing efforts in terms of prevention strategies aimed at young gay men (Terto Jr. 2002). The initiatives also have to take into consideration that today’s young generation did not live through the devastating impact of the first decades of the epidemic in the gay community. There is now an accumulated knowledge and experience gained from



the activities in social movements, through scientific research within various disciplines, and also policy implementation on international, national, and local levels. A more committed politics of AIDS can be seen in most countries in the world after thirty years of living with the epidemic, including technical advances in testing and the new antiretroviral therapies that exist today.

Research among lesbian and bisexual women mainly focusing on the perception of AIDS risks stresses some innovative preventive challenges. The studies analyzed are based on population surveys, questionnaires, interviews, or discussions in focus groups. They have as target groups a variety of age, class, and color/race profiles – but the conclusions regarding AIDS risk perception among women who have sex with women (WSW) are possible to compare. International investigations (Dolan 2005; Marrazzo et al. 2005) as well as Brazilian studies (Mora and Monteiro 2010) revealed that the perception of low (reduced) HIV vulnerability is dominant among WSW; this perception was cited as a “lesbian immunity” view. Within this group, HIV/AIDS risk is mainly associated with having bisexual female partners or partners who are having sex with men, as HIV transmission is associated with direct contact with seminal secretions. The majority of the studies indicate that the ties established with sexual partners in women’s social networks express trust and minimize perceptions of HIV risk. In this sense, the notion of HIV protection among lesbians is related to lesbian identity, stable and/or exclusive relationships, and “knowing” the partner.

Some studies stress difficulties and limitations within prevention programs and health services in moving toward better sexual health among WSW (Dolan 2005; Facchini and Barbosa 2006; Goodenow et al. 2008). They affirm that the invisibility of the risk of AIDS among WSW is, in part, a consequence of the HIV/AIDS preventive discourse, which puts emphasis on penetrative sex practiced in gay and heterosexual contexts. It is also argued that educators and health professionals need to take into account women’s sexual history, as well as the differences between sexual identities and sexual practices.

This exploratory literature review indicates that the investigations of AIDS risk generally use social categories such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual as fixed social identities. As cited before, instead of these categories some studies use the terms MSM and WSW as a recognition that behaviors, not identities, place individuals at risk of HIV transmission. However, this wide-ranging definition does not solve the problem of the complexity and challenge of the categories used to describe sexual identities and sexual practices in health research, as discussed by Young and Meyer (2005).

Although there are limitations in our literature review, we propose that the process of sexual identity formation and the variations in sexual preference

during a lifetime are rarely discussed in the research on gender and sexuality or in programs (by governments, NGOs, or international donors) related to HIV/AIDS prevention. A few studies discuss the fact that sexual and gender identities and preferences are contextual and vary over time, particularly during the period of youth. Besides, as mentioned earlier, self-defined sexual and gender identifications are not always consistent with sexual practices (Diamond 2008; Pedersen and Kristiansen 2008; Mora and Monteiro 2010). Based on the arguments about the construction and expression of sexual and gender identities and preferences in today's societies, described in the theoretical section of the article, we argue that this aspect should be addressed in studies related to AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases as well as in prevention programs and campaigns, mainly targeting young people.

### **Some concluding remarks**

In our analysis we argue that sexual labels are culturally constructed and arbitrary as well as a sign of society's need to categorize and create borders, which are then transgressed by individuals. We understand that the sexual identity categories, as expressed in the lesbian, gay, and transvestite/transsexual movements, have been necessary in order to highlight important questions, and that the LGTBTT movements have won political and social rights for sexual minorities and made them more visible. But we wish to consider the possibility of discussing the place for people with sexual fluidity within the social movements and studies related to sexual health.

Sexual fluidity among young people is part of a process of identification and of becoming an adult in that particular location. It involves questions such as: Who am I in relation to society, parents, friends, and sexual partners? These questions of identification can be interpreted as a manifestation of a resistance against the heterosexual norms in society and/or the exclusion from wealth, education, and job opportunities, or other reasons discussed in the literature that we have cited. But they need a sounding board to be heard by health authorities, for civil society organizations to be aware of their existence, and for them to become visible in governmental policy.

We have not discussed sexual fluidity as a problem for the individual. According to the literature reviewed and the fieldwork we have done with young people in other projects related to AIDS prevention, some people prefer not to be labeled with any term related to their sexual behavior or desire, but we have not investigated whether sexual fluidity poses a special dilemma for the individuals. In this text we wish to call attention to the challenge for the CSOs, NGOs, and health authorities to reach these people with AIDS prevention campaigns. In other words, based on research related to AIDS risk perception among gays,

lesbians, and bisexuals, we argue that AIDS preventive discourses, developed both by governmental and by non-governmental organizations (including the gay, lesbian, and LGBTTT movements), are based on behavior categories or in fixed sexual and gender identity categories and therefore do not reach the group of people with sexually fluid identities or with no specific sexual identity who are highly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. The behavior categories (e.g., MSM and WSW) also have limitations as they neglect the influence of socio and cultural aspects of sexuality in the definition of social and sexual practices.

In our opinion, NGOs and government agencies working with prevention that are involved in the struggle for sexual and human rights and respect for sexual diversity should develop specific policies capable of transgressing cultural, sexual, and economic boundaries and differences. This discussion should consider the fact that “the pursuits labeled ‘identity politics’ are collective, not merely individual, and public, not only private” (Calhoun 1994: 21). Calhoun argues that the issue of identity is about recognition, legitimacy, and power. He characterizes “identity politics movements” as political while they involve refusing, diminishing, or displacing identities others wish to recognize in individuals. In other words, the private is also political. The fixed identities or categorical identities found in social movements and NGOs, instead of being a more complex view of individuals, are problematic. There is a tension between identity as an uncomplicated marker of individuality and identities as plural, cross-cutting, and divided between both the individual and collective levels (Calhoun 1994: 27). The wish for an identity of plurality or a politics of difference is what is vital for a democracy, that people participate in civil society organizations and political movements and are thereby given opportunities to influence the structure of society – a politics of location (Hall 1996: 2). One aspect of this is that young people’s voices related to sexual experiences and identification be considered by society. This view is part of our analysis and what we see as one of the challenges for AIDS prevention programs developed by civil society organizations and governmental health institutions.

## Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Peter Fry for his careful revision and critical contributions to the text. Any persistent problems are our own responsibility. We also want to thank the Swedish International Cooperation Agency – SIDA (project SWE-2007-094) for supporting Simone Monteiro’s trip to the HAINA conference.
- 2 Both authors work with research related to HIV/AIDS in Brazil, and this article includes experience and knowledge from earlier projects. S.M. works with young people and HIV/AIDS risk perception in Rio de Janeiro. M.F. works with AIDS governance and how the AIDS-NGOs are interacting with the state and other actors.
- 3 <http://www.aids.gov.br/>

- 4 An epidemic is considered “concentrated” when less than one percent of the general population, but more than five percent of any “high risk” group are HIV-positive. [http://www.unicef.org/aids/index\\_epidemic.html](http://www.unicef.org/aids/index_epidemic.html), accessed August 1, 2010.
- 5 The campaigns developed by NAP are available at the site: [www.aids.gov.br/mediacenter/](http://www.aids.gov.br/mediacenter/). They are organized by year and theme: Carnival, World Day, STD, MSM, IDU, and Prevention.
- 6 The concept of “identity” has been discussed and subject to critique in postcolonial and feminist literature (e.g., Butler 1990; Hall 1996; Mohanty 2003). The critique of ethnic, racial, and national conceptions of cultural identity and the “politics of location” also indicate the complexity of using the concept. But as Stuart Hall states, as long as we do not have any other concept we have to deconstruct, contextualize, and use it (Hall 1996: 1).
- 7 From studies conducted in Argentina, Pecheny (2004) argued that parents’ tolerance is associated with the subjects’ discretion in the expression of their sexual orientation. According to this viewpoint, due to fear of discrimination, the formation of a gay or lesbian sexual identity tends to involve a separation between the public and private spheres of life.
- 8 There is a debate in the social sciences between sexual orientation being considered a biological force, essentialism, and the other extreme, constructivism, which explains sexual orientation as a social construct. But the issue is more complex than this, and the constructivist model has to be placed in a political context (Calhoun 1994).
- 9 This debate leads us to the criticisms formulated by queer theory about the current forms of understanding social identities developed by sociological studies on sexual and gender minorities (Miskolci 2009).
- 10 <http://mensbiblio.xyonline.net/trans.html>
- 11 Based on his ethnographic work with transvestites in Bahia, Kulick (1992) notes that the gender system in Brazil is not only based on anatomical differences between the sexes, as in Europe and the United States, but on sexuality, or rather, on the role that sex organs play in sexual intercourse. Among the transvestites the one who does penetrative practices (active) is identified as masculine, the one who receives penetrative practices (passive) is identified as feminine or gay (“viado”). These roles were described by Fry (1982) in the representations of masculine homosexuality in Brazil, especially in the less advantaged classes, at the beginning of the 1980s.
- 12 There are few studies from African countries about MSM and AIDS (Monteiro 2009).
- 13 Relying on social network diagrams and the theory of planned behavior, Boily et al. (2005) argue that “a fraction of the changes in individual behavior are non-volitional and can be explained by a change in ‘sexual partner availability’ due to the transmission dynamics of HIV/AIDS before and after ART.”
- 14 “Barebacking” is derived from the word barebackers, a rodeo term meaning cowboys who ride a horse without a saddle. The term has become internationally known as slang for sex without a condom practiced in groups at private parties by serodiscordant men (HIV positive and negative).

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### 3 Shaking that ass:

#### Reggaetón as an embodiment of “low culture” to mark difference and privilege in contemporary Havana<sup>1</sup>

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The article explores the popularity of reggaetón music in contemporary Havana in order to trace hierarchies between different expressions of female eroticism. It further analyzes how sexual boundaries are consolidated through portraying certain gendered values as “in/correct.” The article is based on research among inhabitants in a relatively privileged section of Havana called Vedado, sometimes referred to as a white middle class *barrio*. The article explores how the interlocutors of the study, after the economic crisis in the 1990s, struggle to re-assert a position of privilege through making use of the gendered and sexualized inscriptions in the concept “cultural level.” This is a common marker of difference that has strongly classed and racialized connotations, which the author argues is gaining new importance in contemporary Cuba. As a key example, the dance style of reggaetón is portrayed as an embodiment of “low culture.” The article analyzes one everyday situation in detail, in which reggaetón plays a crucial role in drawing moral boundaries around dancing bodies. The discussion shows how the ascription of “low culture” to some reggaetón dancing bodies runs parallel to the ascription of “incorrect” gendered values. The article finally argues that in post-crisis Cuba, the concept of “cultural level” is being revitalized among the white middle class as a tool to re-establish an earlier position of privilege, relying heavily on the gendered and sexualized inscriptions of the concept.

El artículo explora la popularidad de la música reguetón en la Habana contemporánea, para examinar las jerarquías entre diferentes expresiones de erotismo femenino. Además, el artículo analiza la consolidación de fronteras a través de la representación de ciertos valores de género como ‘in/correctos’. El artículo está basado en un estudio entre habitantes de El Vedado, un barrio relativamente privilegiado en la Ciudad de la Habana, al cual a veces se refiere como un barrio de clase media blanca. El artículo explora cómo los interlocutores de este estudio, después de la crisis económica de los años 90, se esfuerzan en reafirmar una posición privilegiada haciendo uso de inscripciones generizadas y sexualizadas del concepto de “nivel cultural”. Éste es un marcador de diferencia común con fuertes connotaciones de clase y raciales, y la autora argumenta que éste concepto es cada vez más importante en la Cuba contemporánea. Un ejemplo clave serían las referencias al estilo de baile reguetón como una corporalización de “baja cultura”. El artículo analiza una situación cotidiana al detalle, en la cual el reguetón juega un rol clave para delinear límites morales alrededor de cuerpos que bailan. El argumento muestra cómo la atribución de “baja cultura” a algunos cuerpos que bailan reguetón es paralelo a la atribución de valores de género “in/correctos”. Para concluir, la autora sostiene que en la Cuba pos-crisis, el concepto “nivel cultural” se está re-vitalizando entre la clase media blanca como una forma de restablecer una antigua posición de privilegio, basándose en las inscripciones generizadas y sexualizadas del concepto.

This article takes the popularity of the music and dance style reggaetón in contemporary Havana as a point of departure to trace hierarchies between different expressions of female eroticism. The article explores how encouraged forms of eroticism are contrasted with a counter-image of “oversexualization,” and shows that these boundaries are consolidated through portraying certain gendered values as “in/correct.”

The article is based on research among interlocutors from the relatively privileged *barrio* Vedado, which is sometimes referred to as a “middle class” section of Havana (see Stout 2008: 724). Vedado is also a “whiter” section of Havana compared to other central *barrios*. This is a location of particular analytical interest at the current moment of Cuba’s history. At present, the white middle class in Havana is struggling to grapple with their new position following the economic crisis in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet bloc (see, e.g., Espina Prieto 2004). The crisis brought with it new and growing economic inequalities and the middle class could no longer count on historic privileges. This article explores how inhabitants in Vedado struggle to re-assert a position of privilege in post-crisis Cuba, making use of the gendered and sexualized inscriptions in the concept “cultural level.” The analysis is developed through a detailed reading of the moral distance that was marked against reggaetón music and dance.

### Reggaetón

The interlocutors of this study often complained about what they called the “oversexualization” of Cuban society and popular culture. The growing popularity of the musical style reggaetón<sup>2</sup> was presented as the prime illustration of this “oversexualization.” Reggaetón music typically has sexually explicit lyrics, and in Cuba the covers of reggaetón CDs are often illustrated with photos from pornographic magazines. Reggaetón was ever present in Havana at the time of this study, and its characteristic beat sounded everywhere; on radio and TV, at parties, people’s homes, in taxis, kiosks, and street vendors’ booths.

One common argument was that “reggaetón corrupts children.” One woman in her early thirties commented, “Children of today are much less innocent than when we were children. Now there is sex on TV all the time. And the reggaetón – the lyrics are over-explicit. They are all about the ass [*el culito*] and the pubis.” She complained about her niece’s father who gave his daughter reggaetón CDs for her birthday, “So I tell him, ‘Listen to the lyrics! You have to raise your daughter; think about what you give her!’”

Among the white middle class of Vedado, reggaetón was generally referred to with contempt. In 2006 I did an interview with Fernando, a man in his late twenties who was active in the Communist Youth League (UJC, *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas*).

Silje: What do you think of reggaetón music?

Fernando: I don't know, I don't like it.

Silje: But what do you think, about... the music, the lyrics.

Fernando: I don't know why it has come into fashion. It's probably because it's so simple, so simple, it doesn't require any comprehension or having a wide culture to accept it, far from it.

It has become very popular, it has become popular above all among adolescents, and I really see that as a danger. Even that values will be lost. Because the reggaetón songs don't transmit any value. On the contrary, all they do is to encourage *machista* [approx. male chauvinist] feelings, degradation of women, exaltation of man's virile values, things like that. And that I'm better than you, there's a certain competition among everyone, some even say, like, so-and-so [Fulano] is better. So these values don't seem correct to me. And, I don't like it, I usually say that this music is a neuron destroyer.

Silje: Come again?

Fernando: Neuron destroyer [laughs].

Silje: So you think that this affects people's values, or...?

Fernando: Yes, sometimes. There are two forms that one can... Almost always the people who listen to that... The thing is that it doesn't seem correct to me just to accept those lyrics. Just hear them and accept them. But well. There are people who don't really go with that, they dance, because it's true that it has a rhythm that sticks, it's very infectious, so people, well, they dance, and that's what it's made for, for dancing. And they try not to hear the lyrics so much, instead, it's good for dancing, for having a good time, and they forget a little bit about that.

But others don't. There are even those who don't dance, and learn the lyrics. So you can see that they don't like to dance, because they're shy, but they know all the songs. And they even repeat them with pride – right? – because they know the song. And they repeat all of it.

So, they come to believe what it's saying, this discourse that appears there, they incorporate it, sometimes, unconsciously. Unconsciously. They incorporate it, and then you can see it reflected in their attitudes. Above all in adolescents.

And it affects both males and females. And the females are relegated to the sexual role, the sexual object that is represented in the music. Just a sexual object. Set out in all the songs. A sexual object, an object to compete for, by men, a trophy. And we're all supposed to fight for that trophy, to dominate it, to conquer it, but in the end there's no value there for the woman. She has no rights, it's the height [emphasized] of *machismo*. It's like a musical representation of *machismo*.

Fernando almost admitted that he occasionally danced to reggaetón – “it’s true that it has a rhythm that sticks.” At the same time, he portrayed himself as able to listen to the lyrics with a critical distance. He made sure to establish an explicit distinction between “us” – who are educated, conscious, and intelligent enough to overlook the substance of the reggaetón lyrics – and those who were portrayed as listening “unconsciously.” Thus, Fernando argued, there was a risk that adolescents or those who did not have a very “wide culture” would incorporate the “values” of reggaetón lyrics. Consequently, the popularity of reggaetón was dangerous.

Fernando attributed the popularity of reggaetón to the lack of comprehension and “culture” of the reggaetón audience. “Culture” or “cultural level” is a common marker of difference in the Cuban context. One can talk about having “(high) culture” or “low culture,” or a high or low “cultural level.” According to Mette Rundle, to *have* cultural level in this context includes “moderation, decency, and restraint” as well as an “emphasis on non-promiscuous behavior, and preferences in style and taste of music, food, hair and clothing” (Rundle 2001: 8). Rundle argues that the discourse of “cultural level” has “become an idiom in which to articulate racialised and classed ideas of morality and behavior, without acknowledging it as such” (Rundle 2001: 8). Similarly, Nadine Fernandez suggests seeing “low culture” as “a class discourse embedded with a racial one” (Fernandez 2010: 138). In this context, playing on “high cultural values” and distancing oneself from “low culture” can work as symbolic strategies of “whitening” (see, e.g., *ibid.*: 137).

I argue that in today’s post-crisis in Cuba, the concept of “cultural level” has been revitalized to establish a position of privilege, relying heavily on the gendered and sexualized inscriptions of this concept. The rest of this article traces this process through examples from everyday encounters, after a brief contextualization of these matters in the context of revolutionary Cuba.

### **Official debate**

The popularity of reggaetón music has been debated in official state media, for instance among columnists in the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, which is published by the Communist Youth League (UJC) (see also Fairley 2006: 475). A couple of years ago, there was an extended debate in the online edition of this newspaper on the pros and cons of reggaetón (for a more recent example, see Córdova 2011). In this debate, one musician suggested that reggaetón implied a musical fall-back, and a cultural centre tried to raise interest in the classical Cuban dance style *danzón* to counteract the popularity of reggaetón among

youth (Castro Medel 2005; Caballero 2009). One article made the point that the “vulgarity” of reggaetón are not new, and that the same people who were fans of the Beatles in the 1960s now lash out against the reggaetón fans in the same pejorative terms that were once used against them (*Juventud Rebelde* 2006).

The columnist Julio Martínez Molina took a very critical stance in the debate. He characterized reggaetón as aggressive, offensive, vulgar, pornographic, and barbarian. Moreover, he suggested that reggaetón is degrading to women and represents an animalization of eroticism (Martínez Molina 2007a, 2007b). However, Martínez Molina made sure to point out that he “does not have Norwegian blood nor is a descendant of puritans” (Martínez Molina 2007c), that is, that he was not critical of the erotic content of this music *per se*.

The most positive stance was taken by art critic Rufo Caballero (Caballero 2009), who stated that he likes reggaetón and calls those who attack reggaetón “censors in the name of good taste, of high culture” (ibid.). He argued that reggaetón is not vulgar at all but represents a “culture from the street” that jokes with the “Cuban macho” but should not be taken at face value. Moreover, Caballero suggested that reggaetón is filled with a lot of “Cubanness,” and he can thus “not see any problem around the legitimacy of this kind of music” (ibid.; see also Estrada Betancourt 2009).

It is interesting how “Cubanness” is used as an argument in this debate, both to put the legitimacy of reggaetón in question and, inversely, to defend the same. For instance, through the contrast between reggaetón and the classical Cuban dance style *danzón*, the latter is automatically ascribed a higher value for its traditional Cuban authenticity. Also, we saw that Martínez Molina found it necessary to point out that his critique against reggaetón did not make him a cold northerner. This reflects a contrast between a positive erotization of “Cubanness” on the one hand, and a barbarian “animalization” of eroticism represented by reggaetón on the other. In comparison, the opposite stance, the defenders of reggaetón, choose to point to its alleged “Cubanness” to portray this music as more “legitimate.”

Fernando’s explanation of his contempt for reggaetón above reflected many of the same arguments as the debate in *Juventud Rebelde*. He too argued that reggaetón lyrics are offensive and degrading to women. Fernando’s reasoning, being a member of the UJC, and the semi-official debate in the online edition of the UJC newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, are interesting because their summary of the “incorrect values” represented by reggaetón are strikingly similar to the terms in which sexual education has been developed in Cuba.

## Sexual education

In revolutionary Cuba, sexual education was initiated in the 1970s (Smith and Padula 1996: 174; see also Krause-Fuchs 2007). Sexual education was considered to be a task for public health as well as psychological education and a political-ideological initiative; as “an essential step in the development of the new socialist person” (Leiner 1994: 69). The project of sexual education strove to undermine what were considered traditional sexual prejudices and taboos, “vestiges of the past,” of prerevolutionary Cuba (ibid.: 68). In short, sexual education was considered a means to create equality between men and women. A resolution from the First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) in 1975 stated:

A new morality exists, and because of it, new relations of equality between men and women have arisen. The new generation must leave behind the remainders of discrimination. The joint action of the whole society is to praise women and teach our children and youngsters the traditional chivalry of our people in its new proletarian dimensions. Adequate sex education will have a positive impact on the social relations between men and women, starting in the home, and scientifically reinforced in school, as presented in the study plans for sex education. The Youth Organizations must steer people towards normal, sound and fraternal relations among boys and girls, stimulate the harmonious development of young people and contribute to the establishment of relations of mutual cooperation in carrying out social duties, in the home and in the education of children. (PCC congress, cited in Leiner 1994: 69)

The norms that should accompany sexual behavior were formulated in relation to the new socialist society. Sexual education encouraged heterosexual eroticism (Guillard Limonta 2009: 66). What age young people started to have sex was considered less important; instead, sexual education focused on the *values* that should accompany “socialist sexuality,” such as love, solidarity, cooperation, mutual respect, and equality (Leiner 1994: 73; Smith and Padula 1996: 174ff.).

Within this new “socialist sexuality,” the gendered double standard should be eliminated (Smith and Padula 1996: 175). The Catholic ideal of female chastity and expectation of female virginity was termed “the most anachronistic symbol of woman’s devaluation and a sign of woman’s servitude” (Leiner 1994: 82). Instead, sexual education explicitly encouraged heterosexual female eroticism, it “challenged the traditional veneration of female virginity and sought to teach both men and women that women can and should enjoy their sexuality” (Smith 1992: 188). These ideals are also reflected in current educational television programs and campaigns. For instance, female eroticism is relatively frequently

discussed in television programs such as *Cuando una mujer*, a program designed by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). Norma Guillard Limonta sums up:

Women can now consciously separate pleasure from reproduction and enjoy their sexuality according to their individual needs. Autoeroticism has been validated, sex can be enjoyed before and after marriage, even during adolescence, and sexuality can be experienced in more intense ways. (Guillard Limonta 2009: 66)<sup>3</sup>

As the quote from the 1975 PCC congress clearly illustrates, from the outset sexual education intended to teach sexual behavior that was considered “normal” and “sound.” This included that sex should be practiced within monogamous heterosexual love relationships and stressed “a regard for reproduction as an essential component of sexuality” (Smith 1992: 188). Lois Smith and Alfred Padula suggest that “Castro would attempt to mold sexuality to serve the revolution” (Smith and Padula 1996: 169). Sexual education could be read as a means to “tame” “uncontrolled” sexual expressions and instead encourage sexual behavior of a kind that was considered compatible with “correct” socialist values. An important ingredient in these values was the ideal of equality between men and women.

Cuban sexual education has thus encouraged heterosexual eroticism while stressing that this should be accompanied by “correct” values. In my interpretation, sexual education has been constructed against a counter-image of uncontrolled sexual expressions that must be “molded” to fit socialist society. This counter-image is very similar to the use of reggaetón by its critics: as an illustration of a negative “oversexualization” of Cuban society and popular culture. Importantly, neither sexual education nor the critics of reggaetón criticize a positive eroticism, but they make use of a similar implicit contrasting image of a “sexual other” that is out of control. The “sound” sexual values that have been taught in sexual education – such as the importance of stable monogamous couple relationships of mutual respect and solidarity in which sex is based on love, in contrast to the risks and dangers of “promiscuity” – are the same values used by the critics of reggaetón to represent this music in terms of “oversexualization” and male chauvinism.

Importantly, “oversexualization” or “incorrect” sexual values are closely connected with certain gendered ideals. Sexual education was created as a political project to enhance equality and counter the gendered double standard for sexual behavior. The main criticism of reggaetón is that it is degrading to women, who are treated as sexual objects. Thus, in both cases there is a tight connection between a positive and celebrated eroticism and the specific gendered ideals that should accompany it so that it will not stray out of control.

### **Reggaetón as an embodiment of “low culture”**

To elaborate on this point, a situation from an everyday Havana will be presented at some length. The negotiations of this situation can be understood through the loading of reggaetón as a symbol of “low culture” among the white middle class in Vedado. Below, it is also shown how reggaetón becomes a marker of difference through conflating hierarchical sexual and gendered ideals.

One day during fieldwork I met with a group of friends at my place. We came to talk about an acquaintance we had in common, a young woman called Claudia. My friend Zusel explained to me that Claudia looked like the ideal Cuban woman: “She is the typical *criollita*; with a waist and big buttocks and breasts.” The subsequent conversation was saturated with slightly condescending remarks that Claudia liked to “show off” her beauty. Luis complained that Claudia was so conscious of her beauty that she hardly made an effort to be sociable; she just wanted attention for her attractive looks.

From these intricately spun evaluations, it seemed that Claudia provoked a combination of admiration and envy. It was generally acknowledged that she had the ideal curvy body, and it was also clear that she excelled in skills of playful flirting. All the same, Claudia was somewhat belittled through suggestions that she was “nothing but” gorgeous and all too conscious of her envied eroticized position.

A while after this conversation I met Claudia at a party. The atmosphere was radiant and everyone danced wildly in a big group while smoking and drinking. A friend of the hosts arrived at the party, and the group dancing was interrupted as he and Claudia started to dance close in reggaetón style. Claudia shook her hips and moved her buttocks against his pelvis, which he thrust in a rhythmic manner towards her. The rest of the group watched them dance. While some smiled and nodded at their dance, one guy whispered to me, “*Ella se come lo que le pasa por delante* [lit. she eats everything in her path; in this context approx. she throws herself at anyone].” Another acquaintance named the different guys at the party that Claudia had been involved with. I asked him whether people talked about this, and he replied, “No, she’s like this. She can do these kinds of things without people thinking that she’s vulgar or a slut [*puta*].”

Later that night, another group of guests arrived at the party. It was a friend of the hosts who had brought some of his neighbors from a less central and less privileged part of Havana. The new guests, among them a woman named Tania, were only barely acquainted with the rest of the guests. After kissing us hello, they joined the dance floor and Tania organized a line dance. While most of us



were busy trying to organize our steps, Tania and Claudia stood out as the most exceptionally skilful dancers. They kept dancing as the line dissolved and the rest of the group watched.

Tania and Claudia both accentuated their moves in reggaetón style, shaking their hips and breasts to the rhythm.<sup>4</sup> The situation developed into a playful dance competition in which Tania seemed to gain the upper hand. Suddenly, Claudia started exaggerating her dance moves and the crowd laughed approvingly. Tania, for her part, turned to her boyfriend and danced as if going down on him, touching his body from head to toe and then turned around to move her buttocks against his pelvis. All the time she was dancing with him he looked away, smoking his cigarette.

This situation abounds with subtle references to a wider symbolism around reggaetón. In Cuba, reggaetón dance style is often summed up as "having sex with your clothes on" (see Fairley 2006: 475). At the party, both Claudia and Tania danced with typical reggaetón dance moves, shaking their hips and breasts when dancing alone, and with a back-to-front rhythmic hip-shaking towards male pelvises. As Tania finished off her dance performance, no one who was present at the party could but notice her boyfriend's studied disinterest as Tania was "going down" on him. This performance captured all the characteristics of reggaetón as defined by its critics: an eroticized demonstration of a male power position of sexual arrogance towards his "trophy."

Interestingly, the crowd reacted in different ways to Claudia's and Tania's performances. Claudia was explicitly considered "not vulgar" while Tania's finishing performance was met with raised eyebrows and condescending glances. The differing interpretations of their dance were hence not related to the reggaetón dance style per se. Rather, I would stress that reggaetón was used as a symbol in a process of othering, through differing ascriptions of detachment and irony to these two performances. Even though Tania turned out to be the superior reggaetón dancer, Claudia managed to skillfully outclass her through changing the rules of the game. As Claudia suddenly fell into playful and exaggerated moves, she demonstrated detachment from the classic reggaetón dance style. This was greeted with approval and cheers by the group, and Claudia managed to create an ironic "we." In contrast, Tania was not interpreted as consciously playing with clichés. Instead, the raised eyebrows in her direction seemed to reflect an interpretation of her performance as "buying into" the stereotype of reggaetón.

The contrasting interpretations of Claudia and Tania can be understood through the analysis of sociologist Beverley Skeggs of how cultural characteristics are used to fix certain groups into determined social positions, so as to enable others to become mobile and flexible. Skeggs writes:

Some bodies can be expanded rather than condensed. At the same time they become a resource for others. [...] some forms of culture are condensed and inscribed onto social groups and bodies that then mark them and restrict their movement in social space, whilst others are not but are able to become mobile and flexible. (Skeggs 2004: 1f.)

I suggest that the irony and detachment that Claudia used to change the rules of the game and consolidate group solidarity with her could be read as such an “expansion.” She was read as a *performance*, which, in the words of Skeggs, “requires conscious action, it is knowledgeably and consciously enacted” (Skeggs 1997: 134). The condescending reaction to Tania, on the other hand, seemed to deny her the potential of a distant, detached performance, which I read in terms of a “condensation.” Claudia could use the reggaetón symbolism as a resource – to simultaneously play with and distance herself from – while Tania was positioned by the same symbolism. Thus, the fixing and condensation of Tania was the condition of Claudia’s mobility – irony, playfulness, detachment (see Skeggs 2004: 26). Skeggs argues that to impose fixity onto those from whom one claims moral distance through ascribing essential characteristics to them is a form of symbolic domination (ibid.: 4).

The differing interpretations of Claudia and Tania can be understood through the common view among my interlocutors of reggaetón as a symbol of “low culture.” According to Fernando, who was introduced at the outset of the article, reggaetón was popular among the less educated because it was so “simple” that it did not require any comprehension or “wide culture.” Reggaetón fans, he argued, “incorporated” the message of its lyrics and acted accordingly. But then there were other people – like him – who could listen to reggaetón music with distance and detachment without taking the lyrics seriously, and just dance to the contagious beat of the rhythm. In my reading of the situation above, Claudia’s ironic performance was clearly ascribed the latter detachment. The essentializing reading of Tania, on the other hand, as “buying into” or “incorporating” the cliché of reggaetón, denied her this ironic distance.

Tania’s superior reggaetón dance skills together with her “provocative” clothing and her living in a poorer part of Havana all melted into one to ascribe “low culture” to her. Thus, reggaetón became one of several markers of difference in the encounter between Claudia and Tania. Claudia managed to create an ironic “we,” while Tania was interpreted as acting in line with the reggaetón symbolism for which my interlocutors had so much contempt.

After the party I walked home with Zusel and Ernesto. We talked about the events at the party and entered upon the subject of Tania and her friends.

Ernesto: They're showing off. They are hottie wannabes [*Se hacen las jévitás ricas*]. That's the only thing they do, that's the only thing they have. They asked me to put on reggaetón music, or Michael Jackson. I told them that fortunately I didn't have that music. The blond girl [Tania] said to me, “You've got to be up to date with what's trendy! [*¡Hay que estar al tanto de la moda!*]”

Zusel said that she knew of Tania and her boyfriend through another friend. Suddenly, Zusel mentioned that Tania's boyfriend beat her.

Silje: Why is she with him?

Zusel: They're a good match, she wants a macho man [*machote*] who tells her that she's sexy.

Silje: But why is such a hot girl with such an... un-attractive man?

Zusel: You mean fat?

Ernesto: Maybe because he gives her what she wants, she wants to feel sexy, he tells her that she is. She dances like that, not only for him, but for everyone else, for herself. She's hot, that is the only thing she is.

Zusel: That woman has never had an orgasm in her whole life. She's acting all that, but she's so superficial and unhappy that she has never had an orgasm.

In this conversation Zusel and Ernesto concisely ascribed to Tania a number of interrelated characteristics. Some of their points will be approached here. First, the numerous and contradictory sexualizing references to Tania are explored. Second, the analysis turns to the suggestion that Tania wanted a *machote*, a macho man, together with the sudden mentioning of her boyfriend's abuse. I suggest that the ascription of these specific characteristics to Tania – characteristics that can also be interpreted in terms of reggaetón symbolism – were further means to ascribe “low culture” to her.

It is worth noting the terms used to frame Tania in the conversation above. Interestingly, the exact same wordings that were once used about Claudia were now used about Tania. Both Claudia and Tania were referred to as “just” hot, “nothing but,” and “showing off.” To again borrow from Skeggs, they were portrayed as “only appearance, lacking in substance” (Skeggs 1997: 108). However, there was a crucial difference between the irony and detachment ascribed to Claudia, and the interpretation of Tania. In the encounter between the two, these belittling characterizations *moved* from Claudia to Tania. In their

encounter, Claudia was *not* vulgar or “showing off”; instead, she was read as detached and playfully ironic. In contrast, all the belittling suggestions that were once used about Claudia were now ascribed to Tania, that she was “showing off” and “nothing but hot.”

Tania was recurrently referred to as “acting” or being a “wannabe.” The verb used was “*hacerse*,” which in this context means to pretend, to play or act something. Tania *se hace* – acts – the hot chick; she is a “hottie wannabe.” *Se hace* – she pretends – to be a woman who has orgasms. *Hacerse* may also mean to “become” something, and this meaning could potentially ascribe to Tania a conscious performance, that is, a certain mobility (Skeggs 2004: 1f.). However, in my interpretation of the situation, this terminology was not used to ascribe to Tania the same ironic detachment that was ascribed to Claudia’s performance. The essentializing reading of Tania as buying into the cliché of reggaetón opens rather to a revelation of her as a “fake,” as “acting” something that she is not. If read in relation to the statement that “she is *only* hot,” the suggestion that Tania is an act – she is just pretending, in short, a fake – could even be taken as a further condescending remark about her lacking substance: she is not *even* that which she is “only.” With Skeggs, this could be understood as a form of symbolic violence that effectively essentialized Tania and denied her Claudia’s mobility and detachment.

The numerous sexualizing references to Tania could be read in line with the same argument. The suggestion that Tania was a “hottie wannabe” who wanted to “show off” that she was sexy was clearly double-sided. On the one hand, the sexualizing references to Tania could be taken to express a certain envy and admiration of a celebrated eroticized position. This implies that Zusel’s argument that Tania had “never had an orgasm” again worked to reveal her as a “fake”: she “acted all that,” portrayed herself as hot and sexy, but she was “actually” a sexually unsatisfied woman. With this argument, Zusel took on a power position through switching potential envy and admiration into a slightly patronizing pity.

Let me quickly recapitulate the conversation that preceded the events at the party. On that occasion, Claudia was talked about with a combination of envy and slightly condescending remarks about her being “just hot” and “showing off.” However, in the aftermath of the party, the characterizations of Claudia turned to a positive and “appropriate” erotization. Her ascribed eroticism was redrawn, from envy and somewhat belittling remarks, to be included in the “we” that she managed to create at the party. This “we” was created through approving laughter that simultaneously ridiculed Tania.

Claudia walked clear of the disdain and contempt that characterized the reading of Tania’s performance. Hence, Claudia’s behavior – playful flirting,

“showing off,” many boyfriends, reggaetón dance – was approved and even celebrated. Tania’s ditto and similar behavior, however, was read as the “wrong” sort of female sexual behavior – “too much,” vulgar, out of control – through which she was essentialized and denied Claudia’s playfulness and detachment.

Claudia’s positive eroticism could be included in this “we” through a process of othering in which “low culture” was ascribed to Tania. In this process, reggaetón became an important marker of difference that opened to creating hierarchies within female eroticism. The numerous sexualizing references to Tania thus worked to demarcate a line between Claudia’s “appropriate” sexual behavior that was celebrated and included in the “we,” and Tania’s behavior that was imbued with reggaetón symbolism and thus interpreted as “wrong,” cliché, and “low culture.”

### Gendered violence

Let me now turn to the question of how to understand Zusel’s suggestion that Tania wanted a *machote*, a macho boyfriend, together with her sudden revelation that Tania’s boyfriend beat her. I would argue that both these characterizations play a crucial role in a process of othering. Zusel’s statements play on a common stereotype held among my relatively privileged interlocutors that lower-class women, due to their ascribed “low cultural level,” want men who are dominant to the extent that they beat women. In 2005 I interviewed Marilú, a woman in her mid-twenties, who elaborated on this point. In our interview we sat pondering the question of whether *machismo* was changing among younger generations. Marilú suddenly interrupted our discussion and argued:

I don’t know, people of a lower level, people like that, who haven’t studied, those men are more *machista*, like that, you see?

I don’t know if you have noticed it here, but I’ve been out and I’ve seen men who hit women, in front of everyone, punching them and everything. And you’re like, what’s up with that? But not everyone’s like that. [...]

I think that often it’s not so much the man’s fault, because if you’re there, it’s because you want to be there, because you like being punched, that you like the man to be like that.

Silje: So you mean that women are *machista*...?

Marilú: If a woman is together with a man who is *machista*, it’s because she is a masochist, she likes it. Because a man who raises his hand to you, the first day you do like this [raising the flat of her hand to gesture stop], and that’s it, you see? He doesn’t even have to do that, you see?

In a somewhat misplaced interruption of Marilú’s argument, I tried out a suggestion that was often repeated among my interlocutors, namely that women who are exposed to violence by their male partners “are more *machista* than the men who beat them,” because, it was argued, they want to be with a “real man” who beat them. Marilú’s argument was headed in a slightly different direction but in the end seemed to reach the same conclusion: women are beaten because they like it; they are “masochists.” The way Marilú wound up her argument could be read as a gesture of othering, as she suggested that “we,” she and I, would never accept being beaten, implying a contrast to the “masochist women.” This may also be read in line with Marilú’s initial argument when she suggested that *machismo* was a sign of a “lower [cultural] level.”

This explanation of violence against women in heterosexual couple relationships was very common among my interlocutors. With an argument similar to Marilú’s, one middle-aged woman told me in an interview, “There are women whose husbands beat them, and still they stay with the man. And what, do they like it? They have to like it” (see also Lang 2009: 123).

Sociologist Miriam Lang has analyzed gendered violence in Cuba in relation to the post-1959 practice of social control of the “private sphere” through the work of the neighborhood committees, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). Lang shows that “specifically in cases of violence against women the actors of social control do not feel authorized to intervene in the citizen’s private sphere” and argues that “in Cuba, individual rights of women violated by their partners do not figure among the motives that motivate an intervention of state actors in the private sphere” (Lang 2009: 132, my translation). Interestingly, the local saying *entre marido y mujer nadie se debe meter* – between husband and wife nobody should interfere – is used by police officers *not* to interfere when women report abuse from their partners.<sup>5</sup> Lang shows that when a woman is exposed to violence it is viewed by the police and representatives of the CDR as an individual problem (ibid.: 131). Moreover, the violence is considered *her* problem; it “is ‘privatized’ as a personal problem of the affected woman” (ibid.: 139, my translation). In cases when police or doctors intervene against domestic violence, these are considered interventions against problems of the public order or alcoholism (ibid.: 132).

Domestic and sexual violence for a long time remained largely unaddressed within official discourse in Cuba.<sup>6</sup> When addressed, it was often related to economic problems and crowded housing.<sup>7</sup> At times, it has been formulated as a legacy of a capitalist past (Lang 2009: 133), and consequently it is argued that in Cuba, the problem of violence is considerably less than in the rest of the world (Lundgren 2003: 58; Proveyer Cervantes et al. 2010: 67). Miriam Lang argues that the prevalence of violence has been made invisible because the official

discourse has related violence to women’s emancipation (Lang 2009: 133) and that recognition of this problem hence might question the achievements of the socialist revolution (ibid.: 134; see also Lundgren 2003: 58).

These official explanations of gendered violence must be understood in relation to the general model of change underlying Cuban official discourse. Within this model, a generalized access to education and broad educational campaigns from above are thought to contribute to new and more “correct” values among the population, much in the same manner as the construction of sexual education. *Machista* values are referred to as “vestiges from the past,” as “backward” values from “old bourgeois society,” which will wither with new generations that have been brought up in a socialist society (see Leiner 1994: 68; see also Lang 2009: 138f.). This serves as a context for understanding how violence is explained as an expression of “low culture,” and portrayed as a trait among those less educated who have not yet left behind such “backward” behavior. It also contextualizes the pathologizing comments among my interlocutors that women exposed to violence are “masochists” and probably “like to be beaten.” In 2005 I interviewed Camila, a lawyer who explained to me why laws on equality and women’s rights are not always followed in practice: “It always depends on people’s upbringing, people’s level [*nivel*].” I would suggest that such individualizing explanations are related to the attribution of *machismo* and violence to a “low cultural level” against which “we” – Marilú, Camila, and my other interlocutors – could claim moral distance.

## Conclusion

Zusel’s suggestions above, that Tania wanted a *machote* and that her boyfriend beat her, might be understood in light of the interconnections between *machismo*, violence, and a “low cultural level.” These suggestions became ways to demarcate difference and ascribe “low culture” to Tania. Reggaetón became one among other tools in this process, due to its connotations of *machismo* and “low culture.” All the elements that were used to depict Tania – her dance style, her musical taste, her “showing off” and being a “fake,” and finally her *machote* boyfriend who beat her – became tools in a process of othering and exclusion. This made it possible for Claudia to create a detached and ironic “we” and for Zusel to elevate her self-ascribed “cultural level” – both at Tania’s expense.

It is worth noting the intertwinement between sexual and gendered ideals in this process of othering. The process of ascribing “inappropriate” sexual behavior to Tania ran parallel to the ascription of “incorrect” gendered values. Reggaetón symbolism was used to imbue Tania with “low culture,” on the one hand through disdainful sexualizing references, and on the other through letting her embody “incorrect” gendered ideals – *machismo* and violence/“masochism.”

Thus, the hierarchy that was established between Claudia’s and Tania’s sexual performances was *accentuated* by these gendered ideals, through using “low culture” as a marker of difference.

Due to its strongly gendered and sexualized inscriptions, reggaetón became a very central symbol to mark moral distance for the inhabitants of the relatively privileged *barrio* Vedado in Havana. This should be understood as closely related to the historic moment of post-crisis Cuba. In a situation of new and unfamiliar differentiations, earlier hierarchies are being renegotiated. In this context, negotiations around ideals of gender and sexuality have taken center stage in the white middle-class struggle to re-establish an earlier position of privilege.

## Notes

- 1 This article is based on a chapter from the doctoral dissertation *Heterosexual Havana: Ideals and hierarchies of gender and sexuality in contemporary Cuba* (Lundgren 2011). The dissertation explores how difference and hierarchies are articulated in the negotiation of ideals around gender and sexuality in Vedado, Havana. The material of the dissertation was collected during two extensive periods of fieldwork in the period 2004–2007 (with a re-visit in 2010), through methods of participant observation, individual and focus-group interviews, and the recording of official media and popular culture (see *ibid.*).
- 2 See Wooldridge (2007); see also Fairley (2006), Colón Pichardo (2008), and Díaz Calderín (2008).
- 3 Guillard Limonta stresses, however, that this has not included lesbian eroticism (Guillard Limonta 2009: 66; see also Saunders 2009).
- 4 Jan Fairley describes this female reggaetón dance style, which “involves fast undulating and turning/swirling of the area from below shoulders and chest to pelvis (as if one was hula hoop-ing or belly dancing)” (Fairley 2006: 472).
- 5 For an example of this, see *Negra cubana tenía que ser* (2006).
- 6 See Htun (2007: 120); see also Vera Estrada and Díaz Canals (2008: 481f.), referring to Pérez González (2003).
- 7 In the early 1990s, the Casas de Orientación de la Mujer y la Familia were founded by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), which would offer legal advice and psychological support to women exposed to violence (see Lang 2009: 136). In 1997, the Grupo Nacional de Trabajo para la Atención y la Prevención de la Violencia Familiar (GNTV) was founded (see Proveyer Cervantes et al. 2010: 68) to coordinate measures against gendered violence at an institutional level, educating public health workers, police, and political representatives on gendered violence.
- 8 Since the 1990s, there is a growing body of research on gendered violence in Cuba (see Proveyer Cervantes et al. 2010: 67; see also Muñoz Ferrer et al. 1998; Ortiz and Morales 1999; Artilles de León 2000; Culay 2000; García Méndez 2000, undated; Hasanbegovic 2001; Proveyer Cervantes 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Espina Sierra 2002; Rodríguez 2006)



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## 4 El mundo femenino en la “antipoesía” de Nicanor Parra

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Este artículo se propone analizar la visión del mundo femenino en la obra del poeta chileno Nicanor Parra. En ella, puede observarse una clara distinción entre las mujeres que pertenecen a su entorno familiar y las que son ajenas a él. Esta contraposición pone en evidencia la admiración del poeta por las mujeres de su propia sangre, sujetos femeninos que actúan en el ámbito doméstico y que dan máxima prioridad al bienestar de la familia. Como contrapartida, las mujeres que no pertenecen a su ámbito familiar, los amores fracasados del poeta, sólo provocan sufrimiento y dejan huellas en este sujeto masculino frustrado.

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The article explores Chilean poet Nicanor Parra's vision of the world of women. The research findings reveal an interesting divide between the representation of women belonging to Parra's family and those who do not. The poet presents his appreciation and admiration for women who conform to traditional domestic roles and unconditionally devote their lives to family. Simultaneously, however, in representations of women who do not belong to his kin, the poet's failed love affairs apparently leave a frustrated subject who conveys rage and intolerance.

En la figura del poeta chileno Nicanor Parra Sandoval se encuentra el precursor de lo que ha sido identificado como "antipoesía", entendida ésta como una reacción contra las corrientes poéticas tradicionales españolas y latinoamericanas que hasta los años cuarenta habían estado de moda (Piña, 2007: 13-40).<sup>1</sup> Con el propósito de mejor entender el mundo conceptual de la trayectoria poética de Parra, y en particular su modo de mirar el mundo femenino, es importante tener en cuenta que sus ideas poéticas desafiaron a los que opinaban que la poesía debiera ser culta, solemne y retórica, ya que su manera de componer consistía sobre todo en un escaso uso de palabras y en la ausencia total de figuras retóricas y de metáforas (Piña, 2007: 23 y Parra, 1985: x-xi). El papel de la poesía debería ser el tratar de los asuntos reales y actuales donde los problemas culturales, políticos y religiosos sobresalieran (Parra, 1985: x). La antipoesía entonces presenta elementos de la vida diaria de los espacios urbanos, los problemas comunes y la cultura cotidiana, y enfoca la existencia humana y la frustración, el dolor, la muerte, la locura, el caos y la falta de seguridad que aquélla conlleva (Lastra 1968).<sup>2</sup> El antihéroe de los antipoemas vive aislado en un mundo hostil sin sentido sobre el cual 'el cielo se está cayendo a pedazos' (Parra, 1985: 2).

Aunque los temas de Nicanor Parra son múltiples y de gran interés por su contenido y estilo narrativo, coloreados con el humor negro y el lenguaje coloquial, para el estudio aquí presentado se analizará en particular la visión del antipoeta del mundo femenino enfocando la distinción que hace y las fronteras que construye entre las mujeres que pertenecen a su entorno familiar y las que son ajenas a él.

### Parra y su mundo femenino consanguíneo

*... nada más objetivo que la madre  
centro de gravedad  
piedra angular de este mundo y el otro  
quién va a ponerla en tela de juicio  
ni malo de la cabeza que fuera  
es por esto que yo no digo nunca  
padre nuestro que estás en el cielo:  
con el perdón del respetable público  
me parece más atinado decir  
madre nuestra que estás en el cielo  
santificado sea tu nombre ...*  
(Parra, 1985: 166)

En la trayectoria poética de Nicanor Parra, se encuentra una diferencia digna de atención entre la representación de las mujeres de la familia del poeta y las que no pertenecen a su familia. Resulta necesario apuntar que con "mundo

consanguíneo" se refiere a aquellas parientes más cercanas de cada hombre, como la madre, la abuela, la hermana y la hija, mientras que a las esposas, quienes suelen pertenecer al ámbito familiar según la definición estándar, en este análisis no se las considera familiares. Primero, porque vienen "desde afuera", es decir, no son consanguíneas del autor / protagonista, y segundo, porque en la mayoría de los poemas estudiados más adelante, no aparece claramente designado si se trata de esposas o simplemente amantes.

En la mayor parte de la poesía de Nicanor Parra se advierte que las mujeres miembros de su familia poseen los atributos de la mujer tradicional y en varios de sus poemas su admiración por la "fémina" que sigue las costumbres tradicionales es sumamente notable. Con frecuencia, las familiares son representadas como madres leales y piadosas que cumplen con sus deberes domésticos y se sacrifican con devoción por la familia, aunque les cueste sufrimiento, sudor y lágrimas. Parra parece tener tanto respeto por ellas que a menudo las considera casi seres divinos. Resulta aparente relacionar tales descripciones al tal nombrado "marianismo" el que ha sido fuertemente vinculado con las tradiciones sociales y culturales en las sociedades hispanas desde la antigüedad (Jehenson, 1995: 3). El concepto de marianismo se origina en el mito de la figura materna, la Virgen María, y se refiere sobre todo a la pasividad femenina, la pureza, la reproducción y la idealización de la maternidad. Según el término, la mujer ideal debe ser inmaculada espiritualmente y eternamente generosa. Esta mujer ideal es sentimental, dulce, intuitiva, indecisa, dócil, servicial, vulnerable y tímida. Es, además, 'piadosa y respetuosa de las leyes religiosas.' (Stevens, 91, 96).<sup>3</sup>

En el poema *Hay un día feliz* tomado de la primera parte del libro *Poemas y antipoemas* (1954), citado aquí de la antología *Nicanor Parra: Chistes par(r)a desorientar a la (policía) poesía* (1989),<sup>4</sup> se observa esa idealización del poeta de la mujer tradicional reflejada en las mujeres de su familia. Los versos resumen el regreso del protagonista a la aldea natal y al andar por las calles recuerda su pasado provinciano. El tono del poema es sobre todo nostálgico, aunque la ironía aparece como trasfondo aparente. Recuerda a su familia, su abuela, sus hermanos y hermanas, a su padre y a su madre. Cuando pasa por la iglesia del pueblito, reconoce 'La mirada celeste' de su abuela (1989: 19). La imagen de la abuela que revela parece ser de una mujer tradicional y religiosa, porque la recuerda mirando 'la torre más alta de la iglesia' (1989: 19), a la que admira y respeta. Más adelante en el poema, estando frente a una arboleda, surgen de sus recuerdos las hermanas que ha perdido y la música que las envolvía. Habla de ellas con reverencia y cariño: 'Y cuando estuve frente a la arboleda / Que alimenta el oído del viajero / Con su inefable música secreta / Recordé el mar y enumeré las hojas / En homenaje a mis hermanas muertas.' (1989: 20). Cuando se acerca a la casa de su juventud, la casa paterna, primero recuerda a su padre: 'Lo reconozco bien, éste es el árbol / Que mi padre plantó frente a la puerta / (Ilustre padre que en sus buenos tiempos / Fuera mejor que una

ventana abierta). / Yo me atrevo a afirmar que su conducta / Era un trasunto fiel de la Edad Media / Cuando el perro dormía dulcemente / Bajo el ángulo recto de una estrella.' (1989: 20-21). Aquí el respeto que muestra por su padre no es tan aparente como el que posee por su madre, como se puede ver más adelante en el poema. Primero, lo más positivo que el poeta puede decir de él es que era mejor que una ventana abierta. Segundo, la descripción irónica del padre revela que su manera de pensar y su comportamiento son antiguos, comparables a la mentalidad de la gente de la Edad Media. Tercero, lo compara con un perro durmiendo. El hecho de que el perro / padre duerme bajo el cielo iluminado por las estrellas, revela que, según Nicanor, su padre no posee los méritos exigidos de un hombre verdadero dado que un individuo durmiendo está en un estado de inconciencia e inactividad. La diferencia entre la presentación de sus padres subraya la estimación que tiene por su madre. Cuando huele las violetas, le llega su recuerdo: 'A estas alturas siento que me envuelve / El delicado olor de las violetas / Que mi amorosa madre cultivaba / Para curar la tos y la tristeza.' (Parra 1989: 21). La madre está representada como una enfermera amorosa cuyo método de curar es por medio de la naturaleza, un hecho que lleva la atención de nuevo al artículo anteriormente mencionado de Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, debido a que en él se revela que en oposición a lo masculino: 'Lo femenino, [...], denota el ámbito de lo pasivo e inconsciente atribuyéndosele los referentes naturales de la tierra, el agua y la luna' (1986: 3).

En el poema *Clara Sandoval* publicado por primera vez en el libro *Hojas de Parra* (1985), pero acá tomado de la antología antes citada, *Nicanor Parra: Chistes par(r)a desorientar a la (policía) poesía* (1989), el poeta, aún con más detalle, enfatiza la glorificación de su madre. Esta vez, Nicanor reseña los esfuerzos que ella hacía para sobrevivir a la pobreza y para mantener a su familia a flote. La describe haciendo los trabajos domésticos y los días y noches que pasa cosiendo: 'cuando no se la ve detrás de su máquina / cose que cose y vuelta a coser / -hay que dar de comer a la familia- / quiere decir que está pelando papas / o zurciendo / o regando flores / o lavando pañales infinitos' (1989: 198). Es una mujer que nunca pierde la paciencia a pesar de enfrentarse constantemente con las amarguras de la vida, y parece que acepta su destino porque eligió casarse con un bohemio. En su libro *Latin-American Women Writers: Class, Race and Gender* (1995), Myriam Ivonne Jehenson, al hablar del marianismo, explica: 'Haciendo referencia a la Virgen María, de donde deriva el término, el marianismo glorifica a la mujer que sufre y se sacrifica, que es pura y casta, devota de las tareas domésticas y de la maternidad.' (1995: 3-4). Esta descripción coincide con la de Parra sobre Clara Sandoval que, según los versos del poema, es una viuda joven y religiosa que hace todo lo posible para llevar adelante a sus hijos y para cuidarlos: 'mientras más sufrimiento / más energía

para seguir en la rueda / para que el Tito pueda ir al Liceo / para que la Violeta no se muera' (1989: 199). Además, el poeta revela con asombro que '...todavía le queda tiempo para llorar / a esta viuda joven y buenamoza / que pasará a la historia / como la madre menos afortunada de Chile / y todavía le queda tiempo para rezar' (1989: 199). Al fin del poema quedan aparentes el amor, el agradecimiento y la compasión que el poeta siente por su madre, central de su infancia.

El tema de la madre continúa en el poema *LXII de Nuevos sermones y prédicas del Cristo de Elqui* (1979), pero esta vez no habla de Clara Sandoval en particular, sino de las madres en general. Abarca el tema del amor y la admiración profunda que los hijos sienten por sus madres. Además, el hablante del poema compara la importancia de la madre con la del padre donde la representación de los dos recuerda el poema *Hay un día feliz* en el cual explica el menosprecio que siente por su padre a diferencia del respeto por su madre todopoderosa. El primer verso del poema *LXII* da un indicio revelador de su opinión al revelar que: 'Lo primero la madre' (Parra, 1985: 164), 'centro de gravedad' y la 'piedra angular de este mundo y el otro' que 'se encuentra por encima de todo', mientras, según el hablante, nadie puede estar seguro de quién es realmente su padre biológico (Parra, 1985: 164-6). Por eso, la importancia de la madre sobrepasa a todo ya que 'la oración más solemne de todas' es manipulada por el vate para producir esta otra: 'madre nuestra que estás en el cielo / santificado sea tu nombre...' (Parra, 1985: 166). La última parte del poema es de especial interés porque el poeta da indicaciones sobre la mentalidad restringida de una sociedad machista, patriarcal y católica: 'desde el punto de vista masculino / sé que estoy diciendo una barbaridad / al reemplazar el padre por la madre / en la oración más solemne de todas' (Parra, 1985: 166).

En el antipoema *XL* del mismo libro, Parra gira la atención en torno al amor incondicional que la madre siente por su hijo porque, según su presentación, no importa si un hijo se dedica a la criminalidad, la madre lo perdonará siempre. Según el antipoeta, ella 'lo purifica todo con su llanto / sueña con él cuando tenía 5 años / y lo ve manejando su triciclo / y después la Primera Comunión... / no lo verá jamás puñal en mano' y aunque lo condenan a la muerte por sus delitos y todos se olvidarán hasta de la ubicación de su tumba, 'ella que nunca dudó de él / lo seguirá llamando hijo querido.' (Parra, 1985: 150).

Sentimientos de admiración por las parientas del poeta, se encuentran reveladas en el antipoema *Defensa de Violeta Parra* de la *Obra gruesa* (1969), donde elogia a su hermana recién muerta. Presenta un homenaje a su vida donde habla de las dificultades que la cantante enfrentaba, igual que sus logros profesionales y su don artístico. Parra sitúa a su hermana en un pedestal y la relaciona con la naturaleza: 'Dulce vecina de la verde selva / Huésped eterno



de abril florido', 'Bailarina del agua transparente / Árbol lleno de pájaros cantores', 'Flor de la cordillera de la costa / Eres un manantial inagotable / De vida humana', 'Violeta volcánica', 'mujer árbol florido' (Parra, 1989: 108-13). La compara con animales inocentes y sosegados como pájaros y corderos, animales frecuentemente relacionados con la fe cristiana, la divinidad y la paz. Para Nicanor, su hermana es una 'gaviota de agua dulce', un 'ave del paraíso terrenal' y, por la supuesta oposición que la Violeta recibía de la autoridad del país (los 'tristes funcionarios / Grises como las piedras del desierto'), la llama un 'corderillo disfrazado de lobo' (Parra, 1989: 109-11). Los adjetivos que el poeta usa para describir la personalidad de su hermana demuestran respeto y elogio. Según él, es una mujer 'piadosa' que siempre se preocupa por los demás, es 'admirable' por sus talentos variados, es 'doliente' por andar en contra de la autoridad, es una 'Viola chilensis' por su orgullo por la patria y por rescatar la música folklórica del país, pero tristemente es una 'Viola funebris' dado que se rindió a la vida y se suicidó, un hecho que su hermano tiene dificultades de aceptar: '¿Por qué no te levantas de la tumba / A cantar / a bailar / a navegar / En tu guitarra?' (Parra, 1989: 108-13).

Otro poema donde sobresale la presentación del amor platónico y la melancolía por las mujeres de su familia es *Catalina Parra* de la primera sección del poemario *Poemas y antipoemas* (1954). Los versos están dirigidos a su hija Catalina, fruto de su primer matrimonio con Anita Troncoso. Catalina, nace en 1943, el año cuando Parra viaja a los Estados Unidos para estudiar en la Universidad de Brown, haciendo entendible que el tono nostálgico y triste del poema domine (Zúñiga, 2001: 38). El poeta está preocupado por el futuro de su hija, no quiere que pierda su honor y su virtud, cuestión que se aprecia cuando desea 'que esta rosa nunca / pierda su fragancia' (Parra, 1989: 29), quizás, porque en la sociedad chilena de la época, la virtud y la honra de la mujer eran factores requeridos para mantener una reputación respetable para ella y su familia. En su libro *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940* (1995), la historiadora británica y profesora, Asunción Lavrin, enfatiza que: 'Una mujer joven se encontraba sujeta a los conceptos tradicionales de honor, según los cuales la preservación de la virginidad era el criterio para distinguir lo bueno de lo malo. La familia de la mujer tenía que comprobar que se conducía de manera respetable, ya que su honor personal suponía (o ponía en juego), además, el honor de la familia.' (1995: 126).

Al resumir entonces lo estudiado, aparece que en todos los poemas citados, la visión de Nicanor Parra de las madres y las mujeres que pertenecen directamente a su familia, es favorable, además que el poeta estima a las mujeres que llevan a cabo sus roles tradicionales. Sin embargo, como se argumenta a continuación, la representación "Parriana" de la mujer ajena, la otra, viene tomando un rumbo bastante diferente.

## Parra y su mundo femenino no consanguíneo

*se  
confirma  
mi tesis  
es el  
amor  
lo que destruye  
al hombre  
(Parra, 1989: 132)*

La diferencia entre la representación de las mujeres de la familia de Nicanor Parra y las que no caen dentro del ámbito familiar, resalta a la vista. A partir de los años treinta, cuando el poeta estaba entrando a la madurez, la sociedad chilena por varias razones estaba cambiando rápidamente. Fueron tiempos de industrialización, de mejoramiento y extensión en el campo de la educación y tiempos de desarrollo y crecimiento en la administración pública (Collier, 1996: 285). Estos factores ofrecieron nuevas oportunidades para la nación chilena, incluso para las mujeres. Además, los movimientos feministas empezaban a surgir, y en los años treinta y cuarenta, a diferencia de las mujeres de los otros países de América Latina, las chilenas ya habían comenzado a hacerse relativamente notables en la vida pública, las artes y en el campo profesional como, por ejemplo, en el servicio de salud y el periodismo (Collier, 1996: 286-7). A pesar de la oposición por parte del sistema patriarcal, la actividad feminista y los cambios que estaban teniendo lugar, tuvieron como resultado un lento alejamiento de una gran cantidad de mujeres de sus roles tradicionales, que con su pensamiento crítico y su esfuerzo iniciaron el desarrollo contra el "poder de las costumbres" (Collier, 1996: 187; Vázquez, 1996: 5). Parece indispensable señalar que, a pesar de dichos cambios, en la sociedad chilena de la época, el eje central continuaba siendo la familia en su forma tradicional, y que no fue hasta los años 80 cuando el feminismo logró influir de una manera notable en sus reivindicaciones (Leskinen, 1998: 22-3).

Proviendo de una familia tradicional donde los deberes del hombre estaban bien marcados tanto como los de la mujer, no es de extrañar que estos cambios de costumbres provocaran confusión y una actitud negativa hacia las mujeres que se estaban liberando de sus quehaceres tradicionales. Tristemente, las reacciones y opiniones del poeta acerca del asunto fueron compartidas por muchos de sus compatriotas, como es de suponer dado el pensamiento falocéntrico que había sido dominante en la historia psíquica de la sociedad por siglos y que todavía hoy día existe (Leskinen, 1998: 23-5). En lo que se refiere a la representación negativa de las mujeres en la poesía de Parra, el crítico chileno,

Leonidas Morales, aclara el asunto en su artículo *La poesía de Nicanor Parra* cuando explica:

Las relaciones del personaje antiheroico con la mujer jamás son ingenuas o consumadas en una sola dirección. A la vez que la busca, que se aproxima y le habla, parece que la alejara de sí, que estableciera una distancia: le otorga y le niega importancia al mismo tiempo. Indudablemente influye en este esquema la concepción tradicional de Parra en lo que a la mujer se refiere, una concepción que deriva [...] de la identificación con su padre, con la estructura familiar que representa, y que hace de la mujer la casa, lo doméstico, una función del hombre (Morales 1972).

Con el propósito de revelar las posibles razones de Parra por describir a las mujeres de una manera tan perjudicial, aparecen algunos sucesos de su vida propia que giran en torno a sus relaciones con el sexo opuesto. Lo poco que se sabe es que son experiencias conflictivas, como por ejemplo cuando Nicanor tiene 22 años, y se enamora locamente de María Labbé, una niña de familia burguesa. Su deseo de casarse con ella le resulta difícil de realizar dado que sus ingresos aún no son suficientes para mantener una familia. Además, su intento de impresionar a los padres de la joven fracasa y el resultado es que lo rechazan y María lo evita. Nicanor queda humillado y desilusionado, con un sentimiento de ira por causa de la inferioridad social que inevitablemente siente (Zúñiga, 2001: 33). Al recorrer la biografía de Parra, en su libro *El mundo de Nicanor Parra: Antibiografía* (2001), Pamela G. Zúñiga revela que antes de trasladarse a los Estados Unidos en 1943, el poeta había tenido varias experiencias amorosas con el sexo opuesto:<sup>5</sup>

Mujeres que lo entrapan, que lo utilizan, que lo absorben. Pero el encanto del género, magnético para el escritor, es más fuerte que el veneno, que las encrucijadas, que las encerronas de estos seres peligrosos aludidos en sus crónicas de entonces, como "*El túnel*", "*La víbora*" y "*La trampa*". Crónicas que reflejan, más que sus propias vivencias, sentimientos negativos universales y reales ante el diario vivir, como el tedio humano y el determinismo (2001: 37).

Los poemas que menciona Zúñiga en el párrafo aquí citado, todos tomados de la tercera parte de *Poemas y antipoemas* (1954), son de gran importancia para

la investigación de la visión "Parreana" de las mujeres demostrada en su poesía puesto que, según lo dicho, expresan una actitud confesional del poeta. En el libro *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana desde el modernismo* (1989), Luis Sáinz de Medrano afirma que en estos poemas, al igual que en otros de la misma obra, el 'poeta se refiere a sus propias experiencias, medita sobre su vida, describe su aspecto o su modo de ser' (1989: 539). Empezando con el análisis de *El túnel*, sus versos resumen claramente el estado mental negativo y la falta de voluntad del protagonista, causados por los seres del sexo opuesto. Además, se encuentra que el tono utilizado por Parra en el poema y los que siguen, revela una actitud contradictoria a la expuesta anteriormente. *El túnel* trata del regreso del antihéroe al campo con el fin de ayudar a tres mujeres ya ancianas.<sup>6</sup> Contra su voluntad, tiene que dejar sus estudios universitarios y la vida dulce de la ciudad a cambio de una estancia en el campo, que se prolonga por cuatro largos años, donde el joven se siente aislado y solo, y pierde la inspiración para componer poesía. Su frustración y su desprecio por las ancianas resaltan en sus palabras:

Abandonar de buenas a primeras la universidad  
 Romper con los encantos de la vida galante  
 Interrumpirlo todo  
 Con el objeto de satisfacer los caprichos de tres ancianas histéricas  
 Llenas de toda clase de problemas personales  
 Resultaba, para una persona de mi carácter  
 Un porvenir poco halagador  
 Una idea descabellada. (Parra, 1985: 10-11)

Interesantemente, las mujeres son la causa de su sufrimiento y su aislamiento. La falta de comunicación es obvia, dado que el protagonista no las entiende porque son de otra generación demasiado antigua para él: 'En el principio yo me mantuve sordo a sus telegramas / A sus epístolas concebidas en un lenguaje de otra época / Llenas de alusiones mitológicas / Y de nombres propios desconocidos para mí / Varios de ellos pertenecientes a sabios de la antigüedad' (Parra, 1985: 10). La incomunicación y el aislamiento del yo poético, causados por las mujeres que lo envuelven, son factores de gran interés porque, repetidas veces, juegan un rol importante en varios poemas de Parra. Frecuentemente, el aislamiento es simbólicamente representado como un encarcelamiento donde la cárcel puede ser un abismo, una botella, una habitación, un bosque, una trampa o un túnel (Grossman, 1975: 108). En "*El túnel*" se manifiesta ese sentimiento de encarcelamiento del antihéroe:

Cuatro años viví en *El Túnel*, sin embargo,  
 En comunidad con aquellas terribles damas  
 Cuatro años de martirio constante  
 De la mañana a la noche.  
 Las horas de regocijo que pasé debajo de los árboles  
 Tornáronse pronto en semanas de hastío  
 En meses de angustia que yo trataba de disimular al máximo  
 Con el objeto de no despertar la curiosidad en torno a mi persona,  
 Tornáronse en años de ruina y de miseria  
 ¡En siglos de prisión vividos por mi alma  
 En el interior de una botella de mesa! (Parra, 1985: 12).

Aquí se observa que el protagonista tiene miedo. Más adelante a las mujeres. Las compara con arañas que lo han logrado detener en su red y hacerlo su esclavo, como aparece en los versos siguientes: 'Yo lo veía todo a través de un prisma / En el fondo del cual las imágenes de mis tías se entrelazaban como / hilos vivientes / Formando una especie de malla impenetrable', 'Lograron retenerme entre sus redes durante años / Obligándome tácitamente a trabajar para ellas' (Parra, 1985: 12, 14). Como será el caso con varias mujeres que el antipoeta introduce en sus poemas, las mujeres son unas engañadoras que se aprovechan del protagonista y se burlan de él: 'Pero para qué profundizar en estas materias desagradables / Aquellas matronas se burlaron miserablemente de mí / Con sus falsas promesas, con sus extrañas fantasías / con sus dolores sabiamente simulados' (Parra, 1985: 12). La manipulación del colectivo femenino dura hasta el momento en que el joven mártir descubre que la mujer parálitica 'Caminaba perfectamente sobre la punta de sus piernas' (Parra, 1985: 14). Este hecho le permite escapar de la cárcel aunque el sentimiento amargo permanece en su alma, a lo mejor porque le han robado cuatro años de su vida y se siente traicionado y estúpido: 'Yo volví a la realidad con un sentimiento de los demonios.' (Parra, 1985: 14).

El antipoema *La víbora* sirve de motivo oportuno para estudiar su representación de las mujeres no parientes suyas, y que son además mujeres modernas, con las cuales el protagonista aparentemente no sabe comunicarse. Por su contenido, el poema resulta ser la piedra angular de este análisis, dado que es un poema asaz representativo del sufrimiento interior, la frustración sexual, el estado mental inestable y el aislamiento social del protagonista causados por tales mujeres. Se trata de la relación agotadora que tiene con su cónyuge cuyo comportamiento "anti"-tradicional lo lleva a un estado de confusión, sumisión y miseria. Como indica el título, Parra compara la mujer con un animal peligroso y a veces fatal, como hace en *El túnel* al igualar a las tres mujeres a unas arañas. El poeta juega con la creencia antigua de que las víboras tienen un poder hipnotizante que puede atraer a sus víctimas contra su voluntad (Grossman, 1975: 149).<sup>7</sup> Las mujeres de los dos poemas analizados tienen en común ser

la causa directa del sufrimiento y el aislamiento del "yo" narrador,- a la vez que lo maltratan moral- y económicamente (Morales 1972). En *La víbora* el personaje antiheroico es víctima y prisionero de 'una mujer despreciable' con 'ojos fascinantes' que está 'condenado a adorar' (Parra, 1985: 24).

En este poema y en varios otros donde el antipoeta habla de las relaciones del protagonista con sus amantes y parejas, la sexualidad juega un papel importante. La primera experiencia sexual del poeta tiene que ver. Ocurrió cuando era alumno del liceo y solía quedarse en la casa de una familia para dar clases privadas a los hijos. Una noche una de las hijas entra en su pieza desnuda y se mete con él en su cama. Pero uno de los perros despertó al padre quién entró con su revólver sólo unos segundos antes de que la Tina lograra escaparse. 'Quedé marcado, porque siempre para mí las relaciones eróticas han sido muy críticas y muy delicadas. Tengo la sensación de que hay un gran peligro' (Morales 1998). Este sentimiento de miedo e incomodidad relacionado con el acto sexual está reflejado en la poesía de Parra. Edith Grossman explica las actitudes del protagonista de sus poemas hacia la sexualidad al observar que: 'Para el protagonista, la sexualidad representa una vida de locura, de subyugación a deseos involuntarios, de seducción y de dominación ejercida por la mujer.' (1975: 151). En *La víbora* el protagonista se encuentra en una situación de dominación sexual. Los asuntos eróticos se convierten en actos grotescos y vulgares que no tienen mucho que ver con un amor puro o bello. *La víbora* utiliza el sexo para manipular a su víctima: 'Largos años viví prisionero del encanto de aquella mujer / Que solía presentarse a mi oficina completamente desnuda / Ejecutando las contorsiones más difíciles de imaginar / Con el propósito de incorporar mi pobre alma a su órbita / Y, sobre todo, para extorsionarme hasta el último centavo.', 'Apasionada hasta el delirio no me daba un instante de tregua, / Exigiéndome perentoriamente que besara su boca' (Parra, 1985: 24). *La víbora* está descrita como una abusadora cuya víctima se sacrifica totalmente para cumplir con sus órdenes aunque eso significa 'sufrir humillaciones y burlas sin cuento, / Trabajar día y noche para alimentarla y vestirla, / Llevar a cabo algunos delitos, cometer algunas faltas, / A la luz de la luna realizar pequeños robos, / Falsificaciones de documentos comprometedores / So pena de caer en descrédito ante sus ojos fascinantes.' (Parra, 1985: 24). Se nota en los versos del poema que los papeles tradicionales de los sexos han cambiado ya que *la víbora* es la que manda y el hombre cumple con sus órdenes. Después de cinco años de convivencia, la pareja se separa, supuestamente por razones económicas. Para poder continuar sus estudios, ella, en rol de dictadora, deja a su víctima en la calle sin un peso. El hecho es de interés porque demuestra y enfatiza aún más que *la víbora* es un ejemplo de las mujeres chilenas de la época que estaban rechazando los valores tradicionales exigidos para la mujer. Está estudiando para ser abogada y con esto invadiendo el territorio antes dominado por los hombres. Los versos del poema resumen el disgusto y el sentimiento de injusticia

que esto provoca en el protagonista. No sabe cómo manejar la situación a la vez que siente disminuir su propia masculinidad. Su actitud y su reacción ante la manera de ser de su pareja, concuerda con las contemplaciones de Lilia Granillo Vázquez, en su artículo *¿Por qué hablar de las mujeres en la construcción de las identidades nacionales?*, donde revela lo siguiente:

...las mujeres que han sobresalido socialmente, que han expresado afanes intelectuales y otras preocupaciones tradicionalmente masculinas, han evadido el "poder de las costumbres". Las que han destacado en términos que les eran "ajenos", son invasoras de lo masculino, no son sumisas, ni abnegadas, ni domésticas, son "anormales" puesto que no se han limitado a lo que se esperaba de ellas socialmente. Son una parte del género humano que ha trascendido las fronteras que les habían sido impuestas y, como la sociedad es implacable con quienes no respetan sus límites, esas mujeres han perdido la identidad, al menos, la identidad tradicional (1996: 5-6).

Como aparece revelado en *La víbora*, y en varios otros poemas en los cuales el poeta trata las relaciones del protagonista con mujeres, la masculinidad herida parece ser un factor sobresaliente. Según el concepto del tal nombrado "machismo", el polo opuesto al "marianismo", característica profundamente arraigada en la cultura latinoamericana, el hombre ideal es un héroe independiente, agresivo y sexualmente activo (Stevens, 1973: 91). Es físicamente fuerte y, sobre ser inteligente, posee un impulso espiritual (Cunningham, 1986: 4). Según el significado de la dicotomía machismo / marianismo, la presencia y la actividad del hombre corresponden a las esferas públicas, mientras que el puesto de la mujer pertenece al espacio privado de la familia (Lindstrom, 1989: 55). La mujer no consanguínea que aparece en *La víbora* y en varios de sus poemas, hiere y hasta destruye la masculinidad del protagonista porque ha colocado los roles al revés. Es ella quien muestra agresividad y toma las decisiones, además de utilizar el sexo para dominar a su amante, negando a la vez su "rol primario" de reproductora del género humano. Ha abandonado el espacio privado para hacerse notable públicamente, a la vez que deja la pasividad y roba la palabra, convirtiéndose así en una mujer fatal. La herida a la masculinidad del protagonista está reflejada sobre todo en su pérdida de auto-confianza y del impulso intelectual, igual que en su aislamiento social y su frustración sexual. Es decir, ese tipo de mujer lleva al antihéroe de los poemas a una crisis intelectual reverberada en la falta de una inspiración artística y su deambular sin propósito. Como en *El Túnel*, el protagonista de *La víbora* se encuentra en una situación de encarcelamiento subrayada con su retiro de la vida social. Por una parte, la mujer no le permite a su amante mantenerse en contacto con su familia ni con

sus amigos. Por otra, antes de la separación, la pareja vive en un cuarto redondo en un barrio lujoso que simbólicamente representa la cárcel de la víctima. La redondez de la pieza matrimonial también es significativa porque recuerda a una madriguera (Morales 1972). Para aumentar el efecto de malestar, la pieza está llena de ratas, comúnmente considerados animales sucios y grotescos y que, consecuentemente, pueden representar en el poema la naturaleza de la relación entre la pareja o simplemente el estado terrible de encarcelamiento en el que vive el protagonista.

Otro ejemplo de la influencia desfavorable que la mujer ajena, la otra mujer, tiene sobre el protagonista en la poesía de Nicanor Parra, se encuentra en *La trampa*, dado que, también en este poema, sufre de una crisis tanto intelectual como sexual. Permanece socialmente aislado y, por causa de su fragilidad, cae preso de una mujer. En la primera parte del antipoema, el yo poético habla del abismo intelectual en el cual se halla. Se encierra en su hogar, distrayéndose con proyectos insignificantes para alejarse de la realidad y para rehuir de 'escenas demasiado misteriosas' (Grossman, 1975: 132). El hecho demuestra que es un hombre inactivo socialmente y que, como consecuencia, no posee los méritos de la masculinidad. Todas sus intenciones y precauciones se derrumban en la segunda parte, cuando marca el número de una mujer y cae en *la trampa* del teléfono, su único contacto con el mundo exterior, y se mete 'en el abismo de la sexualidad frustrada e ingrata' (trad. Grossman, 1975: 133):

Caía fatalmente en *la trampa* del teléfono  
 Que como un abismo atrae a los objetos que lo rodean  
 Y con manos trémulas marcaba ese número maldito  
 Que aún suelo repetir automáticamente mientras duermo.  
 De incertidumbre y de miseria eran aquellos segundos  
 En que yo, como un esqueleto de pie delante de esa mesa del infierno  
 Cubierta de una cretona amarilla,  
 Esperaba una respuesta desde el otro extremo del mundo,  
 La otra mitad de mi ser prisionera en un hoyo (Parra, 1985: 16).

El teléfono juega un papel simbólico en la poesía de Parra, por un lado porque, como menciona Leonidas Morales en su análisis, citando a Jorge Elliot, 'irradia una maraña de delgados alambres entrecruzados que son como los hilos de una telaraña. En medio de esta red, quieto, con su boca abierta, como una araña, está el teléfono, con el cual se identifica su amada mientras habla' (1972:81). Así que, una vez más, Parra asocia la mujer con un animal peligroso que atrapa a su preso en su red manipulante. Por otro lado, el teléfono es simbólico porque una comunicación entre dos personas por medio de dicho aparato siempre será de



segunda mano (Morales 1972). Debido a que la pareja se comunica por teléfono y sólo se encuentra en lugares públicos, se deduce que entre los amantes no hay contacto físico: 'Y aquellas catástrofes tan deprimentes para mi espíritu / Que no terminaban completamente con colgar el teléfono / Ya que, por lo general, quedábamos comprometidos / A vernos al día siguiente en una fuente de sodas / O en la puerta de una iglesia de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme' (Parra, 1985: 18). Esta falta de contacto físico produce la antes indicada frustración sexual del protagonista: 'Bajo la forma de incipientes erecciones y de una sensación de fracaso. / Entonces me reía a la fuerza cayendo después en un estado de postración mental.' (Parra, 1985: 16).

Dado el enfoque de esta investigación resulta apropiado observar el poema *Recuerdos de juventud* que se encuentra tanto en la tercera parte de *Poemas y antipoemas* (1954), como en *Nicanor Parra: Antipoems: New and Selected* (1985), editado por David Unger.<sup>8</sup> En el poema se pone de relieve la crisis intelectual del protagonista, su aislamiento literario, su constante frustración sexual, la falta de comunicación con los demás y el rechazo que recibe de las mujeres. El antihéroe anda por las calles, clamando la atención, 'Pidiendo socorro, pidiendo un poco de ternura' (Parra, 1985: 8), pero nadie le hace caso. Todos quedan indiferentes y lo ignoran: 'Con el filo de la lengua traté de comunicarme con los espectadores: / Ellos leían el periódico / O desaparecían detrás de un taxi.' (1985: 8). Se trata de la crisis intelectual y literaria del protagonista que 'Como un herido a bala' (1985: 8) se esfuerza por ser escuchado por los demás porque necesita comunicarse con la gente del mundo en que vive (Morales 1972). El aislamiento social es simbólicamente representado como 'un bosque de sillas y mesas (Parra, 1985: 6) con los cuales el antihéroe choca constantemente (Grossman, 1975: 139-140). Vacila, solo, confundido y sin propósito en el bosque y, parejo al igual que ocurre en *La trampa*, no puede resistir las tentaciones carnales y se hunde cada vez más 'en una especie de jalea' (1985: 6) que se puede asociar con el sexo femenino (Grossman, 1975: 127-8). Aunque tiene deseos sexuales, el protagonista los ve como sentimientos dolorosos e involuntarios. Son tan penosos que hasta padece de 'arrebatos' (Parra 1985: 6), a lo mejor, porque las mujeres que desea lo desdeñan, lo manipulan y se burlan de él: 'Y las mujeres me dirigían miradas de odio / Haciéndome subir, haciéndome bajar, / Haciéndome llorar y reír en contra de mi voluntad.' (1985: 6).

Edith Grossman concluye que para el protagonista de *Recuerdos de juventud* y en varios otros poemas, la sexualidad es vista como una actividad sin sentido y como una persecución dolorosa donde las relaciones que tiene el hablante con el sexo opuesto le producen sentimientos negativos (1975: 154). Le surgen emociones de angustia y de enfermedad y, como de costumbre, la muerte queda cerca:

De todo esto resultó un sentimiento de asco,  
 Resultó una tempestad de frases incoherentes,  
 Amenazas, insultos, juramentos que no venían al caso,  
 Resultaron unos movimientos agotadores de caderas,  
 Aquellos bailes fúnebres  
 Que me dejaban sin respiración  
 Y que me impedían levantar cabeza durante días,  
 Durante noches. (Parra, 1985: 6-8)

Otro ejemplo de la aparente confusión y dolor del poeta ante las mujeres extra-familiares, se encuentra en el poema *Mujeres* del libro *Versos de salón* (1962), en el cual describe a varias mujeres y a cada una por sus características propias y problemas personales. La descripción de las señoras es distante y sin respeto y se puede observar connotaciones negativas a la mujer que se está liberando de su rol tradicional: 'La mujer que no quiere desnudarse / Por temor a quedar embarazada / La vestal intocable / Que no quiere ser madre de familia', 'La mujer que camina / Virgen hacia la cámara nupcial / Pero que reacciona como hombre', 'La señorita pálida de lentes / (Ella no quiere nada con el falo)' (Parra, 1989: 69). Al fin del poema, lo que todas tienen en común es que son 'imposibles' y acaban por agotar al personaje poético: 'Todas estas walkirias, / Todas estas matronas respetables / Con sus labios mayores y menores / Terminarán sacándome de quicio.' (Parra, 1989: 70).

La visión negativa y amarga de las figuras femeninas presentadas es evidente en el poema *Oda a unas palomas* de la segunda parte del poemario *Poemas y antipoemas* (1954), y aunque hay varias maneras posibles de interpretar el poema<sup>9</sup> es justificable afirmar que las palomas podrían simbolizar a las mujeres. Si se toma esto como punto de partida, el cuadro que se pinta de ellas no es favorable dado que el poeta compara a las mujeres con aves relacionadas con la divinidad y la paz, pero de modo irónico. Primero, porque al manipularlos sistemáticamente, destruyen la paz interior de los hombres que son los más vulnerables a sus hechizos: 'Hipnotizan a mancos y cojos / Que creen ver en ellas / La explicación de este mundo y el otro.' (Morales 1989). Segundo, según lo revela, no se puede tener confianza en las mujeres 'porque tienen / El olfato del zorro, / La inteligencia fría del reptil / Y la experiencia larga del loro' y si uno no se cuida en cada instante 'se abalanzan / Como bomberos locos, / Entran por la ventana al edificio / Y se apoderan de la caja de fondos.' (Morales 1989). De hecho, sería posible sustituir la palabra "Oda" en el título por "Degradación" o "Escepticismo", porque lo que a primera vista parece ser una alabanza dedicada a las palomas / mujeres, irónicamente es todo lo contrario. Para lograr distanciarse personalmente del asunto, el poeta no habla de ninguna

mujer en particular que lo haya herido, sino que habla de las mujeres en general, generalizando así las características, la personalidad y el poder negativo que tienen sobre los hombres.

En los antipoemas *Versos sueltos* de *Versos de Salón* (1962) y *El anti Lázaro* de *Hojas de Parra* (1985), la manifestación de las mujeres ajenas sale más feroz y vulgar que en los poemas anteriormente mencionados. Es decir, se enfatiza más profundamente el menosprecio, la indignación, la falta de respeto y la actitud fría y cruel hacia las mujeres. Los dos poemas tocan además el tema del sinsentido de la vida. Los versos de *Versos sueltos* son contemplaciones personales, a veces absurdas y vulgares de la vida, aparentemente sin orden. Surge de nuevo la queja del poeta de la incomunicación entre los seres humanos, el amor mortal y la hipocresía que caracteriza a las mujeres: 'Todavía vivimos en un bosque' (recuérdese que Parra usa el bosque frecuentemente en su poesía para simbolizar el aislamiento de sus protagonistas), 'El galán se libera de su novia', 'La doncella se casa con un viejo / [la] Pobre gente no sabe lo que dice / Con el amor no se le ruega a nadie: / En vez de leche le salía sangre' (Parra, *Versos*). Resalta el menosprecio, el odio y la crueldad hacia la mujer: 'Ya no queda muchacha que violar' y en el mundo que vive el poeta 'Estornudar es el placer mayor' (Parra, *Versos*). En *El anti Lázaro* el hablante aparece monologando con un ser muerto. Le está recordando que la muerte resulta ser una opción más deseable que la vida, porque al vivir uno tiene que sufrir 'la rutina de siempre' y 'el orgullo la sangre la avaricia / la tiranía del deseo venéreo / los dolores que causa la mujer' (Parra, 1985: 190), mientras que al morir uno se convierte en el dueño de sí mismo y de su entorno (el ataúd). En el antipoema surge otra vez la opinión amarga del hombre hacia los seres humanos del otro sexo. Las ve como prostitutas y la causa de sus dolores, principalmente porque lo controlan usando la sexualidad. El protagonista propone al muerto quedarse tranquilo en su tumba porque no vale la pena resucitarse ya que 'el amor de la tierra' es más preferible que 'las caricias de una lóbregra prostituta' (Parra, 1985: 192).

## Conclusiones

Por medio del estudio aquí presentado se ha demostrado que la visión que del mundo femenino tiene el antipoeta chileno Nicanor Parra Sandoval (1914), presenta una diferenciación reveladora, a lo largo de su trayectoria poética. Dado que fue criado en una sociedad machista, patriarcal y católica no es de sorprender que las mujeres que exaltan las costumbres tradicionales le den confianza y un estado mental estable. Queda obvia la admiración del poeta ante las mujeres que cumplen con los roles domésticos y que dan la máxima prioridad al bienestar de la familia. Las suele situar en un pedestal, y su estimación hacia ellas llega a ser tan profunda, que en algunos de sus poemas las considera como seres semi-divinos. Esto se observa sobre todo en los poemas donde habla de

las mujeres que pertenecen a su familia cercana, como su madre, su abuela y sus hermanas, ya que en ellas se encarna el comportamiento apropiado. Algo parecido aparece en los poemas en los cuales el autor trata el cuerpo maternal y las madres como espacios de significado socio-cultural, y revelan que el deber primario de la mujer es la reproducción y la maternidad.

Se ha manifestado que existe una abrupta diferencia entre la representación de las mujeres de la familia de Parra y las no consanguíneas, entre éstas y las otras, las que no pertenecen al ámbito familiar. Sus amores fracasados, las experiencias negativas con mujeres y los cambios sociales que estaban teniendo lugar en Chile y daban nuevas oportunidades a las mujeres chilenas, son de importancia para un mejor entendimiento de las posibles razones de Parra de describir a la mujer ajena de manera tan despiadada en su poesía. Las contemplaciones del poeta acerca del asunto son encabezadas por medio de una crisis existencial del personaje poético, causada por sus amantes, sus esposas o las mujeres que lo envuelven. El yo poético en los poemas de Parra aparece como un ser frustrado que padece de desconsuelo e ira y cuya masculinidad parece herida. Manifiesta su desprecio hacia el comportamiento de las mujeres modernas con las cuales no logra comunicarse, a lo mejor porque, al reaccionar contra las costumbres tradicionales, han colocado ellas los papeles de los géneros al revés, alejándose a la vez del espacio privado de la familia para invadir los territorios antes dominados por los hombres. Además, en su poética, la causa tras la decadencia familiar parece hallarse en que las mujeres han ido rechazando su rol de reproducir a la humanidad usando ahora su cuerpo y sexualidad para crear nuevas identidades sociales y culturales.

A modo de conclusión, entonces, afirmamos que en la poesía de Nicanor Parra analizada en este artículo, a pesar de la influencia que ha logrado tener en el mundo literario latinoamericano, no encontramos al 'gran poeta realmente revolucionario' (Binns, 2006: XXIX) del que tanto se ha hablado, en cuando a su presentación del mundo femenino.<sup>10</sup> Según lo presentado, sus ideas han quedado detenidas en la idealización de valores tradicionales y, como consecuencia, en la desigualdad entre los géneros. Proviendo de tal palo, sus opiniones podrían ser consideradas como 'un trasunto fiel de la Edad Media' (Parra, 1989: 21).

## Notas

- 1 Según Adolfo Vásquez Rocca: 'La antipoesía es una escritura elaborada a partir de la negación de los rasgos esenciales de otras escrituras y de otros códigos literarios. El antipoema es una contradicción, un contratexto. [...] La antipoesía es, en el proyecto deconstructivo de Parra, un contradiscurso lírico, de resonancias más bien urbanas, donde ya no habla el yo heroico nerudiano, sino el sujeto moderno, irónico y sarcástico, cuyo monólogo fragmentario tiene la desnudez confesional de un documento clínico y la elaboración intelectual de una sátira de los usos del habla formalizada' (Rocca, *Antipoesía y deconstrucción*, [http://www.filosofia.tk/versoados/articulos/articulo\\_antipoesia.htm](http://www.filosofia.tk/versoados/articulos/articulo_antipoesia.htm)).

- 2 'No veo por qué tiene [la poesía] que restringirse [...]. Caben, además, personajes que nunca estuvieron en la poesía: guaguas, soldados, ministros, esqueletos, carabineros [...]. ¿Por qué ellos no pueden entrar en los poemas?' (Parra en Piña, Nicanor Parra, 2007: 23).
- 3 Alicia del Campo afirma: 'El Marianismo no puede ser entendido sino como noción complementaria del Machismo, bipolaridad que se hace presente en la práctica de la socialización sexual' (1987: 430).
- 4 El libro mencionado aquí no es el poemario publicado en 1983 bajo el mismo título, sino una antología de poemas inéditos publicada en Madrid en 1989.
- 5 Las mujeres relacionadas con el poeta son varias. Las que destacan son primero Anita Troncoso con la cual Nicanor se casó en 1940. Se divorciaron en 1951 (Zúñiga, 2001: 38). La segunda pareja del escritor fue la sueca Inga Palmén a quien conoció en 1958 (Zúñiga, 2001: 46). La tercera fue Rosita Muñoz, pero después de la separación de ella, Nicanor se compromete con Nury Tuca, una mujer española (Zúñiga, 2001: 60). Ana María fue la quinta pareja destacada del antipoeta y se dice que el amor entre ellos fue tan intenso que la relación resultó demasiado tormentosa (Zúñiga, 2001: 66). En 1989 conoce a Andrea del Toboso, una joven entonces de 17 años (Zúñiga, 2001: 96), que, al parecer, todavía acompaña al poeta.
- 6 Es importante notar que *El túnel* es el único poema en que Nicanor revela su actitud negativa hacia mujeres de su familia pero, al mismo tiempo, queda aparente que las tías no pertenecen al círculo familiar más cercano como las hermanas, la hija, la madre y la abuela.
- 7 Aquí, parece inevitable señalar la diferencia entre los animales representativos para las mujeres del mundo "Parreano" ya que relaciona a su hermana, Violeta, con unos animales sosegados y dulces como antes se ha explicado.
- 8 Esta última edición fue la utilizada en esta investigación.
- 9 Una interpretación puede ser que el poema es una crítica a la religión católica. Entonces, las palomas que el poeta describe en la oda, podrían ser representativas de la supuesta falsedad y la manipulación de la iglesia católica. En tal caso, la crítica y la ironía yacerían sobre todo en el hecho de que, desde su aparición en el Antiguo Testamento, la paloma ha sido el símbolo de la paz (Schrevel 2003).
- 10 Afirma Niall Binns: 'Para empezar, corresponde decir que *Nicanor Parra es la figura más importante en la historia de la poesía hispanoamericana contemporánea*' (XXIX).

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## 6 Labor organizing among women workers in maquiladoras: Crossing the border of gender and class in the cases of Matamoros, Mexico, and San Marcos, El Salvador

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Mucho se ha publicado sobre el trabajo de las mujeres en zonas industriales de exportación de los países en desarrollo pero hay poco escrito sobre la agencia de estas mujeres y sobre el cruce de fronteras que tienen que hacer en relación a cuestiones de género y de clase para poder organizarse. El objetivo de este artículo es hacer una comparación entre dos experiencias de organización laboral entre mujeres trabajadoras de industrias maquiladoras (plantas de montaje industrial con fines de exportación). Estas plantas están situadas en las primeras fases de producción, sobre todo en la industria textil, electrónica o de auto-partes. Las maquiladoras han reclutado tradicionalmente mano de obra femenina aunque la situación ha cambiado en los últimos años. La historia de su explotación es de sobra conocida, lo que es menos conocido son sus experiencias de organización laboral. Con los casos de Matamoros en México y San Marcos en El Salvador queremos ilustrar la diversidad de experiencias en el cruce de fronteras y delinear los factores que afectan este cruce. El material base de este artículo proviene de trabajos de campo. En el caso de Matamoros, se trata de un trabajo que cubre varios años de observaciones y entrevistas en diversos periodos; en el caso de El Salvador, se trata de un trabajo de campo realizado durante 2009.

Much has been written on women's labor in the export industrial zones of developing countries, but not so much on their agency, their organizing efforts, and their crossing of gender and class borders. The aim of this paper is to make a comparison between two experiences of labor organizing among women workers within maquiladora (outsourced assembly-plant) industries. These companies are situated in the first stages of production, mainly in the textile, electronic, or auto-parts sector. Maquiladoras have traditionally recruited mostly female workers, that is to say, cheap and unskilled labor, although the situation is changing in recent years. The story of their exploitation is quite well known; what is less well known are their organizing experiences. With the cases of Matamoros in Mexico and San Marcos in El Salvador, we want to illustrate the diversity of experiences in the crossing of borders and to delineate the factors that affect this crossing. The material for both of these experiences is taken from our own fieldwork. In the case of Matamoros, this is part of a long-term observation with interview work at several stages. In the case of El Salvador, the fieldwork took place during 2009 in the zone of San Marcos in San Salvador.



## Introduction

Women workers' organizing has always involved the crossing of borders. The border of their gender identity, their traditional responsibilities, always a hindrance to their integration into the labor markets, and the hindrance of joining an organization, in this case a class organization, but also the bodily hindrance of their potential pregnancies and the risks of factory work to themselves and their potential children. These borders have transformed into challenges. The challenges of assuming a worker identity, of coping with all the problems encountered at the workplace, and of becoming a worker activist, but also the challenge of becoming a feminist worker activist. This has opened new possibilities in the way of creating alternative labor organizations, for example, or of confronting the traditional leadership structures within trade unions and thus rejecting the authoritarianism and patriarchal hierarchies still plaguing classic trade unions.

The aim of this paper is to make a comparison between two experiences of labor organizing among women workers within maquiladora (outsourced assembly-plant) industries. These companies are situated in the first stages of production, mainly in the textile, electronic, or auto-parts sector. Maquiladoras have traditionally recruited mostly female workers, that is to say, cheap and unskilled labor. The story of their exploitation is quite well known; what is less well known are their organizing experiences. With the cases of Matamoros and San Marcos, we want to illustrate the diversity of experiences in the crossing of borders and to delineate the factors that affect this crossing. The material for both of these experiences is taken from our own fieldwork. In the case of Matamoros, this is part of a long-term observation with interview work at several stages. In the case of El Salvador, the fieldwork took place during 2009 in the zone of San Marcos in San Salvador.

## Women crossing the borders of active trade union participation

In spite of the fact that women have a growing share in labor markets (they represent about one-third of the world labor market) and represent about 40 percent of all workers organized within trade unions, their active participation in trade unions has been very modest. According to the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), women are poorly represented at the level of decision making in most trade unions. The glass ceiling that many feminists argue is a fact in most workplaces is also quite present within trade union structures. These structures seem to be one of the strongholds of patriarchal practices, difficult to eradicate.

For a long time, union leaders maintained that there were no differences between men and women inside the unions, that unions represented both men's and women's interests regarding wages and other benefits. However, they

overlooked the differential treatment that men and women receive in many workplaces. While men enjoy the best positions, wages, and benefits, women are for the most part in subordinate positions and they are over-represented in part-time labor, thus losing benefits and wages as well as stability. This situation is more than reproduced within trade unions, although nowadays many unions have recognized the need to achieve gender equity and a gender perspective in their statutes and behavior (ICFTU 2006: 7). According to the ICFTU, a gender perspective implies the creation of a women's committee or the inclusion of several women members on the executive committee; gender units provided with sufficient financial support and decision-making power; gender equity considerations at all decision-making levels; gender quotas in all eligible positions; and finally, gender mainstreaming measures in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all policies and programs within the union (ICFTU 2006: 7–8).

In spite of the advances of these proposals, they still represent a liberal-quantitative interpretation of a gender perspective, leaving outside such important problems as wage discrimination and sexual harassment. Also, these recommendations are extremely difficult to implement in the unions that are still patriarchal strongholds based on the traditional idea that the man is the main breadwinner in the family as well as the main person responsible for making decisions about *public* issues such as wages and labor benefits. The participation of women in these issues is still minimized.

Also, in spite of the increased number of women in the labor market, most of them do not join the unions, either because their work is in the informal sector, or because they work only part time, or because, according to the (male) leaders, “They don't know how the unions could help them,” or because they do not have time for union work due to their family responsibilities. Women workers thus mistrust unions for not being sensitive to women's needs, or for the cost of membership dues, or for putting their jobs at risk (ICFTU 2006: 3). Moreover, the study of women inside the unions has been quite poor. Whenever such studies have been done, women have been studied only as victims, not as agents capable of generating changes or even accumulating power and exercising relations of domination (Sánchez 2000). And in the case of the women workers we study, we have discovered that their organization by NGOs has created other sorts of conflicts involving gender and class, as many of these NGOs are organized and led by middle-class women, as we shall see in our case studies.

### **Women and unions in maquiladoras in the case of Mexico**

During the period after the Mexican revolution, labor conflicts were minimized and always ruled by the state, and very few independent unions managed to survive the long period of rule (1929–2000) by the official and so-called

revolutionary party, the PRI (Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada – the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution). Moreover, this revolutionary regime proved from its beginnings (1917) to be very patriarchal, denying women any political rights until 1952. Needless to say, trade unions (both corporate and independent) reflected such patriarchal structures and attitudes. The economic crisis that started with the debt crisis in 1981 demanded an economic restructuring and an opening of the economy that threatened the corporative structures mentioned above. The corporate unions and their affiliates were among the first victims of this restructuring. Moreover, it is during this period that the maquila industries, established in the mid-1960s on the U.S.–Mexico border, increased in importance, especially regarding the creation of jobs with women as their preferred source of labor.<sup>1</sup>

The industrial restructuring demanded a deregulation and flexibilization of labor to improve productivity. These requirements were included in collective bargaining, and some benefits like maternity leave and access to nurseries suffered. Women started to participate in movements of protest in all unions: in public service unions and the big corporative confederations like the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos), but also among independent unions like FAT (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo). The protests asked for a stop to the firing of workers and respect for collective bargaining, subordinating women's demands to these more general labor demands.

After the signing of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), women's union participation increased, in separate organizations or in questioning patriarchal unions, and in integrating into transnational alliances with women trade unionists in Canada and the U.S. They thus found a better combination for their roles as trade unionists and feminists. This led to the creation of the Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas de México, RMSM (Network of Female Trade Unionists of Mexico).<sup>2</sup> Parallel to this, an effective effort to organize women workers in Exporting Processing Zones was registered. This organizing was conducted through unions and NGOs. The NGOs were hostile to corporative or “yellow trade unions,” criticizing them for their lack of attention to women workers. This naturally created a huge rift between unions and NGOs.

Trade unions have never been welcome in the maquiladora industry. The managers or owners of these industries have always considered real unions to be problematic, and these organizations have questioned the low wages and minimal working conditions inside these companies. However, the *real* unions were few. In other words, we distinguish two types of unions: traditional/corporative unions, devoted to a minimum defense of labor rights (right to organize, collective bargaining, and right to strike), and subordinate unions or “yellow unions,” characterized by the defense of the companies' interests instead

of protecting those of the workers. Traditional/corporate unions keep women's rights to a minimum; "*yellow unions*" have a total disregard for these rights.

### **Crossing the border of traditional trade-unionism: The case of the SJOIIM in Matamoros, Mexico**

Matamoros, Tamaulipas, in northeast Mexico on the border with the U.S., started becoming a maquiladora region in the mid-1960s. During the 1980s and part of the 1990s, these industries in Matamoros developed very fast, reaching their peak in 2000. At that point the Matamoros region had 60,000 workers employed in the maquila industry, mostly in the production of auto parts (especially for Delphi Corporation) and electronic products. From 2000, Matamoros entered a recession as a consequence of the contraction of the U.S. market, the main export market for maquiladora products, and the crisis in the U.S. auto industry.

The principal trade union among maquila workers in Matamoros has been the SJOIIM (Sindicato de Jornaleros y Obreros Industriales y de la Industria Maquiladora – Trade Union of Laborers and Industrial Workers and of the Maquiladora Industry). This union, which started as a union of cotton workers in 1932, expanded from the mid-1960s to represent maquila industry workers. The SJOIIM may be considered the prototype of a traditional/corporative union, protecting some basic labor rights. By 2010, the SJOIIM had reached an affiliation of around 45,000 workers, of whom 60 to 65 percent are women.

From its beginnings, the SJOIIM managed to sign collective contracts with the first maquiladoras and since then has maintained its control in most of the companies in the region. During the maquiladora boom, in the 1980s, the SJOIIM gained important victories: the best wages in these companies, with wage increases superior to those approved at the national level and strong collective bargaining, where seniority was the criterion for receiving labor benefits. These advantages were also possible because General Motors, especially Deltronics of Matamoros, produced 90 percent of all the radios and stereos GM used in its international car production. Even after the 2000 crisis started, the increases in wages followed national increases, and labor benefits were kept at almost the same percentages as before. However, some companies fired all of their workers in order to rehire them at the basic wage and lower benefits.

The predominance of SJOIIM in the Matamoros region has obstructed the organization of any alternatives, either in the form of other unions or of organizing by NGOs. Most companies still prefer to deal with the SJOIIM because they are used to it and because of its strength.

The situation of women within the maquila industry and the attention they have received from the union may be seen at two levels. The collective bargaining

and its achievements naturally benefitted them as part of the collective labor force. However, women were concentrated in non-skilled tasks and functions, while men occupied the skilled positions (like technicians), and the highest post a woman could attain was as head of line. When maquilas modernized, during the 1980s, with new machinery and new forms of labor organization, hundreds of women were fired because production lines were replaced by group production.

The second level refers to the inclusion of clauses specific to women in collective bargaining. Despite their numerical strength, in collective bargaining women's rights referred only to the basic rights in the national labor code: maternity leave and protection of pregnant women; that is, reproductive rights. But even these were quite neglected by the SJOIIM, even during the maquila boom period. The health of women workers suffered as a consequence of their work in this industry. For example, several cases of anencephaly among the children born to women working in the Mallory Company in the 1970s and the 1980s made Matamoros known worldwide through the *Mallory children* scandal. The SJOIIM's reaction, probably triggered by international pressure, was to include a clause in the collective contracts forbidding companies to place women in locations where they had to use chemical products.

Another case in which international pressure played some role in the SJOIIM's reaction was at the beginning of the 1990s, some years after the international campaign to stop the pregnancy tests required by major companies in order to ensure the hiring and the stability of women workers.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the SJOIIM included another clause in the collective contracts in which the companies agreed not to fire pregnant women, including temporary workers. Moreover, the company would respect the payment of maternity leave and other rights that the national labor code stipulated (SJOIIM, 1990). In the middle of the 1990s, the SJOIIM also obtained the creation of a space where women workers would be able to breastfeed their babies. However, maternity leave suffered a new attack from the companies in the 1990s, when they tried and managed to drop it from collective bargaining, arguing that it was not necessary to include such clauses because they were in the national labor code already. Although the SJOIIM accepted this at the time, the specific clauses were included again some years later, since some factories had taken advantage of their absence to fire pregnant women.

Nurseries were another issue to which the SJOIIM was unable to respond. Although the trade union did contribute to the construction of some nurseries within the social security system, these proved insufficient to meet the demand. Women workers had to find alternate solutions like private nurseries, hiring women to care for the children, resorting to support from their extended family, or even leaving the children by themselves (Quintero 1998). The companies also

distributed scholarships for children of women workers to attend school, but these too were clearly insufficient.

But what has been the role played by women workers within the SJOIIM? It is evident that women have played a very important role in strengthening the trade union. First, as the critical mass to support the pressure the union needed from the beginning, at the end of 1960s and during the 1970s, when the companies were not so willing to bargain. Several times the SJOIIM had to resort to strikes, and women workers, socialized within a labor culture where the strike was a conventional and accepted tactic, were the main supporters of these movements. Second, as potential leaders because of their participation in labor movements and meetings even though they did not occupy the highest positions in the union structure. Women workers stood out as organizers of the movement and defenders of the union. And they were conscious that most of the clauses in the collective bargaining had been gained thanks to them.

Moreover, up to beginning of the 1990s, women affiliates within the SJOIIM were extremely active, especially the older ones. They were in daily contact with the union and had been participating actively from the time they joined, before being hired by any maquiladora, until they were fired or they retired. A survey carried out at the beginning of the 1990s found that 90 percent of the women workers knew their union and considered it to be their defender, and 73 percent expressed some knowledge of collective bargaining. Further, 70 percent of those interviewed said they knew their leader and their *delegado* (local union representative), and 100 percent of them attested to their participation in the election of *delegados* and were convinced that they could remove them if they did not respond to the demands of the workers (Quintero 1997).

However, the situation has been changing in recent times. Women workers seem to be the first victims of the recent economic crisis. A significant number of them have lost their jobs as firms with economic problems closed, and whenever companies re-open their doors they have preferred younger women or men. Also, new generational contradictions seem to threaten the union's legitimacy. Senior workers enjoy better wages and benefits than the younger ones, who see their possibilities for improvements limited by the weakened position of the union. Thus, younger women workers appear to be more critical and less respectful of the struggle and benefits of the union than the senior women. The relationship with the union among these young workers has become more pragmatic: they join because that gives them the possibility to be hired in the maquila industries, but they are not involved or interested in union issues.

On the other hand, and in spite of their previous active participation, women workers within the union seem to be unable to have a more formal role as protagonists in the union's hierarchy. The leadership of SJOIIM is

mostly dominated by men, first in the person of Agapito González, a strong and patriarchal leader who, although encouraging women's involvement in labor movements and negotiations, always kept them under his control. His successor, a younger adept of the former leader, has included women in his team in central positions such as Secretary of Organization, but the key posts are still held by men in spite of the fact that the majority of affiliates are women. Moreover, women still have to confront the challenges of the priority given to economic issues over any gender demands, and the absence of new groups of women leaders.

In other words, women in the SJOIIM have crossed the borders of becoming full-time workers and assuming a worker identity, but the border of active participation in union affairs, fully crossed by earlier women workers, is hardly trespassed by younger affiliates, and the border of joining the ranks of high leadership or becoming highly positioned feminist leaders seems still out of reach.

### **Trade unions in the social context in El Salvador**

Women workers in El Salvador have to face challenges similar to those of their counterparts in Mexico, trying to cross the border of gender, class, and physical risks. El Salvador was one of the first countries in the region to have an organized labor movement as early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was also the first country (1932) where trade unionists and the local Communist party led a popular insurrection, gathering together indigenous people, farm laborers, peasants, and students, and it resulted in bloodshed, *la Matanza* (massacre), in which about 30,000 people were killed by the military, whereupon the whole labor movement disappeared.

In January 1992, after a twelve-year civil war (and the deaths of about 100,000 people), peace accords were signed. However, peace and transition to democracy did not restore labor's strength, because some of the alliances among the labor organizations and the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) were broken, some of the federations, like FENASTRAS (the National Federation of Salvadoran Workers), had moved to the right, and the ones remaining with the FMLN, like FEASIES (the Federation of Associations and Independent Unions of El Salvador) or FESTES (Union Federation of Salvadoran Workers), could not cope with the challenges of organizing workers in the maquiladora era. By 2006 there were 191 trade unions with 163,000 affiliates, of whom 24,432 belonged to the manufacturing sector (UNDP 2007–2008: 355). Within the maquila industries there were only six trade unions in 2003, and of these, two disappeared that year (Wolf Herrera et al. 2003: 42).<sup>4</sup> In

Central America as a whole, while maquiladoras increased by 37.5 percent, trade union presence decreased by 17.5 percent.

The maquiladora industry started in the 1970s but did not flourish until the 1990s with the creation of free trade zones and *recintos fiscales* (fiscal precincts). Both of these forms offer foreign (and national) investors tax exemptions, duty-free import of machinery, raw materials, and unlimited repatriation of profits. This development was encouraged by the U.S.-backed CBI (Caribbean Basin Initiative) and the GSP (Generalized System of Preferences), which guaranteed certain specific exports, like textiles, access to the U.S. market “based on the protection of international labor standards.” Maquila exports rose from 18 percent of total Salvadoran exports in 1991 to 48 percent in 1998, and from less than 5,000 workers in 1990 to about 60,000 in 1996 and about 90,000 in 2003 (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 70; REDCAM 2005: 5). In contrast to the Mexican maquilas, those in Central America concentrate their production on clothing and apparel goods, and most of the factories are subcontractors. In El Salvador, half of these factories are owned by Salvadoreans.

Other important information: as in Mexico, in all Central American countries, labor legislation and national labor codes are applicable in free trade zones and related areas (like *precintos fiscales*) (Wolf Herrera 2003; Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; REDCAM 2005). This means that, at least in theory, maquiladora workers have the same rights as those in the rest of the industries and workplaces in the country. As we shall see, however, because of the classic collusion between justice authorities and other ministry officials, maquiladora owners, and some co-opted trade unions, these are not applied.

### **Women workers crossing the border of maquila work**

Most maquila workers are young women between the ages of sixteen and thirty; in the mid-1990s they represented about 78 percent of all maquila workers and 87 percent of the female labor force. About 50 percent of these women were single mothers (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 70; REDCAM 2005: 5). Most of them received the minimum salary of about 150 U.S. dollars per month, while the basic food basket amounts to five times that sum (Connor et al. 1999: iv).

In contrast to the Mexican case in Matamoros, women workers in free trade zones in El Salvador are not attracted by trade unions. According to official figures for 2002, of 138,000 trade union affiliates only 11,740 were women, that is, only 9 percent of all affiliates (Análisis sobre El Salvador 2003). To obtain a collective contract in El Salvador, trade unions must affiliate at least 51 percent of all workers in a factory. According to UNDP figures, by 2006 in the manufacture sector there were about eight enterprise collective contracts



supporting 1,211 male workers and 433 female workers and one industrial collective contract protecting 1,829 male workers and 1,455 female workers (UNDP 2007–2008: 356). This from a total of 80,000 workers in maquiladora in the whole country.

What are the obstacles to more trade union affiliation within the maquila industries? One is the volatile character of these factories, which open and close very swiftly. Governments are unable to control their permanence in the country, since these companies are totally dependent on their parent companies. Another factor is their vulnerability to commercial agreements, like the end of the MFA (Multifiber Agreement) in 2005 and the recent one in 2008–2010. Both situations led to unemployment for thousands of workers. A third reason is the mistrust and hostility of factory owners toward any kind of labor organization that they do not control or use for their own purposes; thus the use of threats and blacklists. Most of the time government officials have obstructed labor organizing and have discouraged conflicts, siding most often with maquila owners. Also, workers have adapted and resigned themselves to permanent instability; they see no point in organizing, and sometimes they even use trade union affiliation to get the management to fire them in order to obtain certain indemnities and thus be able to change their workplace. Thus, worker rotation has become a tactic of resistance and survival in times when the work on offer is plentiful. In addition, trade union organizing has sometimes become a one-time solution in order to solve a certain state of affairs but is rarely a permanent solution to poor labor conditions or low salaries. The bad reputation of many trade unions, like FENASTRAS, which uses labor conflicts only to benefit itself, has also contributed to a strong rejection of trade union affiliation. And, last but not least, is the lack of interest by male-dominated unions in women's interests and problems and women workers' lack of time (with the double burdens of work and home) to organize (Martinez and Quinteros 1997; Wolf Herrera et al. 2003: 44–46; Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 71).

This does not mean that there are no labor conflicts in the maquilas in El Salvador. On the contrary, given the low pay and the physical risks of precarious working conditions, the long working hours, the rarely paid overtime, and the mistreatment and harassment (particularly sexual harassment), several such conflicts have taken place. The Mandarin International conflict in 1995 was one such effort to organize a union affiliated with one of the big union federations. It was successful, thanks to transnational support and international campaigns against GAP, but although the independent trade union survived for some time (before the factory closed and moved out), it never managed to gain a collective contract and thus to improve the salaries of the workers (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 75–80).

### **Crossing class and gender borders in El Salvador: Two study cases**

In what follows we shall try to give an overview of organizing efforts with women maquiladora workers in El Salvador, taking the concrete case of San Marcos. We focus on some of the organizations, trade unions, and NGOs that try to organize or support these workers. In El Salvador, in contrast to the Matamoros case, it is NGOs that have been more successful in their efforts to help women maquiladora workers, although, as we shall see, some trade unions also continue to struggle. Among the women's NGOs involved in this terrain we have ORMUSA, Mujeres Transformando (MT), Movimiento Salvadoreños de Mujeres (MSM), Las Melidas, and Las DIGNAS. Among the more active trade unions we have the federations FEASIES (Federación de Asociaciones y sindicatos independientes de El Salvador) and FENASTRAS (still considered to be a "yellow union" negotiating directly with the managers without any concern for the workers' interests), and smaller trade unions like SGC (Sindicato General de Costureras), SGTV (Sindicato de Gremio de Trabajadores del Vestido), and other factory trade unions.

Using information gathered through interviews and direct observation during the summer of 2009, we will take the case of a group of trade unions, SGC, SGTV, and their joint MSTSM (Mesa Sindical de Trabajadores de la Maquila), and will continue to the case of a federation of trade unions, FEASIES, in alliance with an NGO, Mujeres Transformando (MT). We will present the ways in which these organizations try to cross the borders of gender and class to confront the challenges faced by their affiliates.

#### *Trade unions on their own: The Mesa de la Maquila (SGC and SGTV)*

The trade unions around the MSTSM, especially the SGC and SGTV, try to organize women workers through focusing on what they call "labor clauses," that is, concrete issues negotiated by trade union groups called "seccionales."<sup>5</sup> They have already managed to organize six seccionales, four by SGC and two by SGTV, with a total affiliation of about 1,654 women (and 118 men), most of them in San Marcos. The issues taken up with the factory owners are very concrete and sometimes small: demanding good toilets or subsidized lunches or fighting in court for the reinstatement of fired workers. But this negotiation is bound to be unsuccessful if it is not supported by a larger group of workers and by alliances with other organizations like the National Commission for Human Rights or with foreign organizations that use the banner of corporate codes of conduct to exert pressure on the brands for which maquilas work. However, according to the leaders of the SGC and the MSTSM, every factory demands different strategies according to its own situation. The ideal solution would be a collective contract, but that is extremely difficult to achieve given the fact that

they would need to affiliate 51 percent of the workers. However, according to its general secretary, the SGC was close to concluding such a contract in Empresas GAMA, an enterprise with Palestinian owners. Needless to say, this would be an historic achievement.

These trade unions had integrated a gender perspective into their training courses for women workers and their leaders. This training encompassed not only labor rights but also more general human, and especially women's, rights, focusing on improving women's self-esteem so they could cope with other, private problems like domestic violence or access to health care services. For this they tried to get the assistance of government entities such as ISDEMU (Instituto Salvadoreño para el desarrollo de la Mujer). Moreover, they also tried to make women conscious of their responsibilities; for example, the cleanness of the toilets at the factory, something that women sometimes boycotted as a form of personal vengeance against the factory but that affected the rest of the workers, according to the leaders of the SGC.

Trade union meetings and training courses were organized during workers' free time, but never immediately after a workday because that delayed the women's arrival home and created problems for them. Most events took place on weekends, and for the training courses women were encouraged to bring their children and a sort of daycare center was organized so the children would not disturb their mothers' training. Social events were organized so the women workers could bring their husbands and relatives in order to demystify the image of a trade union as dangerous agitators and replace it with one of "caring" organizations, thus increasing their credibility and legitimacy. Also, women workers were given some money to cover the transportation costs of coming to the meetings, and at these meetings or social events free food was provided. Moreover, given their low salaries, affiliated workers were not asked to pay trade union dues.

The challenges these trade unions are facing, apart from their struggles against the companies and sometimes the official authorities (the Ministry of Labor or labor courts), had to do with the inherent instability of maquilas, the workers' reactions to the conflicts, new forms of production recently enforced, and the traditionally bad reputation of trade unions. Regarding the instability of maquilas, the problem was not only that factories closed suddenly and disappeared. Affiliated workers or those defended by the unions might suddenly have to leave the plant and abandon the conflict because of pressing economic needs forcing them to migrate, or personal problems (criminality related to the Mara gangs) affecting their families. There was also the problem of those workers who were starting to be threatened or harassed by other workers loyal to the factory owners.

The introduction of new forms of production was seen by these trade unions as a threat to worker solidarity. The system of team work in modules, where a group of workers were given a certain amount of work to be done, a target, created enormous stress among these women workers. They were forced to control each other, limiting the amount of time for going to the toilet, for example, in order to accomplish the target. Another challenge these trade unions were concerned with was the increasing recruitment of young men instead of women workers. Men were preferred by the owners because they did not have maternity-leave problems, nor did they ask for special permits to take their children to the health services or to solve problems at school.

Finally, the *machista* trade union culture was seen as a problem. Not so much within the SGC, as 98 percent of its affiliates were women (and the person interviewed, the general secretary, was a woman), but at higher levels, within the federation and confederation, where only men occupied the decision-making positions. Finally, there was the lack of legitimacy of many trade unions with a bad reputation for dishonesty or of ex-workers trying to make their fights against their former enterprises into a *modus vivendi*. The latter damaged the image of organized workers and trade unions with their stories of women workers having to prostitute themselves to survive.

Relations with other trade unions or NGOs organizing women workers were also a challenge that entailed a certain degree of failure in the crossing of class borders. These trade union leaders expressed a feeling of being used, even manipulated or invaded in their territory, by NGOs of the kind that only approached them when they needed them to justify their own work to donors. Although women's NGOs had a training capacity that these trade union leaders admitted they needed, they could not trust them due to some bad experiences in which they had felt manipulated. Part of the problem was that NGOs were run by middle-class women, not by women workers who were or had previously been active, and that these NGO women made a living from these activities.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, these NGOs had a network of international contacts and access to international funds that they did not share with trade unions. But NGOs needed trade unions, because even if they could help to train workers about their rights, they would never be able to represent them in front of the company as trade unions would.

These trade unions had certain international and regional contacts – for example, with the International Trade Union Confederation – and sporadic support from regional offices of international organizations like UNICEF (helping in their training-related children's daycare activities) as well as with certain regional forums, but all in all, these contacts were quite limited. At the national level, the trade unions' main coordinating effort was the Mesa Sindical

de trabajadores y trabajadoras de la maquila (MSTM), formed by two industry trade unions (SGC and SGTV), four “seccionales” belonging to different factories, and a trade union federation, FESTES (Federación de sindicatos de trabajadores de El Salvador). This was an umbrella space meant to promote women workers’ interests, responding to a widespread feeling that these interests were not really being represented either by trade unions or by women’s organizations. But MSTM was also conceived as a juridical shield to stop the blows against the trade unions themselves. Moreover, it was a step forward toward creating a federation of maquila trade unions that represent these interests vis-à-vis the government and the maquila owners. And finally, it was a promoter of trade union organizing with special brochures to be distributed among the workers.

*A women’s NGO in alliance with trade unions: Mujeres Transformando (MT)*

Mujeres Transformando (Women Transforming) is an NGO that started in 2003 with the aim of organizing maquiladora women workers through new strategies.<sup>7</sup> The idea was to carry out this organizing in the communities where women lived in the Santo Tomas municipality.<sup>8</sup> Women leaders were identified for each community, and through these leaders women’s groups were formed and started receiving courses, basically on labor rights from a gender perspective but also on mental health and self-esteem, through a participatory methodology. By July 2009 MT had already organized seven groups of maquiladora workers and seven groups of women (many of them ex-maquila workers) working in all kinds of activities: street vendors, domestic workers, but also maquila home-workers (doing embroidery). These groups amounted to about two hundred women in July 2009.

As in the case of the trade unions we have presented, MT is flexible regarding the time of the meetings and trainings for these women, most of them taking place in the evenings or on weekends, when family members are welcome and food is served. The trainings take place once a week in the case of beginners and once every two weeks for more advanced groups. Training sessions alternate between labor rights one week and mental health and relaxation the next.

Even though this is a women’s NGO whose main organizers are not active or former maquila workers, MT has managed to legitimize its class credentials through the creation of the Municipal Committee of Maquila Women Workers, in which all MT-organized women are represented. This committee was born in 2005 as a space for consulting about MT decisions, but it gradually became a space in its own right with the aim of having political incidence. The committee organizes women’s mobilizations, it has negotiated with municipal authorities to make July 5th, Maquila Women’s Day, a municipal holiday, and it is trying to do the same at the national level. The leaders of this committee receive special leadership training in how to speak in public, how to deal with the microphone,

how to breathe (theatre training), but also in computer skills and general knowledge of international trade and the international economy. A delegation of the committee participated in the Social Forum of the Americas in Guatemala in 2008, in a special event called the women's trial against neoliberal capitalism. This event was part of the regional campaign against labor flexibility in which MT participates. The Municipal Committee of Maquila Women Workers also has representatives on the MT steering board.

Like most NGOs working with maquila women workers, MT had traditionally been very critical of trade unions. This started to change when one of the women workers they trained turned out to be the general secretary of a newly created factory trade union, organized in reaction to FENASTRAS manipulations. This union ran into a conflict with the management, the leading members of the union were fired, and they were advised by a male trade union activist to resort to a hunger strike, a tactic they refused to follow. The MT-trained leader contacted the MT, which helped her and the other trade union leaders, with legal assistance, to be reinstated in the plant and to register the trade union. Fortunately, this went well, as the new labor authorities, who belonged to the recently elected FMLN, were more sympathetic to labor demands.

This event, together with previous contacts with FEASIES, a federation of independent trade unions, led MT to review its opposition to trade unions. The whole leadership of MT went to a trade union organizing course in which they found their previous prejudices about male chauvinism in trade unions well confirmed. However, they also learned how to respond to provocations, as well as the need to reinforce their training on mental health to help women enrolling in trade union organizing cope with such a milieu. Moreover, they gained the skills to encourage such trade union organizing, although they admit that this has to be a personal decision by each woman worker. Through its alliance with FEASIES, MT is already offering courses on trade union organizing skills. These are training sessions with a gender perspective that take place on Saturdays or Sundays at MT headquarters; they are given through participatory techniques and are meant to be reproduced afterwards in the communities.

MT received most of its financing from a Swiss agency, Brock le Pont, but regional resources, too, like the Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (Central American Fund of Women), have financed, for example, the activities of the Municipal Committee of Maquila Women Workers. Like most other women's NGOs, MT was also part of regional coalitions like the Concertación por un Empleo Digno de las Mujeres (CDM), but otherwise its regional or international contacts were not very well developed.

In the summer of 2009, MT was in a phase of restructuring strategies. It did not want to expand but to consolidate with two new orientations: a broadening of the trade union path (aiming, for example, at the creation of a new, large

industrial trade union focused on women) and a search for alternatives to confront unemployment. A bridge between the two was the organizing of self-employed embroidery workers. MT was discussing the possibility of organizing them as an independent workers' trade union or as a micro enterprise so the workers themselves could control the commercialization of their products instead of being forced to sell these products to maquila plants.

### **Final reflections**

From the cases we have presented, we can see the different degrees to which these women workers have crossed the border of gender and class by assuming the identities of workers and trade union activists. We have also seen how they have confronted the physical challenges of having a woman's body in rather risky working places.

The Matamoros case shows that male-dominated traditional unions are far from releasing their grip on power and that numerical superiority does not mean access to decision making. Women may be the majority of workers and those most affected by bad working conditions and economic crisis, but their interests are no priority, however, for traditional unions like this. On the other hand, women in these trade unions seem to accept this situation, and though well trained in labor mobilization, they do not seem ready to cross the border of questioning male authority. Nevertheless, changes may be under way through a generational shift, due to the loss of privileges previously taken for granted. The question is whether there is any process of awareness of feminist alternatives among the new generations, something which could encourage the crossing of borders, as seems to be the case in El Salvador.

Although difficult, the situation in El Salvador seems more encouraging. Maquiladoras in San Marcos and in El Salvador in general are not the almighty transnational corporations we see in Matamoros; they are mostly subcontractors of well-known brands in the garment industry, a fact that makes them more vulnerable to transnational pressures via consumer boycotts. However, such pressures and transnational support from solidarity groups have not been able to compensate for the lack of strong unions capable of winning collective contracts that could improve working conditions and wages in a substantial way. And part of the problem regarding the weakness of unions has to do with their inability to organize women workers. Some of these unions have understood the problem and are working in a positive sense, as we have seen. Their labor consciousness has merged with an increasing feminist awareness (lacking among the Matamoros union women), and although they are still a minority, their projects and advances seem rather promising. However, there is still the problem of crossing the border of class regarding the cooperation

of women-friendly unions, like the SGC and SGTV, with women's NGOs. But even this problem seems possible to overcome if one judges by the example of the FEASIES-MT alliance, where both sides have crossed such a border and understood the necessity to learn from each other and to cooperate.

Finally, all these agencies (trade unions and NGOs) have to solve the challenge of the physical risks these working women have to face in their everyday work. Many of them are single mothers, so they have no alternative but to accept these hazardous jobs. The confronting of these challenges can be successful only if these women really do manage to cross the borders of active participation in trade union struggles and of becoming feminist worker activists as well.

## Notes

- 1 "Maquiladoras" are foreign-owned "offshore assembly plants" that started being established during the 1960s along the Mexico-U.S. border, relying on Mexico's abundant supply of low-wage labor. Nowadays they can be found everywhere in Mexico. Whereas in the 1970s, women represented about 100% of labor in the maquiladora sector, this percentage had diminished to 55% in 2000. See Quintero 2002.
- 2 For a detailed account of the creation of the RMSM, see Domínguez R. 2007.
- 3 The main part of this campaign led by the Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project took place in 1995, after NAFTA was signed. See Domínguez R. 2002.
- 4 According to other accounts, there were thirteen trade unions in maquila industries in 2003 and they represented about 7 percent of all maquila workers. See *Análisis sobre el Salvador* 2003.
- 5 Regarding the SGC, the SGTV, and the MSTSM, the information in this section comes from interviews conducted with Aracely Martines (general secretary of SGC) and Gloria Flores (coordinator of MSTSM) and attendance at their training courses, during the first part of July 2009.
- 6 The person interviewed emphasized the fact that the general secretary of the SGC herself was still an active worker, not a full-time trade union leader.
- 7 Interviews with Montserrat Arévalo (leader of MT) and Rosemarie de Rosario (former maquila worker and promoter within MT) and attendance at an MT training course on women's rights and on trade union organizing, July 2009.
- 8 Most of the workers living in this municipality work in the San Marcos maquila area. MT limits its activities to this municipality alone, since its juridical status limits it geographically. MT recently obtained national juridical status but was cautious with any geographical expansion other than to nearby municipalities where potential new groups could be created, as in the case of Pachimalco, where a substantial amount of home-worked embroidery sold to factories was taking place.



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## 7 The impact of guerrilla participation on K'iche' women's collective identity formation process

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The essay presents an analysis of the relationship between revolutionary mobilization and collective identity formation processes of K'iche' women. What happens to women's collective identity formation process if activists do not map a site for gendered expressions and demands within the revolutionary movement? The essay analyzes the way in which the interaction between centralized decision-making structures and decisions related to women's bodily expressions of identity – such as traditional garb – have affected the dynamic of collective identity formation in the post-war period. It is argued that the modalities of K'iche' women's activism – specifically the demand of obedience and of laying down their traditional garb – have posed many obstacles in the process of constructing an empowered gender identity. However, activists have also been skillful in exploring niches in which they could critically reflect on their own emancipation on the basis of Mayan *cosmovisión*.

El ensayo presenta un análisis de la correlación entre la movilización revolucionaria y la creación de una identidad colectiva de las mujeres K'iche'. El proceso de creación de identidad empezó durante el conflicto armado, así que surge la pregunta ¿Qué sucede con ese proceso cuando activistas revolucionarias no crean un marco para expresiones y demandas genéricas? El ensayo analiza cómo la interacción entre estructuras centralizadas y decisiones relacionadas con la expresión corporal de una identidad femenina (como el traje indígena) ha afectado la dinámica de crear una identidad colectiva en el periodo de postguerra. Se cuestiona que las modalidades de activismo de mujeres K'iche' - en concreto la demanda de obediencia y de abandonar su traje tradicional - han presentado varios obstáculos en el proceso de formar una identidad genérica empoderada para las mujeres K'iche'. Sin embargo, activistas han demostrado habilidad en la exploración de nichos en los cuales pueden considerar críticamente su emancipación, basada en la *cosmovisión* Maya.

## Introduction

We did not have a gender consciousness, before and during the war, but unconsciously, we hoped that with change in society and from the class struggle, there was going to be a situation of equality for women. Unconsciously that was the feeling... They [the men of the Left] always said that this [the women's] struggle was secondary; always said that the problem was capitalism and I think we believed that because we didn't know the depth of our situation.

Lety Mendez (cited in Shayne 2004: 1)

This essay explores how the identity formation process of Guatemalan K'iche' women has been shaped by their participation in popular movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Specifically, it analyzes the impact of elite discourses – i.e., the discourse of the revolutionary leaders – on women's collective identity formation process. It also considers women's own assessment of the link between their activism and their collective identity formation process. The focus on revolutionary mobilization is inspired by the fact that this mobilization in many ways facilitated women's entry into public life, and presented them with new possibilities, ideas, and skills (Light 1992; Ray and Korteweg 1999). Therefore, the civil conflict is often seen as the background against which indigenous women's emancipation started to take shape (Luciak 2001; Berger 2006).

The essay pays special attention to the issue of bodily expressions and determinants of a collective identity, and to how these were dealt with during the period of revolutionary activism, both by K'iche' women themselves and by the leaders – usually men – of the revolutionary organizations. The paper argues that initially, the formation of a collective identity was a priority neither for women activists nor for their leaders. This means that initially, relatively little explicit thinking had gone into how to shape the identity formation process, or into what type of collective identity was envisioned (e.g., a gender awareness tied to ethnic and class awareness, an empowered identity, the role of traditional indigenous beliefs for a shared gender identity, etc.). This initial absence of a preconceived strategy was soon replaced, however, by conscious efforts to critically rethink elements of K'iche' women's collective identity on the basis of Mayan *cosmovisión* in the aftermath of the armed conflict. Still, the relationship between gender awareness and ethnic awareness, and the role of authoritarian relations within the social movements, and the conceptualization of emancipation, needs to be considered when analyzing the link between revolutionary mobilization and K'iche' women's collective gender identity. To analyze these issues, the paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the theoretical

section sets out the framework on collective identity formation that underlies this research. Then the methods are outlined and the situation of Guatemalan K'iche' women during and after the armed conflict is briefly discussed. The body of the text then sets out the key findings of the research in relation to the discourse on gender and the effects this had on K'iche' women's identity formation. The essay concludes with a discussion of prevailing understandings of an emancipated identity.

### **Theoretical framework**

Underlying this paper is a constructivist view of identity, whereby identity is not seen as a pre-given, but rather as a symbolic representation with boundaries that are flexible and constantly reproduced through social interaction (Cooper and Brubaker 2000). The essay reckons that identity formation at the group level can have roots in objective interests or shared culture, as well as being an elite-driven process. Especially in the context of the Guatemalan civil war, a focus on leaders' discourses is justified, since revolutionary leaders had privileged access to information and controlled the transmission of knowledge, which increased their ideological power (see Foucault 1979; Laraña 1994). This justifies a double focus, on the one hand on how leaders discussed collective identities, and on the other, on how K'iche' women activists experienced this issue.

The essay sees identity formation processes at the collective level as a process in which the involved actors come to think of themselves as distinctive from members of other groups with whom they interact, and stresses the relational, processual, and contextual component of identity formation (Barth 1969). Collective identities can be empowering and emancipating in the sense that they trigger an awareness of common problems and resources, and nourish the idea of being an actor in one's own life. Collective identity can, in other words, be a stimulus for collective action for the advancement of the group, since it tips the cost-benefit balance of any action towards the collective level and justifies engagement in activities that have no immediate benefit for the individual – such as participating in protest marches (Drury 1999). This also means that the stronger a collective identity of a group is, the more leverage this group will potentially have on policy, because its members will be more motivated to mobilize (Laraña 1994). An empowered identity is thus key to a successful emancipation and vice versa.

This theoretical framework inspires a focus on women's revolutionary activism during the civil war as a determinant of collective identity formation. As several studies argue, it is during conflict that women erode typical male arenas and redefine behavioral and institutional boundaries and borders. This questions traditional boundaries and redefines roles, and provides women with

opportunities for social participation (e.g., MacDonald 1987; Shayne 2004). This social participation has the potential to change social awareness and introduce women to new ideas of equality, a newly gained sense of rights. It also facilitates economic independence, and the creation of networks and skills that can be used later on (Molyneux 1985; Blumberg 2001).

## Methods

Since academic literature of the time does not focus on the participation of K'iche' women in indigenous movements (Hernández 2005), interviews are the most important source of information. The essay is based on a discourse analysis of interviews with revolutionary leaders, K'iche' guerrilleras, and current indigenous feminist activists. In the framework of research on the influence of armed conflict on protest strategies of the women's movement in Central America, I conducted 74 interviews with Nicaraguan and Guatemalan women and former activists.<sup>1</sup> As Silverman (2006: 10) underlines, interviews do not give direct access to facts or experiences because historical memory is constantly reworked in light of the current situation. Interviews can therefore merely offer people's interpretations and representations of facts and events. However, accepting this means taking into account the fact that different interviewees have different relations to the phenomena they describe, which deserves attention in its own right. Moreover, I aimed partially to overcome the lack of stability by conducting a large number of interviews on similar topics and by triangulating interviews with documentary resources where possible. For analytical clarity, the number of direct citations is limited, and instead, the essay presents the findings of the analysis of the combined interviews.

In addition to this, I reconstructed the discourse of revolutionary leaders on the basis of documents from the recently discovered Guatemalan Historical National Police Archive (AHPN). This archive – to date – contains, among other things, a collection of 297 confiscated revolutionary pamphlets. I analyzed these documents in terms of gendered messages. The analysis was further refined and double-checked during focus groups and personal conversations on this topic with former guerrilleras. This way it was also possible to discern the interplay between the discourse of the leaders – expressed in the pamphlets – and the everyday discourse of activists in relation to gender and collective identity. The data gathering consisted of a constant movement between a close reading of the text<sup>2</sup> on the one hand, and a consideration of the wider social and cultural processes on the other hand, because discourses can only be understood in reference to the culture and society in which they arise (Wodak and Meyer 2001: 2). To understand this social context, the next section considers the situation of Guatemalan K'iche' women during and after the civil war.

### **Socio-cultural situation of K'iche' women during the armed conflict**

K'iche' people are the largest indigenous group in Guatemala, and were one of the groups most heavily targeted during the civil war (Esparza 2005). This civil war was one of the fiercest armed conflicts the Latin American subcontinent knew in the last decades – in terms of duration, number of people killed and maimed, and repressive government strategies (Koonings and Kruijt 1999). Yet, at the same time, the conflict is often referred to as the background against which both indigenous people and women came to think of themselves as sharing a collective identity (Fagan 1999; Luciak 2001). In several respects, it can therefore be seen as the starting point for the emancipation of both groups.

The motivation for analyzing the collective identity formation process of K'iche' women in particular is twofold. Firstly, they present a case of a group that had little or no feeling of commonness on the basis of their gender before the armed conflict (Torres 1999). Secondly, because K'iche' women were particularly active in the guerrilla forces (CEH 1999 par. 82: 108–23), they were exposed to the rhetoric of revolutionary leaders that acted as an – unintended – catalyst in their collective identity formation process.

### **Socio-cultural situation of K'iche' women**

For the purpose of this essay, three aspects are particularly important to point out in relation to the situation of K'iche' women during the civil conflict.

Firstly, before the conflict, neither K'iche' people as a group nor K'iche' women shared a strong sense of common belongingness or collective identity (Kellogg 2010). It was not until the beginning of the early 1990s that indigenous women began creating spaces to organize themselves and recover the cultural demands of their people (Hernández 2005). Furthermore, K'iche' people – and women in particular – had a history of deprivation and relative invisibility and were discriminated against in many ways (Stern 1998). K'iche' women thus found themselves in a situation of double discrimination and invisibilization, and their daily activities were in many cases restricted to the domestic sphere. Limited economic power, lack of property and inheritance rights, low literacy and paid-employment rates, conservative gender-ideologies and conservative Catholicism further restricted women's options at both the micro and macro level (Palencia Prado 1999).

Another factor that initially hampered the formation of an independent collective gender identity is the idea of complementarity – rather than equality – that is the fundament of Mayan cosmovisión. The concept of complementarity – an ideal rather than an experienced reality in many cases – refers to a wide scope of exchange and interrelations between animals, the cosmos, nature, and energy,

but also between men and women (Jocón Gonzales 2005). This idea appears incompatible with mainstream feminist demands for equality. Yet K'iche' women have actually been able to use it as a resource in their emancipation struggle in the post-conflict period. By critically reinterpreting the idea of complementarity beyond the common understanding of complementarity in gender roles, K'iche' feminists provided a source of inspiration for social transformation. Below, I return to the idea of complementarity, arguing that, despite its initial role, it served to refine and advance K'iche' women's emancipation struggle and process of collective identity formation (Marcos 2010: 205).

A last important factor when analyzing how the collective identity formation process of indigenous women was influenced by their revolutionary activism is the role of traditional garb. Traditional garb is a crucial boundary marker of group identity, because it functions as the physical and bodily expression of differences (Rupp and Taylor 1999). Because of this, it can be seen as an element at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and politics. By taking traditional garb as a case study, one can thus interrelate different societal dynamics and assess how the participation and the bodies of women were politicized. Given the symbolic value of traditional garb, it can potentially serve as a starting point for the construction of a gendered collective identity. I return to this in section 5.3.

### **K'iche' women's activism during the civil war**

Despite the brutal nature of the civil war, the conflict also facilitated women's entry into public life, and to some extent thus held the germs of K'iche' women's collective emancipation process (Torres 1999; Hernández 2005). On the one hand, women also mobilized and became activists during the conflict. On the other hand, women's economic role changed because the civil war entailed the necessity for women to work outside the home. This increased their economic power and participation opportunities. Blumberg (1998) argues that when the economic power of a large enough proportion of women rises, this will be translated into an improvement in macro-level rules about women's rights. Ray and Korteweg (1999) see mobilization and economic advances as a key aspect of emancipation and of an empowered identity, precisely because they present women with new possibilities, ideas, and skills. These new opportunities, they argue, will affect the identity formation process at the group level. As Kampwirth (2004) indicates, however, the effect of participation in popular movements is highly dependent on the nature of the movement and the position of the individual within it. This is an important point, and in the next section, I analyze what the modalities of the mobilization were in order to assess its effects on the identity formation process in the post-war period.



### **The position of women in top-down and everyday discourse**

I argue that the evolution of both a collective ethnic and gender identity was influenced by the discourses and actions to which K'iche' people, and women in particular, were exposed during the civil conflict. Therefore this section considers the attention that was paid to the idea of collective identity formation during the period of civil conflict, both by the leaders of the indigenous guerrilla forces, and in everyday conversation.

#### *Elite discourses*

Strategies of the Guatemalan government, such as infiltration, killings, and disinformation campaigns, were aimed at destabilizing popular movements (CEH 1999). These actions have been of particular relevance in shaping the discourse and action of the leaders of these movements. Given the fierceness of the war, leaders focused virtually all attention – both discursively and in their actions – on the war effort, and were largely unaware of, or uninterested in, the gender identity-formation component (Lupe 1983; Interview P, Q). Fierce repression was at the origin of a discursive strategy that was aimed at creating the largest possible base for support, but also inspired the adoption of rigid organizational and communication structures on the part of the popular movements. These were needed to operate efficiently. The desire for efficiency can also be seen as one of the reasons why leaders started to stress the idea of a collective ethnic identity (Holland 2008): this identity – which was largely absent before – could be used as a basis for mobilization (Bayard de Volo 2006a). However, given the context of war, most actions and decisions on the issue of identity were reactions to government actions, rather than expressing a conscious program in terms of identity formation.

Moreover, the implicit construction of a collective identity was fostered only along ethnic lines. Gender played no role in this discourse. An analysis of the 297 revolutionary pamphlets in the AHPN shows that during the civil conflict, women hardly figured in the discourse of the leaders of the popular movements at the national level. There are also no significant differences between the different leftist groups that made up the National Revolutionary Unit for Guatemala (URNG).<sup>3</sup> None of these groups addressed women as a group in their pamphlets, nor did they mention specific needs of women, or promise specific rights to women.<sup>4</sup> While revolutionary movements in that era tended to be gender-blind in many cases, this was not the case in Nicaragua and El Salvador, where the FSLN and FMLN respectively used gendered discourses on many occasions – albeit in a pragmatic and functionalist way – to mobilize women as a group and play on their shared interests (FSLN 1980; FMLN 1990; Shayne 1999: 98). Examples thereof are the posters that call on women – as

a group – to mobilize for the revolution or the pamphlets promising better healthcare and childcare to women (Bujard 2010). While these initiatives too are not *per se* an expression of a great awareness of gendered needs on the part of Salvadoran or Nicaraguan revolutionary leaders, their reference to women as a group, implicitly, fostered the idea of a gendered collective identity (Drury 1999; Bayard de Volo 2006b).

Because gender issues were deemed unimportant by Guatemalan revolutionary leaders, gender equality at the lower levels was a far-distant ideal rather than a daily reality. As one former URNG leader (P) puts it, “Sure, we believed in gender equality, but it was far from being one of our priorities. If it was there, it was there, we weren’t going to oppose it, but certainly we weren’t about to fight for it either, there were more important things going on.” Another testimony (Q) also describes how women’s and society’s lack of interest in gender equality influenced the lack of attention for gender. “The few of us who considered gender equality a relevant issue were unlikely to actually impose measures to arrive at it, simply because that could make conservative men turn their back on us. You should not forget that women weren’t even asking for it themselves.”

### *Everyday discourse and practice*

Interviews confirm that also in the daily operating units in which women were active, gender hardly played a role, and that the situation was not conducive to the creation of a collective gender awareness or of an awareness of the specific needs and interests of women. As one interviewee (K) argued, women did not necessarily take issue with the absence of women’s needs from the goals of their leaders, as the war efforts were seen as a priority by women too. Women adopted the line of reasoning that they needed to fight for ethnic emancipation and the end of the civil war first, and only later on for their own needs as women. They thereby echoed the position of the leaders, for whom creating a collective gender identity was by no means a priority – not even for the pragmatic purpose of mobilizing women more efficiently. In all focus groups and interviews, participants confirmed that both in everyday conversations and in the speeches delivered by the leaders, women’s issues were not problematized, and women’s issues would presumably be solved if forces were united in the fight for the end of economic oppression and authoritarian rule. In ideal terms, this line of argument would result in equal gender relations at the organizational level. What most interviewees describe, however, was that this was not the case in daily life. While some interviewees stressed the fact that leaders of the guerrilla were on average more progressive than the rest of society, others describe how

this was hardly noticeable in everyday actions and relationships within the units. As one interviewee (H) commented, "It looked as if life was going to be better for everyone who joined the guerrilla, men and women all the same. Back then, I never considered that our starting point was different from that of men or that we had the right to demand that they solve this problem in their own communities first before trying to change the whole country. Maybe they never wanted us to come to that conclusion [laughs]."

### *Discourses of obedience, body politics, and collective identity formation*

Despite women's absence from revolutionary pamphlets and propaganda, preliminary findings suggest that the collective identity formation process of women was heavily influenced by the discourse of the leaders of popular movements and by women's participation in these movements. The large numbers of women who were active in the revolutionary movements<sup>5</sup> could ideally draw on this experience to organize around gender issues later on. Moreover, the new ideals of equality that women were presented with could provide the basis for an empowered identity. It is precisely this involvement of women and how it was structured and impacted their identity formation later on that is important for this essay. Different aspects of this mobilization influenced the identity formation process in different ways.

For one thing, the collective gender identity that occurred was largely an unintended consequence of women's mobilization in the popular movement. While this is understandable and not problematic as such,<sup>6</sup> how this affected their collective identity formation process should be analyzed. How did the demands of uniformity and obedience, for example, leave their trace on K'iche' women's future collective identity? To analyze this, the effect of two elements surrounding women's mobilization is crucial: closed decision-making models and subjugating body politics.

*Closed decision-making models and obedience.* Several interviewees (B, E, J) overlap in their assessment that within the popular movements, traditional structures of power were reproduced, if not in practice then at least in how women perceived them. As one interviewee (D) testified, "They [superiors and male comrades] were like my father and brothers, I could not but obey them." Another interviewee (G) argued that, in hindsight, she experienced the group as a hierarchical structure and the leaders (men) as authoritative figures with whom she could not argue. So, *de facto*, through a series of decisions, the group had taken on a vertical structure of obedience that did not easily accommodate the emancipation of women within it. Decision-making structures became even more centralized and closed in March 1982. Operational rules on the part of

the popular movements became stricter in response to General Montt's *beans and bullets* program (McClintock 1985: 242). Demanding obedience in a struggle for emancipation creates the impression of a contradiction, because it demands an attitude of submissiveness on the part of the people it is claiming to emancipate. Moreover, this situation impacted differently upon women than on men, because women came from a situation of double oppression: gender-based and class-based.<sup>7</sup> This differential impact is especially visible in relation to the policing of the body, which is the focus of the next section.

*The regulation of physical expressions of identity.* The most prominent expression of their identity for K'iche' women, interviewees argued (J, L, B), is their traditional garb. This garb can be seen as one of the boundary markers that allow groups to distinguish themselves from one another, and is therefore an important material element of collective identities. For practical reasons, activists – both women and men – were required to exchange this traditional garb for more practical or discreet outfits. The impact of laying down traditional garb affected women and men in different ways, for one thing because the difference between traditional and combat-style garments was greater for women than for men (cutting the braids, skirts vs. trousers, etc.), but also because K'iche' women were – on average – linked to community life more strongly and their traditional garb was an expression thereof (Fulchirone 2009). Moreover, women had a different starting position. The latter, however, was not recognized by the leaders, as was illustrated by an ex-URNG leader (P): “The question you ask about women is not relevant here. These demands [about cutting hair, wearing military uniforms, and participating in the activities] were the same for men and women. We wanted an equal society, we treated men and women in an equal way. It's as simple as that.” More importantly, however, demanding that women lay down their traditional garb was significant because it can be seen as a political act: the body is the domain in which politics are made visible. In that sense, imposing rules upon women's bodies once more transformed them into *cuerpos objetificados* at the service of – male – leaders. This way, the – implicit – discourse and demands concerning women's bodies shaped the way in which women mobilized and held the risk of investing women's collective identity with a degree of submissiveness.

Moreover, apart from appropriating women's bodies into a struggle that was not necessarily their own, the act of imposing decisions related to the women's bodily expressions of identity was an explicit political act because it deprived women of a vast array of tools for transgressing. According to Hernández and Krajewski (2009), the body can be seen as a means *par excellence* to fight and denaturalize established categories and to visibilize boundaries. Demanding of women that they conform to the group norm takes away women's possibility

to render borders more visible and to relate to them and transgress them in the process of their identity formation.<sup>8</sup> This transgression is a crucial part of any process of identity formation. Applied to the context of K'iche' women, this argument suggests that the very act of demanding conformity and uniformity in terms of bodily expressions of identity challenged the occurrence of an empowered collective identity, because markers that identify different groups (men – women) were invisibilized, thus taking away the potential to contest and raise critical voices within the newly created group in which gender differences were not acknowledged.

Several women indicated that having to lay down their traditional garb under those circumstances was disturbing for them, because it was neither their own decision, nor something they were consulted about or prepared for psychologically, nor something they deemed necessary *per se* (Interview A, G, H). Moreover, interviews suggest that this touched upon women's self-image. It affected their belief that they could make their own decisions as independent individuals, because others were deciding for them in one of the most intimate aspects of their life, namely their bodily experiences and expression of their identity (Interview A, C, K). At face value, it thus appeared that, by demanding that women – and men – lay down their traditional garb, traditional frames of reference related to gender were taken away, and that women were not encouraged to reconceptualize their collective gender identity within the movement, since there was very little room for maneuvering or independence. This is arguably a barrier to the construction of an emancipated collective gender identity. This is, however, only one side of the coin. The next section considers how the aforementioned obstacles to the creation of an empowered collective identity have been balanced by K'iche' activists in finding niches for emancipation.

### **Exploring new ways to emancipation and new forms of empowerment**

The fact that decisions within the movement were made top-down rather than enabling women to think critically and make their own decisions – albeit understandable given the context – can hardly be called emancipatory. One interviewee (F) comments, “They told us they needed us to do this or that, go here or there, believe in one thing or another, and that's what we did.” Remarks like these were common during the interviews and illustrated how little room to maneuver women in the guerrilla had to be critical agents in their own emancipation struggle. Nevertheless, the argument can be made that their activism has been a resource for K'iche' women to construct an empowered collective identity. There are two sides to this argument, one based on women's experiences, one pinned on a theoretical consideration.

Firstly, the gender blindness of social movements is nearly universal, but in several cases leads women – or other groups who are marginalized by the very organizations that claim to fight for them – to organize precisely in reaction to this invisibilization (Hale 1997; Zemlinskaya 2010). This has also been the case in Guatemala, where the overlooking of women's concerns fostered critical thinking about this situation among women active in these mixed-gender organizations. Hernández (2005) shows how the Guatemalan civil conflict has been fertile ground for indigenous women to organize and integrate elements of their *cosmovisión* into the political struggle to facilitate their own empowerment. In this same vein, women started to construct their own independent organizational spaces apart from those of the national indigenous movement and from feminist movements. Mama Maquín, for example, was women's response to the overlooking of gender concerns in refugee camp councils. This means that despite the neglect of gender issues and despite the demand of obedience, women have been able to draw on their experience in revolutionary movements to organize their own spaces for critical reflection, in which they could conceptualize how they saw themselves as a group within their nation state, their class, their ethnic group, and against the background of their *cosmovisión*.

This acknowledgement triggers a second consideration with regard to the question of an empowered collective identity, which is also theoretical. The prevailing idea that emancipation is based on equality between men and women (e.g., Aasen 2009) was replaced with the idea of complementarity and duality by indigenous feminists. Based on their revolutionary mobilization and their re-appropriation of traditional beliefs, they developed a culturally relevant model of emancipation that allows for the existence of differences between men and women, and that sees these as desirable to arrive at “respectful, sincere, equitable and balanced relationships” (Gabriel 2004). In this model, the concept of complementarity is not used to avoid talking about power relations, but rather as a tool to highlight the need to rethink culture and collective identities from a perspective of gender equality. This is important to consider when analyzing the situation of K'iche' women in terms of the nature of their collective identity, and suggests that we may have to rethink our concept of an emancipated collective identity altogether, because it is precisely the decentralization of the discourse of a collective identity and of equality that has contributed to the creation of a sense of emancipation in this case. In the face of the individualism promoted by globalizing capitalism, K'iche' women are recovering the values of community, balance, complementarity, and duality as the basis for their shared – empowered – collective identity, and thereby challenging prevailing notions of emancipation and questioning the very premises that underlie feminism.

## Conclusion

The modalities of the ethnic emancipation struggle have critically shaped certain aspects of K'iche' women's emancipation process. Documentary and discourse analysis showed that, throughout, the issue of gender-specific needs was one of very low interest to revolutionary leaders, on the one hand because it did not fit the logic of wartime decision-making and priorities, and on the other hand because nobody was explicitly pushing for it. Hence, the discourse on women and gender issues remained characterized by what Edwards and Potter (1992: 162) call "the systematic use of vagueness." To the extent that women came into the discourse at all, there were no explicit policies or discourses related to them. Because the issues remained implicit, women, in most cases, felt as if they too would benefit from their participation in the civil struggle.

Nevertheless, women's participation in these popular movements has been a trigger for the development of a gender awareness. Leaders played a marginal role in this process, and in some respects even presented a barrier to critical thinking by K'iche' women about their own situation as a group. Moreover, the fact that there was only little awareness of, attention to, and interest in the modalities and dynamic of women's collective identity formation process meant that several elements of K'iche' women's collective identity formation process were unintentionally shaped by decisions by leaders, and some aspects of identity were bypassed altogether. Hence, the participation in movements that were pinned on obedience and the forsaking of physical expression of identity is arguably a suboptimal starting point for women to establish an empowered gender identity.

Nonetheless, female participation in guerrilla movements indisputably also fostered the development of critical thinking on an emancipated identity. As soon as military tensions waned, K'iche' women took the opportunity to organize spaces of their own in which they could critically reconsider their own identity. This effort has not only been relevant for K'iche' – and other indigenous – communities, but it also challenges our concept of emancipation and empowerment. The form of emancipation that is advanced is pinned on the idea of complementarity rather than equality and offers interesting avenues for conceptualizing what constitutes an emancipated identity.

In conclusion, the modalities of K'iche women's activism, whereby they were systematically denied a voice, has impacted the way in which these women conceived of themselves as a group, and has left them in a contradictory position. Interviews show that women activists were initially approached with an expectation of submission and that they were invisibilized. Yet, based on in-depth interviews with ex-guerrilleras and indigenous leaders, this essay

argues that the development of an emancipating collective identity of K'iche' women that is emerging today can also be seen as a consequence of women's mobilization, because women reacted precisely to the injustice they perceived in the movements in which they were active. Indigenous feminist thinkers are slowly aiming to overcome contradictions and elements of submissiveness, which entered their collective identity through the modalities of their initial mobilization, by turning to traditional *cosmovisión* as a resource and a framework against which to shape new emancipating identities and relations. They have used their experience of revolutionary mobilization to reject, respond to, and negotiate the structures of domination that frame their lives, and have more specifically done so in reclaiming both indigenous spirituality and feminist ideas long present in the region.

## Notes

- 1 Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, most interviews are made anonymous, and only those that are directly cited in the text are mentioned in the appendix.
- 2 Text here refers to both written documents and the interviews.
- 3 I.e., the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms (ORPA), the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), and the National Direction Nucleus of the PGT (PGT-NDN).
- 4 Among the documents by rebel forces retrieved in the AHPN, the only one that makes note of women as a group is one by the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca stemming from 1982, and calls on them to join a protest march.
- 5 There are no precise figures, but accounts, for example, by Rigoberta Menchu, speak of women making up around 30 percent of the combat forces.
- 6 Much of the literature on women's emancipation describes how emancipation comes about as a by-product of participation in social movements (Molyneux 1985; Ray and Korteweg 1999; Bayard de Volo 2006a).
- 7 Other war-related dynamics also impacted differently on men and women, such as the disintegration of community structures. As one woman argued, "I'm not saying that seeing your child die is not awful for a father, but for us it was different, we didn't only suffer more [...] because we spent more time with them, we also suffered with every other mother's son who died, because we see how – with them – our community died" (Interview C).
- 8 According to all of my indigenous interviewees it was perfectly possible to conserve the traditional garb while engaging in activities which are feminist, progressive, and emancipatory.

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Interview B: ex-guerrillera, victim of wartime gendered violence, founder Actoras de Cambio and Q'anil (Guatemala City, 26 May 2010, 11 February 2011).

Interview C: ex-guerrillera EGP (Transvaal, Guatemala, 17 May 2010).



Interview D: ex-guerrillera EGP (Guatemala City, 2 June 2010).

Interview E: double interview, ex-guerrilleras from the North of Guatemala (Huehuetenango, Guatemala, 14 May 2010).

Interview F: ex-guerrillera FAR, board member of UNAMG (Guatemala City, 24 May 2010).

Interview G: ex-guerrillera PGT NDN, board member DEMI (Guatemala City, 7 June 2010).

Interview H: double interview, ex-guerrilleras, founders Kaqla (Guatemala City, 21 February 2011).

Interview I: ex-guerrillera, academic, member UNAMG, advisor Actoras de Cambio (Guatemala City, 26 January 2011).

Interview J: ex-guerrillera PGT NDN, member Actoras de Cambio (Guatemala City, 26 January 2011).

Interview K: ex-guerrillera ORPA, member Actoras de Cambio (Guatemala City, 15 February 2011).

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Interview Q: male guerrilla leader FAR (Guatemala City 17 May 2010).

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## 8 Embodied plurinational identities in the urban highlands of Bolivia

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Constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of both “manhood” and “womanhood” (Yuval-Davis 1997). Nationalist projects try to create unity around certain ideals. During the nineteenth century, Latin American states worked to normalize elite, predominantly male, ideals of femininity and masculinity (Dore 2000). The turbulent social protests that shook Bolivia at the beginning of the twenty-first century started a process of restructuring the Bolivian state with the aim of creating a decolonized state, one more directed by social movements. This article explores the way national identities have been gendered and embodied in this process, focusing particularly on the ways plurinational ideals are embodied by Bolivia’s new leadership: women and men of indigenous background active within social movements. It starts with a historical review of some of the ways Bolivian nationalism was expressed in terms of gender, class, and race/ethnicity, and compares these notions with the ways national ideals are expressed today, referring mainly to what is sometimes called the “indigenous nationalism” of Bolivia’s current government and social movements.

Las construcciones de la nacionalidad muchas veces incluyen nociones específicas de tanto ‘virilidad’ como ‘feminidad’ (Yuval-Davis 1997). Los proyectos nacionalistas tratan de crear unidad alrededor de ciertos ideales. Durante el siglo diecinueve, los estados latinoamericanos trabajaron para normalizar los ideales de la élite, predominantemente masculina, acerca de la feminidad y la masculinidad. (Dore 2000). Con las protestas sociales que ocurrieron en Bolivia durante la primera década del siglo veintiuno empezó un proceso de reestructuración del estado boliviano con el fin de crear un estado descolonizado, y más dirigido por los movimientos sociales. Este artículo explora la manera en que las identidades nacionales han sido imbuidas de género e incorporadas por el nuevo liderazgo de Bolivia: hombres y mujeres de origen indígena, quienes activamente participan dentro de los movimientos sociales. Empieza con una reseña histórica de las diferentes maneras en que el nacionalismo boliviano ha sido expresado en términos de género, clase y etnicidad, y compara estas nociones con la manera en que los ideales nacionales son expresados hoy en día. Se refiere principalmente a lo llamado “nacionalismo indígena” del gobierno actual de Bolivia y los movimientos sociales.

## Introduction

Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of both “manhood” and “womanhood.” She promotes a gendered understanding of nations and nationalism and suggests a systematic analysis of the contribution of gender relations to crucial dimensions of nationalist projects that try to create unity around certain ideals. During the nineteenth century, Latin American states worked to normalize elite, predominantly male, ideals of femininity and masculinity (Dore 2000). The turbulent social protests that shook Bolivia at the beginning of the twenty-first century started a process of restructuring the Bolivian state with the aim of creating a decolonized state, one more directed by social movements. In this article I will explore the way national identities have been gendered and embodied in this process, focusing particularly on the ways plurinational ideals are embodied by Bolivia’s new leadership: women and men of indigenous background active within social movements. I start with a historical review of some of the ways Bolivian nationalism was expressed in terms of gender, class, and race/ethnicity, and compare these notions with the ways national ideals are expressed today (2005–present), referring mainly to what is sometimes called the “indigenous nationalism” of Bolivia’s government and social movements. I then outline some of the possibilities and limitations of the ways national identities are being gendered and embodied by these actors.<sup>1</sup> The article is based on anthropological research in the form of literary reviews, interviews, and observations during the period of 2006 to 2009.

## Gendered embodied national identities

Following Yuval-Davis (1997), we may ask how we can understand the gendered embodiment of national identities and borders, and in what ways national identities have been embodied in the Andean area. These questions are related to the analysis of “the ways the relations between women and men affect and are affected by various nationalist projects and processes, as well as the ways notions of femininity and masculinity are constructed within nationalist discourses” (ibid.: 4). She suggests a systematic analysis of the importance of gender relations into crucial dimensions of nationalist projects such as national reproduction, national culture, and national citizenship (ibid.: 3). Yuval-Davis (1993) distinguishes between three dimensions of nationalist projects: constructions of nations based on notions of origin, culture, and citizenship in states. Different aspects of gender relations play an important role in each of these dimensions of nationalist projects.

The idea that the nation was to be created based on the idea of a common origin or shared blood/genes was hardly an option in the Bolivian case during the first two hundred years of the republic. In Bolivia nationalist projects have

responded, rather, to the idea of creating a shared culture and traditions as well as basing nationalism on citizenship in the state. In historical sources concerning relations between nation, state, and gender relations in Bolivia and Latin America, it is clear that gender relations were organized according to difference and hierarchy. The main problem seems to have been how to maintain differentiation between different categories of people, within the idea of a unified nation (Barragán 1997; Widmark 2010).

Nationalist projects in Bolivia, as elsewhere, tried to create unity around certain ideals. During the nineteenth century, as indicated by Dore (2000: 5), Latin American states worked to normalize elite, predominantly male, ideals of femininity and masculinity. This normalization provided the opportunity for national, regional, and local officials to exert pressure on men and women to conform to what the elite regarded as “proper” behavior. “Proper” was a highly fluid notion that varied by sex, class, race, marital status, age, and so on (*ibid.*).

By analyzing the legislation of the new republic of Bolivia, Barragán (1997) shows that juridical equality, the basis of modernity and political independence in Latin American countries, was not equal. With the exception of the rights of the male elite, the essential structure of the nation continued to be difference and hierarchy, a fact that was perceived as perfectly logical and consistent by the authors of the legislation (*ibid.*: PE58). A dilemma for the ruling elites, not least in Bolivia, was how to promote economic progress (through the formation of a rural labor force) and at the same time maintain distinctions based on race, class, and gender (Larson 2005: 38).

After the 1952 revolution the Bolivian state set out to create a national identity without ethnic distinctions. However, patterns of class differentiation and the reassertion of local identities undermined the construction of a unified national culture, and social, cultural, and economic distinctions between women remained, resulting in ambiguous images of femininity (Gill 1993: 72). By contrast, the policies and programs that were established in Bolivia in the 1990s expressed a new vision of political agency and citizenship. These programs reflected a multicultural, pluri-ethnic, and gender-sensitive vision that broke with the longstanding assimilationist paradigm and promised greater respect for the country’s cultural diversity (Paulson 2002). In 1994, under the neoliberal government of Sanchez de Losada, Bolivia was recognized as a multicultural and multiethnic state. Since then, Bolivia has gone through a far-reaching process of social and political change, taking a serious turn in early 2000. Issues about cultural, ethnic, and indigenous identities are very much in focus since, in Albro’s words, “indigenous-based politics have lately gained national ground not through promoting ethno-nationalist separatism but by ceding the formerly exclusive category of ‘Indian’ to a pluralist and urban-

based project of refounding the Bolivian state” (Albro 2005: 433–34). The country’s new constitution, which was accepted by referendum in January 2009, declares Bolivia a plurinational state with a constitution that grants the Andean country’s thirty-six native peoples the right to self-determination, including collective title to their lands. Even though the politics of the MAS government of Evo Morales is quite pragmatic in nature, it is guided by a combination of socialism and indigenous-based politics. It is often referred to as “indigenous nationalism,” alluding to the fact that it is a nationalism hegemonized by the peasant movements (Monasterios 2007; Stefanoni and Do Alto 2007). Thus, the nationalist project has changed, with subsequent implications for the notions of femininity and masculinity.

### **Bodily metaphors and border guards**

Bodily metaphors may be used to symbolize and delimit groups of people. Gender symbols play significant roles in maintaining and ideologically reproducing the unity of “imagined communities.” The unity of national “imagined communities” is a mythical unity that has to be maintained and ideologically reproduced, and this, according to Armstrong (1982 cit. in Yuval-Davis 1997: 23), requires a system of symbolic “border guards.” The task of these “border guards” is to identify people as members or non-members of the collectivity, and they are closely linked to specific cultural codes of style of dress and behavior as well as to more elaborate bodies of customs. A particularly significant role is played by gender symbols (ibid.: 23). The idea that the collectivity’s identity and future destiny is carried by women has also brought about “the construction of women as the bearers of the collectivity’s honour” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45). Thus, women embody in their “proper” behavior and their “proper” clothing the boundaries of the collectivity. Radcliffe (1999) argues likewise that national identities in the Andean area are embodied “through racialized and gendered experiences of corporeality (corporeality referring to the bodily interface between material relations and self-identity)” (ibid.: 213).

In Bolivia, what has been considered “proper” behavior and clothing has been different for different groups of women. The ideal *señora* or “lady” of the beginning of the twentieth century had certain characteristics, such as submissiveness, religious devotion, and devotion to her family. Female virginity at marriage and chastity thereafter were highly valued and the sexuality of women was guarded by both women and men. The ladies of the Creole upper class followed a fashion style emanating from Europe. This group of women did not value hard work as an end in itself and they did not work outside the home (Gill 1993: 74). This could be contrasted to the urban Aymara-speaking women



of today, who may be valued within their own group for their capacity for hard work, who are expected to contribute to the economy of the household, and among whom wearing the traditional *pollera* (an outfit probably created in its current form by the *cholas paceñas* in the mid-twentieth century) is a sign of dignity (Widmark 2003). Female virginity at marriage is not emphasized among these groups, where young people are often allowed to have premarital relations and young couples often wait to marry until they already have several children and have accumulated enough social and economic capital to organize the wedding.

There are differences between different social groups with regard to the ways gender relations are structured and how hierarchical relations have been expressed in gendered ways that are typical of the twentieth century in Bolivia. Stephenson (1999) argues that the dominant ideology of womanhood played a key role in the struggle for hegemonic control by the urban *criollo* sectors. National discourses expressed support for a homogeneous cultural identity, based on certain representations of woman and the maternal body. Hierarchies were reconstructed on the prevailing ideology of womanhood, which expressed not only gender differences, but also economic and racial differences. The parameters that determined who were “women” and who were “not women” were thereby established, and thus only certain women were legitimated as women within the oligarchic state (1999: 9–13).

The way differences have been structured may be illustrated by Gill (1990), who studied domestic service and the actors involved and states that “prior to the 1952 national revolution, domestic service was a complex system that reflected the heterogeneity of La Paz society” (ibid.: 121). It was in homes of the *criollo* upper class that most household workers were found. The wealth of these families derived from large landholdings or mines, and the male members often worked in professions like law and medicine. The main tasks of the adult women of these households were to care for the family members and manage the home and the servants. In order for a woman to be considered a “lady” in the fullest sense, it was necessary to have servants in the home. These upper-class women did not engage in salaried employment outside the home if it could be avoided, because it was considered improper for women of their social standing. It was not only the members of the upper class who employed servants, however. Servants could also be found in the homes and businesses of, for instance, bakers, butchers, owners of small shops, and tailors; that is, families with considerably less social prestige and economic power, and with a sense of belonging to an urban Aymara culture. But the servants of these female employers were often used in both domestic and non-domestic tasks such as engaging in their employer’s small family business, selling goods in the markets,

or assisting in travels between the city and the surrounding altiplano to buy and sell goods (*ibid.*: 121).

Class relations separated upper-class employers from employees, who had very different situations and unequal duties and obligations. Mistresses and servants were divided by class divisions and ethnic differences, but both groups were affected by prevailing gender conventions, albeit in different ways. Most women answered ultimately to a male head of household, who had the power to intervene in domestic affairs and contradict the orders of the mistress. The legal system confirmed that he had final authority over servants. As Gill notes (1990: 123), the males of the household could behave toward the female domestic servants (including sexual abuse) in a way completely contrary to what was considered “proper” behavior within upper-class gender relations.

Bolivia went through important transformations of society following the 1952 national revolution and the agrarian reform the next year, which changed the relations between employers and servants. With the destruction of the hacienda system and the abolition of serfdom that followed from these events, the urban oligarchy lost many of its former privileges. Gill (1990) has demonstrated how class, gender, and ethnic relationships have structured the interactions between employer and servant and conditioned their involvement in the labor force. The way house workers have been treated varies over time and with the personalities and socioeconomic backgrounds of their employers. Transformations that led to a drastic decrease in multiservant households and the downward mobility of some employers generated changes for the household workers, but various enduring practices continued to shape the relationship between mistress and female servant.

Other important gendering institutions of the state in Bolivia after the revolution have been the military and the school. Gill (1997) explores in another study the role of military service in creating a positive sense of masculine identity among subaltern men that is simultaneously linked to their own subordination and reinforces other gendered patterns that degrade women and non-military men. Larson (2005) shows how politics of rural schooling (connected to the republic’s nation-building project in the early 1900s) was formulated to enter the “bodies, hearths and minds” of the rural population with the aim of transforming women and men into productive peasants. These reforms focused, among other things, on the Indian woman’s being the one to cultivate the new habits of hygiene, work, and consumption necessary for the nation to prosper. The role of schooling for cultural production has also been analyzed by Luykx (1999), showing the intersections of gender, race, and class that influence the formation of rural schoolteachers and their transformations into Bolivian citizens in the twentieth century. As we can see by looking at these examples, there have been certain dominant ideals pointing toward different

groups' expected roles and positions in the Bolivian nation, followed by notions of what is considered "proper" behavior for each category. Any social change will have to stand up to and question these – very entrenched – notions.

### **Plurinational ideals embodied by today's female leaders**

Returning to the social and political processes of this century and the restructuring of the Bolivian state, it is interesting to explore how current social and political changes express themselves in relation to these issues. Since my research area has focused on political participation lately, I am wondering how cultural discourses (of today) produce gender differences within the political area. Are there particular ways in which plurinational ideals are embodied by Bolivia's new leadership: women and men of indigenous background active within social movements? Is "indigenous" nationalism expressed differently compared to the earlier nation-making of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

What first comes to mind is a photo found on the internet of the "plurinational cabinet" of the Bolivian government in 2010. In the picture the new Bolivian government is lined up, and in the front row we find only women. We can see, due to their traditional dress (the hat, shawl, and skirt), that three of the women are of indigenous background, representing Tarija, Cochabamba, and La Paz. One of them is not dressed "de pollera" but signals her background through the braids, hat, and shawl. Most of the men wear a suit, and the women who are not of "indigenous" background wear trousers or a suit (jacket and skirt). The fact that the women are lined up in front might not be determined solely by the fact that they are shorter in height; creating a gender-balanced government has become more important to the Morales leadership. The female state secretaries of indigenous background are also strategically placed in front, for, as Monasterios (2007) notes, ever since the inauguration of Evo Morales's government it is indigenous women's groups (both rural and urban) that are perceived as the legitimate representatives of large majorities of women. In a visit to the Bolivian government's website in 2012, I look for parliamentarians, who are identified by name and a photograph in a list. There are a few men who signal indigenous background through their choice of head gear, but women are in the majority, wearing the typical braids and a hat. Even though the former hierarchy between different social groups is downplayed, one might say that difference is highlighted, and it is the women who have the role of upholding this difference through their dress.

Uniformity is striking among groups of people of indigenous background in Bolivia. Strong borders around the group are expressed through what clothes they wear, what they eat, how they dance, and so on. Women's dress is always an issue, but uniformity is not only for women; there are dress codes (less

visible) for men also. I have shown (Widmark 2003) that among urban Aymara speakers it was not only women who dressed in a uniform way; most men wore a certain kind of gabardine trousers, a waist-length leather jacket (in some cases, one of nylon), and a cap. Their hairstyle was also similar to that of other men of the same category; the hair was combed back and kept in place with the help of water or hair gel. In my research (*ibid.*) I showed that among these urban bilingual Aymara speakers there was a lot of social pressure to maintain borders around the community, something that was also expressed at meetings though explicit references to differences between themselves and representatives of other sectors of society.

With the uniformity in, for example, ways of dressing there is not much room for individual expressions, which is well in line with the communitarian and egalitarian ideals that are often emphasized in the Andean area. In relation to this, I want to point to a couple of additional photos on the internet representing official images of female leaders of indigenous background, women whom I know. One is a picture of Sabina Choquetijlla when she was a candidate for vice president in 2005. She chooses an image of herself, when she has just been given the post by her fellows and is being congratulated, with a wreath of leaves and “mixture” (confetti) in her hair, which might signal that she has been chosen according to traditional communitarian procedures with the aim of “servir a la comunidad” (serving the community), which is a common expression in the highlands. Andean communities have many egalitarian characteristics, but this does not mean that they lack hierarchies. I found another photograph, this one of Isabel Ortega – senator of Oruro and president of the Indigenous Organization of America. I knew her in the 1990s, when she was a base leader in the countryside outside Oruro. In the photo she wears a very costly traditional outfit, probably required by the occasion, but it also signals her position to her supporters, that is, the fact that she is now an influential politician and can afford such an expensive outfit.

The choice of traditional dress expresses a certain ethnic sense of belonging. Traditional outfits can be bought at many different prices and are generally quite expensive, but it may also signal a “humble” background in terms of class. In Bolivian society there is often a correlation between ethnicity and class; that is, indigenous peoples are often poor, and people of indigenous background are often associated with people of scarce resources, which is something a politician perhaps wants to emphasize in front of his/her followers. That is how Julia Ramos, parliamentarian representing Tarija, explains her choice of dress in an interview by Marta Cabezas in 2008. She wants to show that she leads a life and dresses like “ordinary” people, that is, the Bolivian majority.

In analyzing politicians' choice of dress we can also see how bodily expressions of ethnicity follow political conjunctures. In the plurinational state of Bolivia in 2010, a dress code that clarifies or emphasizes ethnic differences is expected by parliamentarians and members of government. Until recently this was not so, and I want to highlight a third picture portraying Teresa Canaviri, former vice minister of the government during the period of Carlos Mesa (2003–2005), who is wearing her hair in a pony tail and does not wear a traditional outfit. Maybe she does not identify with the countryside as much as the other two, but she is still of indigenous and social-movement background, having been one of the founders of one of the Aymara-based NGOs in El Alto. It is not a coincidence that she was vice minister in the government preceding the shift towards Evo Morales and the MAS movement. There is another interesting picture on the internet portraying Bolivia's vice minister Teresa Canaviri Sirpa and Ellen Inga O. Hætta, state secretary in the Norwegian government, when they met in Kautokeino in 2005. Ellen Haetta wears a traditional Sami dress, but Teresa Canaviri wears a pullover and trousers. These pictures show that claims of identity politics may be followed by the use of traditional dress as a way of expressing "authenticity," which is common among Sami leaders in the Nordic countries, but maybe not a viable strategy for Teresa Canaviri at that time.

### **Are women more Indian?**

Several authors have claimed that in the Andes, women carry the notions of "Indianness" to a greater extent than men do (de la Cadena 1995; Radcliffe 2001; Canessa 2005). Radcliffe (1999) reports that men self-identify as mestizo to a higher degree, and more unambiguously, than women in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Quito. Women are expected to be more "authentic" in their sense of belonging to the ethnic group or even nation. Is this still true in Bolivia, and what are the implications?

"Authenticity" is a debated phenomenon in relation to politics of ethnic identity, where it can become a political and economic resource as exemplified by the use of typical "indigenous" clothing, mentioned above. But it can also be the source of what Mercer (1990 cit. in Yuval-Davis 1997: 45) has called "the burden of representation" or "forced identities" (Chhachhi 1991 cit. in Yuval-Davis 1997: 45). It is typical that women are required to carry this "burden of representation," being constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honor (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45). In the Andes, women carry the notions of "Indianness" to a greater extent than men do. Zulawski (2000), in her analysis of the different ways two medical doctors confront the

“Indian problem,” that is, the issue of the integration of the native population into the new nation-state in the early twentieth century, points to this fact. One of the medical doctors working with indigenous miners viewed the problem of the “Indians” as one of culture (a common view at that time), while the other brought in the category of social class to explain the miners’ health problems. He perceived the miners as working class, by definition not “Indians,” and therefore not to blame for their diseases. But the women, whom he perceived as “Indians,” had customs that led to the spread of disease and death (ibid.: 122). While the view of one of the doctors focused on Andean culture as producing health problems for the public, the view of the other focused on the women as the main bearers of that culture (ibid.: 126). This way of thinking, although in very different contexts, resembles the reports of Radcliffe (2001: 161) that within indigenous movements of Peru women are positioned as the core of indigenous society and are expected to remain as guardians of indigenous culture, and of de la Cadena (1995), who argued from the highlands in Peru that women were seen as “more Indian” than the men from the same village, perceptions based on ideas of division of labor and qualities achieved through migration. The same tendency can be found in Bolivia, and Canessa (2005) even argues that indigenous men are also perceived as “more feminine” by association, because of the intersections of the gender and ethnic hierarchies.

As mentioned above, women often embody the borders of the collectivity in their “proper” way of dressing, which is partly illustrated above in reference to the dress codes of the indigenous politicians. When I did my anthropological fieldwork for my dissertation among a group of urban bilingual Aymara speakers, women were spoken of as being “de pollera” (wearing the traditional skirt) or “de vestido” (wearing occidental clothes). In general I found that there were very few differences in terms of cultural sense of belonging attached to choice of dress. Instead it concerned mostly practical and economic concerns, since being dressed “de pollera” was more expensive. Even so, there were meanings attached to the different dress codes that were activated on certain occasions, and in some contexts: to be “de pollera” seemed to imply a “proper” way of being, which meant to carry more cultural dignity.

While people within the urban Aymara community attached little notice in terms of social sense of belonging to the different dress styles of “de pollera” and “de vestido,” people belonging to other social sectors would interpret the dress style of “de vestido” as indicating more acculturation to a modern or occidental way of living than “de pollera.” These images and notions then also affect urban Aymara’s experiences of themselves. National identities are created in social and interactive processes, something that is discussed by Canessa and his colleagues

(2005), who show how metropolitan ideas of nation employed by politicians, the media, and education are produced, reproduced, and contested by people in the rural Andes.

The dominant ideas reproduced by media, for example, may be very influential. Paulson (2002) indicates that the stratification of Bolivia has, for a long time, allowed a dominant national discourse that inscribes concerns about ethnicity on the bodies of indigenous-identified others. Groups of “marginalized” others have been the focus of gender and ethnic attention for both scholarly discourse and political programs. Policies and projects have usually been designed to recognize and help poor people, indigenous people, women, etc. What is ironic in the Bolivian case is that these so-called marginal groups have constituted the vast majority of the national population. Yet a dominant national discourse has been created that establishes ethnicity with “the others,” “the Indians,” “the marginalized,” an image of passive women of indigenous background. In keeping with dominant global discourses, Bolivian newspapers and television have announced and repeated key markers of otherness that construe Bolivian majority groups as inferior marginals (*ibid.*). This image of passive women of indigenous background and marginalization does not correspond to the visions of the “indigenous nationalism” proposed by the government of Morales. Yet these are phenomena that the female leaders I interviewed had encountered in their experiences of carrying out their mission. They tell about notions of politically active indigenous women as being “sucia” (dirty), “menor de edad” (minor), “infantilizada” (childlike), and “cerca de la naturaleza” (close to nature). Words like “arrinconada” (put in a corner), “callada” (silenced), “invisibilizada” (invisibilized), “soledad” (loneliness) are common when they tell about their experiences. Antonia Rodriguez, vice mayor of the municipality of El Alto in 2009, expressed her experience as a woman in the political sphere like this:

Well ... they treat us a bit as if they are simulating our participation, but the men are not convinced that we have the same value [as them]...so it has been very, very hard. When you talk in public they silence you... Today, I don't know if you noticed that I don't have the same value as the ordinary mayor [who is a man].

Images of passive, incapable, indigenous women are blamed on colonization, but today these images have been incorporated into the women's “own” group. There are many cases and stories of physical abuse and maltreatment among women who are active mainly on the municipal level. As recently as 2012, a

female municipal representative dressed “de pollera” was reported murdered in the Department of La Paz, with speculations in the press of the murder’s being politically motivated.

What is positive is that there are today alternative expressions of female national identities. One of them is based on complementarity as a “model for” (Geertz 1973: 93) ideal gender relations. The theoretical framework of the current gender equality plan (Ministerio de Justicia 2008) is innovative and combines Andean perspectives with feminist ideas. It expresses the continuing tensions between idealist images of Andean culture and community (with embodied expressions) and new ways of being and expressing a sense of belonging to the plurinational state of Bolivia.

Gender differences are generally emphasized in many different ways in the Andean area, but this fact is questioned and depicted as a historical construction that should not be taken for granted. Under the headline of *Cuerpo* (body) the new plan states:

...es sobre las diferencias biológicas entre los cuerpos masculinos y femeninos que la sociedad ha construido un sistema de jerarquías y valores. El reconocimiento de esta construcción históricamente elaborada, es la puerta de entrada para la fundación de una sociedad donde sea posible “vivir bien.” (Ministerio de Justicia 2008: 16)

Another contested issue is the use that is being made of the memories of the precolonial order:

Es preciso despatriarcalizar la memoria y reconocer que también existen formas distorsionadas de reproducirla, recrearla or recuperarla. Un ejemplo es el uso que hacen algunas corrientes indianistas e indigenistas del concepto de ‘memoria larga’. Apelando a ella, afirman que en las sociedades precoloniales...existía una relación de complementariedad casi perfecta entre mujeres y hombres, que se deformó y envileció por efecto de la colonización, cuando existen claras indicaciones de que esa relación siempre tuvo carácter vertical y no horizontal. (Ministerio de Justicia 2008: 20)

This paragraph signals an openness within the current government to leave the idealizing discourses common within the politics of indigenous identity in favor of a more insightful gender analysis of today’s conditions.



## Concluding discussion

Since I came to meet Bolivian society in the beginning of the 1990s I have been struck by the obsession with difference. These expressions of difference always relate to visible and invisible borders between different groups and categories in Bolivian society that stipulate who is supposed to do what, be where, act in what way, and what he or she is supposed to wear. In reviewing some historical sources, it is evident that one aspect of nation-making took the form of a normalization of elite ideals of masculinity and femininity, ideas that did not work well with the practices of the majority. What was considered “proper” behavior and clothing was considered to be different for different social categories, but these categories were also mutually dependent. For example, to be able to fulfill elite ideals of the “lady” it was necessary to have access to servants. A person representing the male elite could show his power by “having access” to other, “not honorable,” women. It is also through legislation that differences based on gender, class, and ethnicity are maintained and expressed through different treatment of different “classes of people.” Differences between different classes are also upheld through different institutions, here exemplified by domestic service, military service, and schooling. This brief review of some aspects of the relations between gender, state, and nation confirms the notion that in the case of Bolivia the intersections between gender, class, and ethnicity have been crucial in structuring gender relations, and even though the basic premises of the state are currently being reworked, this will most likely continue to be so for some time to come. There are strong hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and class that intersect and shape people’s room to maneuver. Hierarchies are upheld through demands and expectations from within and without, and these borders are changing with the social and political changes. In some contexts they are diminished and even made to disappear, whereas in other contexts they are reinforced or new borders are put up. Shifts of power sometimes turn the former hierarchical roles around. By maintaining difference it is possible to show that there has been a shift of power. At the same time, by granting special rights to indigenous groups, underlining the fact that Bolivia consists of a variety of nations, difference between different categories of people is maintained and even reinforced.

## Notes

- 1 Note that this article does not deal with other current expressions of nationalism that would not fall under the banner of “indigenous nationalism.”

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## Introduction

### **Women, indigenous, poor? The construction of gender in Latin America from the perspective of intersectionality**

The following three articles are based on the results of the research project *Women, Indigenous, Poor? The Construction of Gender in Latin America from the Perspective of Intersectionality* funded by the University of Helsinki (2008-10). The general purpose of the project was to apply the concept of intersectionality in Latin American gender studies. The participants in the project were Elina Vuola (director), Auli Leskinen, and Sarri Vuorisalo-Tiitinen (researchers). Our case studies are in the fields of the study of religion (Vuola) and literature (Leskinen and Vuorisalo-Tiitinen).

The first article by Vuola sets the common theoretical ground for all the articles, asking how intersectionality might be used in Latin American gender studies and especially in the case of religion as possibly one "difference" that has to be taken into account in intersectional analyses. In their articles, both Leskinen and Vuorisalo-Tiitinen apply the concept in the study of literature - Leskinen in contemporary Cuban women's writing produced in the island and Vuorisalo-Tiitinen in one important writer, the Mexican novelist Rosario Castellanos.

It is recommended that the three articles be read in the order they appear in the book. Some of the common theoretical considerations are presented in the first article and thus not repeated in the two subsequent articles. Intersectionality has mostly been used in the Anglo-American feminist theory of the global North and, even there, only in certain disciplines. Our project aimed to expand both the geographical and cultural field but also to apply the term intersectionality in new disciplines and fields of study.

## 9 Intersectionality in Latin America?

### The possibilities of intersectional analysis in Latin American studies and study of religion

Elina Vuola

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In this article, I ask how intersectionality might be used as an analytical category in Latin American gender studies and especially in the case of seeing religion as possibly one "difference" that has to be taken into account in intersectional theorizing. I trace the history and different ways of using the concept of intersectionality, also asking critical questions. Then I ponder the possibilities and difficulties of seeing religion as a difference. My concrete case study is the cult of *La Negrita*, the most important personification of the Virgin Mary in Costa Rica, and women's interpretation of her.

En este artículo investigamos cómo el concepto de interseccionalidad podría ser usado como una categoría analítica en estudios de género en el contexto de América Latina, y en especial si se puede entender la religión como "una diferencia" que debe ser tomada en cuenta en las teorías sobre interseccionalidad. Además de ello también se analizan la historia y las diferentes formas de uso del concepto de interseccionalidad desde un punto de vista crítico. Posteriormente se presentan una serie de reflexiones sobre las posibilidades y dificultades de entender la religión como una diferencia. Mi estudio de caso es el culto de *La Negrita*, la personificación más importante de la Virgen María en Costa Rica, y las interpretaciones de las mujeres de ella.

In the early nineties, I was working as a visiting scholar at a research institute in Costa Rica. The institute organized and hosted two-month training courses for NGO, church, and social movement activists from all over Latin America, with the intention of giving them theoretical tools and perspective for their activism. I was asked to teach the group of people, which consisted of indigenous, church, environmental, and human rights activists, about feminism and gender issues, which I did. After I finished my talk, a middle-aged Colombian *mestizo* Catholic priest (male by definition) thanked me warmly but also gently pointed out how the issues that I was talking about might have relevance in Europe, but that, since I was European, I might be blind to or not know well enough the Latin American context. Before I had time to reply, a Kuna indigenous woman from Panama, who until then had been silent, commented furiously, “If Elina cannot speak for Latin American women as a European, how can you as a man speak for us either? Or who are you to speak for the indigenous people if you are not one yourself? I fully agree with what Elina said, but it is our responsibility to think about it in our own contexts.”

At that time, in the early 1990s, nobody was speaking of intersectionality, but that is exactly what was at play in that little seminar room. The concept of intersectionality has since become important in contemporary feminist theory. The diversification of central concepts such as gender and women, and the inclusion of differences between women, have by and large meant taking into account race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality is a way of theorizing gender in relation to these other differences or constructions of identity and selfhood. In other words, it has been understood that focusing only on gender is not enough for understanding and explaining the different forms of female subjectivity or agency. Understandably, gender and gender difference have been the principal focuses of feminist theory. Taking other differences and their interaction with gender into account does not mean diminishing or excluding the meaning of gender but, rather, understanding it more broadly. Differences within one gender (between women, between men) may be greater and more important than differences between men and women of the same society and class. In intersectional analysis, these differences are not contrasted with each other. Rather, the focus of analysis is on their hierarchical ordering and on the ways they interact with each other.

In this article, I will present and analyze the concept of intersectionality, also critically, and ask under what kinds of conditions it could be applied in Latin American gender studies, in which it has not been widely used until today. I will also briefly present some concrete examples from the study of religion in the Latin American context.

### **How to understand intersectionality?**

Intersectionality is not a unified theory or approach. It is not a new grand theory, but rather a way to combine some central theoretical developments in recent feminist theory under one concept. There are different ways of understanding and using the concept of intersectionality in contemporary feminist theory. Sometimes these differences are related to disciplinary differences. There is something in the concept itself that has made it useful for many feminist scholars, on the one hand, and has resulted in unclear uses of it, on the other.

In general, the invention and application of the concept has been a response to the critique of the predominance of analyses of gender of the kind that have tended to obscure the vast differences between women inside even one society, not to speak of cross-cultural differences, and the lack or weakness of theorizing race, ethnicity, and class as principal markers of these differences in relation to gender. Thus, the emphasis in the use of the concept is not as much on differences between women and men as on trying to theorize differences inside each gender. To put it more concretely, differences between men and women may be – and often are – smaller (not meaning that they do not have any relevance) within the same class and ethnic group in a given society than differences between persons of the same gender across class and ethnic differences. Thus, a well-educated Nordic academic woman – such as myself – may have more in common with the men of the same group than with another woman from a very different cultural, class, and ethnic context. By this, I do not mean that women across different ethnic and class boundaries would not still have commonalities which they share as women. An important question in this regard is the meaning and importance given to the body in feminist theory, something I am not going to deal with here. Nevertheless, the greater the other differences, the greater the difficulty in speaking of either women or men as a homogenous group marked mainly by their gender.

The term was coined by the legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw from the United States (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). According to her, domestic abuse and rape affect women of color differently than they affect white women because the programs developed to help abused women and the laws created to punish domestic violence ignore the ways in which race and gender discrimination combine to exclude women of color in the United States (Crenshaw 1991). Thus, intersectionality was intended to address the fact that the experiences of black women were ignored and misunderstood by both feminist and anti-racist discourses. Crenshaw argued that theorists need to include race and gender as well as their interaction in the analysis of the multiplicity of black women's experiences in a racist and sexist society (Crenshaw 1989).

Ever since, the concept has been clarified and developed further by various scholars. My intention is not to go through that history but to take examples of some of the main uses of the concept, including the differences between them. Obviously, gender is central in all these uses. But what exactly is seen as intersecting with gender, and how that intersecting happens, remains somewhat unclear, as can be seen in the principal different ways of understanding and naming the forces that intersect.

### **Different uses of the concept**

The most common answers to the question above, which nevertheless are not commensurate or interchangeable, are the following. Some theorists speak of differences or social divisions (Yuval-Davis 2006: 199), while others talk of identity or identities (Nash 2008). According to some, it is explicitly positions, hierarchies, or asymmetries of power (Lykke 2003, 2005) that intersectionality intends to theorize. Further, some speak, in much more neutral terms, of categories (of difference) (McCall 2005; Ludvig 2006; Davis 2008). Thus, there are various ways of understanding and naming the object of an intersectional analysis. Some theorists would say it is about analyzing social power structures (such as class), while others apply the term to denote how identity formation is a complex, and often changing, process (such as age).

Yuval-Davis points out these multiple uses of the term and the potential problem of this multiplicity itself in the absence of a > clear consensus on the meaning of the term.

According to her, the question of whether to interpret the intersectionality of social divisions as an additive or as a constitutive process is still central. At the heart of the debate is “conflation or separation of the different analytic levels in which intersectionality is located” (Yuval-Davis 2006: 195). She herself talks of social divisions. There is a need to differentiate carefully between different kinds of differences. Social divisions are historically and culturally specific, include power aspects, and are always both social and individual (Ibid.: 199–201).

Kathy Davis, for her part, says that there has been considerable confusion concerning what the concept actually means and how it can or should be applied in feminist inquiry (Davis 2008: 67). However, this very weakness or confusion may be the source of the concept’s strength: “It offered a link between critical feminist theory on the effects of sexism, class, and racism and a critical methodology inspired by postmodern feminist theory, bringing them together in ways that could not have been envisioned before” (Ibid.: 73). Thus, she claims that it may be the very paradox of the term’s weaknesses and open-endedness that has allowed it to become so successful. The concept’s lack of precision and its myriad missing pieces are what have made it such a useful heuristic device for critical feminist theory (Ibid.: 77–78). Intersectionality is obviously in need



of a definition and further development. I intend to take part in this endeavor by raising some new critical questions, some of a more general nature, others from the perspective of my specific fields of research, Latin American studies, on the one hand, and feminist study of religion, on the other.

### **Some critical questions**

With regard to content, because of the history of the concept, gender is most often “intersected” with class, race, and ethnicity. Less common, but nevertheless used, are sexual orientation, age, nationality, language, and religion. In principle, there is of course no end to these differences or categories, which may be one of the weaknesses of the concept. The list of different differences runs the risk of becoming as empty as the list of positions that has been important for feminist scholars when they want to be open and transparent about their position vis-à-vis the subject of their research. I am fully aware of the important epistemological underpinnings that this development in feminist and cultural studies has. The question is rather about the (im)possibility for any of us of being aware of the vast array of “differences” between human beings. Further, we see ourselves differently from the ways others see us. A difference that I as a scholar name as central for my possible epistemological and other limitations in a given context may have less importance for my informant or someone else I am collaborating with.

The story with which I started the article is an example of this. It takes us back to the question of who names differences between people as relevant or, conversely, irrelevant – and when and for what purposes these differences are named. At the same time, my example also illustrates the fact that in Latin America, as well as in other parts of the global South, the inclusion of issues of race, class, and ethnicity in gender was well developed before the term intersectionality was even coined.

With this in mind, I propose that even though an umbrella term such as intersectionality may be useful for theoretical purposes, it is through concrete examples and in specific contexts that it can gain its potential force. To go back to my example, especially in a culture which is not my own, I can never be sure which one of the “differences” is more important and in what kinds of ways: my being a European, white, and educated or my being a woman? As my example also shows, it does not always depend on my own self-definition. And further, in concrete situations it is also about the interplay of multiple and simultaneous power structures: delegitimizing feminism as “European” may result in delegitimizing Latin American indigenous women by a priest whose self-definition was working in solidarity with the poor – including the indigenous people – of his country. In fact, he probably looked as “European” as I in the eyes of the Kuna woman.

The different uses of intersectionality, in different disciplines, point to yet another open question. Is the term descriptive or analytical? In other words, is it the “results” (simultaneous effects of differences or asymmetries) or the “starting points” (different differences) that is meant by intersectionality? Or is it both? For example, race or ethnicity as parts of a person’s (positive) identity is not the same as racism or ethnic discrimination, which are (negative) results of society’s asymmetrical power structures. Similarly, a gender identity is not consummate with sexism or heterosexism. In a sexist or racist society, these identities are affected by power structures, but they are always more or something different from them. In fact, the positive self-identification, individual or communal, is the source of critique of racism and (hetero)sexism. Thus, whatever is meant by power asymmetries, they are not universal, one-way-only, and simple, and it is important not to use them interchangeably with racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities.

Further, some “differences” that are bodily rooted and experienced are more stable and powerful than others. Gender, even in its possible malleability, is difficult to place in the same category with, for example, nationality or age. We come back to the question of what is meant by “difference” and which differences are seen as important or even central. As lived experiences, some “differences” are more powerful and “fixed” than others. Some of them change over time (such as age), some can be changed (religion, class, nationality, and even gender), some obviously cannot and should not (race, ethnicity).

How, then, do we choose between the different, sometimes even conflicting, uses of “difference” in intersectional theories? How and why do we prefer some and exclude others? Without giving any definite answer to this difficult question, I will briefly present some further questions that could help in that task. First, issues of methodology are central. One example of the methodological development of intersectional analysis is Leslie McCall’s proposal for three different approaches as methodological tools in the intersectional analysis of different categories. These are: anticategorical complexity (since social life is so complex, fixed categories of any sort are simplifying), intercategory complexity (using categories strategically to analyze changing configurations of inequality), and intracategory complexity (focusing on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection, while also maintaining a critical stance toward categories) (McCall 2005: 1773–74).

Second, questions of method are of course tied to methodological differences in different disciplines. If intersectionality is some kind of new grand theory or

umbrella concept, does this mean that research has to be done with different methods, even in the case of a single researcher? What implications does interdisciplinarity have for the intersectional approach? Third, the development of the term intersectionality has a specific history in the Anglo-American academy, especially in the United States. How to take cultural criticism and the possible difficulties for cross-cultural implementation of concepts and theories seriously? Fourth, as I have already discussed, a clarification should be made in the case of each piece of research of whether, by intersectionality, one is referring to theorizing identity or social power or both. Fifth, the vast debate between universality and cultural relativism as it is related to gender issues and women's rights is still – or even increasingly – important for gender studies and feminism. It is central to any feminist project, theoretical or practical, to take into account that the potential dangers of cultural relativism or cultural essentialism are as important as the dangers of universalism. This issue is directly related to the ways we understand and use the concept of intersectionality.

For example, according to Uma Narayan,

The project of attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between “Western culture” and “Non-western cultures” and the women who inhabit them. Seemingly *universal* essentialist generalizations about “all women” are replaced by *culture-specific* essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories such as “Western culture,” “Non-western cultures,” “Western women,” “Third World women,” and so forth. (Narayan 2000: 81)

For her, in a way that is similar to gender essentialism, cultural essentialism assumes and constructs sharp binaries, and in both cases, the discursive reiteration of essential differences often operates to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such “differences” (Ibid.: 82). She calls attention to the importance of paying attention to internal plurality, dissension, and contestation over values and ongoing changes within any category (nation, religion, gender, etc.) – which is not to deny the existence of differences per se (Ibid.: 96). Narayan theorizes from within a postcolonial feminist context, which is why her critique has relevance not only to theories of intersectionality in general, but especially to feminist theorizing in the global South, including Latin America.

### Latin American studies and intersectionality

Given these problems in the concept of intersectionality itself, could it have some relevance in Latin American studies, especially gender and feminist studies? As I have already pointed out, the term has its roots in Anglo-American English-speaking feminist theorizing, reflecting the specific conflicts between white and black feminisms in the United States. Unlike the term gender, which has found its way into mainstream gender theory in Latin America (*género*), it is rare to see intersectionality used in Spanish (*interseccionalidad*). I am not saying that it should be. With regard to our joint research project, Sarri Vuorisalo-Tiitinen has made an innovative effort to theorize intersectionality in the context of Latin American gender and ethnic studies, applying the concept in the case of Zapatista women. She uses the term *interseccionalidad* (Vuorisalo-Tiitinen 2011).

It is important to keep in mind the historical and cultural specificity of any concept, even when it is considered to be usable in a different cultural and linguistic context. For example, Finnish gender theorists are proposing various “indigenous” Finnish translations for the term intersectionality – a process which is fascinating epistemologically as well. Obviously, English and Spanish, as Indo-European languages, are more closely related, but it is nevertheless important at least to ask critically if concepts such as intersectionality can and should be used also in Latin American gender theorizing.

Issues of race, class, and ethnicity have been part and parcel of Latin American feminism and feminist theorizing from early on, even when not always without conflict and critique from minority women. Edmé Domínguez has analyzed this tension in the context of Mexican feminism as a different approach by “hegemonic feminists” (*feministas hegemónicas*) and “grassroots feminists” (*feministas de campo*) (Domínguez 2004). More broadly in the Latin American context, the same tension or difference has been described as a difference between feminist vs. women’s movements (*movimientos feministas* vs. *movimientos de mujeres*).

The conflicts and opposition between these two politically active women’s movements have shaped, at least to certain extent, the specific characteristics of Latin American feminism(s). Since the 1990s, these two different ways of feminist organizing have come closer to each other both theoretically and practically. Incorporating the demands of an increasingly feminist *movimiento de mujeres* type of activism in the construction of a more inclusive, racially and ethnically aware, and class-conscious feminist transnational project is the biggest challenge facing Latin American and Caribbean feminisms (Saporta Sternbach et al. 1992: 433). That article, with its prognostic for future challenges, was written twenty years ago. Whether that challenge has been met or not, and whether it is still

relevant, is not a question I am addressing here. However, some scholars were already then pointing out that it might be unnecessary to draw such a clear-cut line between the two groups or ways of organizing and theorizing. According to Amy Conger Lind, it is through the making of a collective identity that Latin American women have come to take a stance against several forms of power represented in their daily lives (Lind 1992: 147).

These are examples of how Latin American feminist practices and theorizing have been influenced by different factors, not just by U.S. or European feminist theory, but also by each country's own specific political and historical contexts, Third World and postcolonial feminisms, as well as by development discourses and practices. Should these specific influences on Latin American feminist thought and practice now be called intersectionality?

In the discussion at the Red Haina conference, where this paper was first presented, María Clara Medina pointed out that one possible problem in the use of the term intersectionality in the Latin American context is the way it has been theorized – and even proposed as “a weapon against discrimination” in the context of the United Nations – principally from the context of hegemonic countries, from “the North.” Can those who are discriminated against apply it to themselves, and if so, how? Medina also asked if intersectionality is a way of articulating rather than constructing something (for example, identities). Merely to identify “differences” easily becomes another hegemonic list or litany of various sorts of oppressions. Whatever the ways we use the term, we have to be aware of its theoretical and political connotations. If this is not done, speaking of intersectionality may be problematic in a variety of contexts that differ from the European and North American contexts because of history, political structures, and culture.

I think the term intersectionality can be used also in the Latin American context, if it clarifies and gives structure to at least some intentions to theorize gender in the multiethnic and class-divided Latin American continent. That is, the concept itself should be re-theorized in relation to the various specificities of the continent, including its feminisms. It is important to build on the continent's specific history and character of gender theorizing. For example, besides the above-mentioned development of Latin American feminisms, could the long history of *indigenismo* in various Latin American countries offer something that would make theorizing about intersectionality both genuine and critical? In religious studies, to which I will turn at the end of the article, movements such as liberation theology are specifically Latin American ways to combine theory and practice in a continent which is marked both by high religiosity and by class differences.

### Religion and intersectionality

Religion has rarely been mentioned in the discussions of intersectionality, with some few exceptions. Nira Yuval-Davis mentions religion as one of the important social divisions (Yuval-Davis 2006:205). Erika Appelros writes explicitly about religion and intersectionality (Appelros 2005). However, many scholars of religion, especially those working in the field of gender and religion, have pointed out the lack or superficiality of theorizing religion in gender studies.

For example, according to Elizabeth Castelli:

If “women” has long been recognized as too abstract a category to be useful for analysis, “religion” has rarely been included in the litany of qualifiers (“race, class, culture, ethnicity/nationality, sexuality”) by which “women” becomes an ever-more marked and differentiated category. Yet feminist scholars who intervene in the academic study of religion have often drawn attention to the complicated role that religion has played in identity formations, social relations, and power structures. “Religion” as a category often cuts across other categories by which identities are framed (gender, race, class, etc.), and it often complicates these other categories rather than simply reinscribing them. (Castelli 2001: 4–5).

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood, who has done fieldwork among conservative Muslim women in Egypt, has a similar view:

Over the last two decades, a key question has occupied many feminist theorists: how should issues of historical and cultural specificity inform both the analytics and the politics of any feminist project? While this question has led to serious attempts at integrating issues of sexual, racial, class and national difference with feminist theory, questions regarding religious difference have remained relatively unexplored. (Mahmood 2005: 1)

For Mahmood, understanding women’s agency only or principally in political terms is too narrow. A binary logic of submission versus resistance is based on a teleological understanding of emancipation, which easily omits other forms of agency. She pays attention to women’s religious and ethical agency, which is also reflected in the title of her book, *The Politics of Piety*. Since religion and ethics are often so intertwined, she wishes to interpret her informants’ self-understanding also in terms of ethical agency.

Historian of religion Ann Braude, who in 2002 convened a conference of first-generation feminist theologians and religious leaders from different faith traditions in the United States, writes in the introduction of the book that contains the papers delivered at that conference:

As a group, religious feminists have worked over the last forty years to lift the religious women of the ages from obscurity, to acknowledge their roles in scripture, ministry, theology, worship, teaching, and devotion. Imagining and constructing non-sexist religious models for the women and men of the future, they have critiqued the conditions that fostered women's exclusion, so that those conditions can be changed. What a dreadful irony it would be, if their own history, the story of religion's interaction with feminism, fell out of the narrative, just at the moment when the history of the second wave is being written... Braude 2004: 3)

Braude is referring here to the way the historiography of second-wave feminism (in the United States) tends to leave out the voice, thoughts, and activities of religious feminists and academic feminist theologians. That, for her, as a historian, is "inaccurate, a misreading of America's past" (Braude 2004: 2). Religious feminists fell (and fall) between two hegemonic discourses. On the one hand, religious hierarchies and academic theology have often discouraged women's public leadership and ways of theorizing, or, at worst, portrayed them as agents of secularism and destruction of religious values. On the other hand, feminism has been reinforcing these views by mentioning religion only when it is a source of opposition (Braude 2004: 2).

I myself have pointed out these problems in Latin American gender studies especially, and especially in how religion is depicted in the well-known *marianismo* thesis of Evelyn Stevens (Vuola 2006, 2009). Feminist theory, as all the quotations above make clear, has often been both blind and sometimes openly negative toward any positive synergy between feminism and religion as well as towards the experiences of religious women. Even theories of intersectionality, which explicitly pay (self)critical attention to the blind spots of feminist theory and the myriad of differences between women, have by and large not been able to see religion as an important factor in women's lives. Has religion remained the last way of "othering" women – especially those of a different culture or subculture – in feminist theory?

Obviously, this also reflects the selectivity of interdisciplinarity within feminist theory. Theology has rarely been a discipline to be dialogued with. Feminist theologians, for their part, have not widely used ethnographic methods

or included the insights of anthropologists of religion in the development of a feminist theology that is also attentive to women's lived religious practices and ways of understanding their religious identity. What do women do with their religion? Women's ways of being religious and interpreting their religious traditions (often in tension with the official religion or religious elites) have not been central either in feminist theory or in traditional theology.

### **Religion as difference?**

If religion is analyzed as one "difference" between women or as an important social division and producer of power asymmetries, it is possible to take it into account also in intersectional analyses. This may be especially crucial in societies that are strongly marked by religion, and in the case of women, by religious traditions that explicitly foster women's subordination and wish to expand their constellations of gender and sexuality into national legislation. This is clearly the case of most Latin American societies. However, it is as important to analyze carefully how in fact religion – in the case of Latin America, principally Roman Catholicism – creates and sustains subordination and how people, especially women, interpret that influence. My own research has shown that the single most important female figure in Christianity, the Virgin Mary, can be used and interpreted both in obviously sexist ways and in ways that empower women, often the most disadvantaged women. Thus, no large generalizations about the power of religion in societies and individuals should be made without paying attention also to how women interpret their religious traditions.

It is central that scholars of religion pay attention to sexist interpretations and practices within religions, but this should be done in relation to women's religious agency. In intersectional analyses, this means not only seeing religion as a "difference" between women (of different cultures and religions but also within a given religious tradition and society) but also bringing gender as an intersectional category to the study of religion. This makes it possible to understand religion both as a structure of power (institution) and as a source of empowerment and positive identity (individual, community).

Of the three different methodological approaches of Leslie McCall which I presented earlier, the intracategorical approach may turn out to be useful in understanding religion as one of the differences or categories as object of analysis. If it is true that secular feminism has not been able to be attentive to religious women's agency and self-understanding, the intracategorical approach can, on the one hand, help in shedding light on the importance of religion. On the other hand, it focuses on power constellations within categories, such as religion. Thus, religion is not only mirrored with secularism and secular society,



but gender asymmetries legitimized by religion are analyzed also, and possibly primarily, inside different religious traditions. This comes close to what I have called patriarchal ecumenism (Vuola 2009), by which I mean the similarities and concrete cooperation between the most patriarchal sectors of different religions (for example, Christianity and Islam). The differences of interpretations, especially in issues concerning women, gender, family, and sexuality, may be and *de facto* often are greater within a given religious tradition than between them. The same, of course, is also true of feminist and other cooperation in inter-religious dialogue.

Next, I will briefly present one case study from the Latin American context which combines gender theorizing with Latin American studies and the study of religion, but which also takes the above-mentioned possibilities of perceiving religion as a category in intersectional analyses. What follows is based on my ethnographic research in Costa Rica (2006 and 2007), where I interviewed Catholic women on the meaning of the Virgin Mary for them.<sup>1</sup>

### ***La Virgen de los Angeles alias La Negrita***

The cult of the Virgin Mary was imbedded in Latin America at the very beginning of the conquest in the early sixteenth century. Often, she replaced pre-Columbian female deities, whose attributes were fused into a syncretistic Latin American Mary. Later, with the import of African slaves to American lands, the same happened in relation to African deities and beliefs. Thus, the various representations of Mary in Latin America are a fusion of European, African, and indigenous American elements. This is clearly discernible in the popular religiosity of the continent even today. The Virgin Mary is the most widespread single religious symbol and saint all over Latin America. Sometimes it is difficult to see the connection to the Biblical Mary of Nazareth or the official Catholic Mariology. The “official” and the “popular” – which should not be too sharply separated, either – live side by side, blended into each other. Popular practices and beliefs can live half-officially as part of the more recognized devotion, creating a distance sometimes between what is formally (doctrinally) accepted by the Church and what are seen as customs of the common people. This is also the case of the Virgin of Los Angeles, commonly referred to as *La Negrita* – “the little black one” – who was declared the patroness of Costa Rica in 1824.

The basilica dedicated to her is situated in the city of Cartago, the former capital of the country, about twenty-five kilometers from the present capital, San José. The statue placed at the main altar of the basilica is tiny, only about twenty centimeters high, somewhat clumsily carved of greenish black stone. Thus, it is one of many so-called Black Madonnas of the Americas. The figure is round and maternal, the Virgin holding the baby Jesus on her left arm.

According to the legend, written down in its contemporary and official form only in 1934, she appeared on August 2, 1635, to a young *pardo* (mixture of Spanish, Indian, and African) woman, Juana Pereira, on the outskirts of Cartago where she was collecting firewood. On a rock, she found a little stone image of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms, took it home, and placed it in a basket. The next day, she found the image again on the same rock. She thought it was another statue, but at home, she noticed that the basket was empty. This time, she locked the basket after placing the statue there again. On the third day, she found the statue on the same rock once again. Frightened, she ran home to check the basket and found it empty. She then went to the local priest, gave the image to him, and told the whole story.

According to the legend, the priest did not pay much attention to the young peasant girl and her story, but he did guard the statue. When he wanted to take a closer look at it, it had disappeared from the place he had put it. After some searching, he found it on a rock in the forest. This time he put clothes on the image and brought it to the church. The next day, when he was saying mass, he again noticed that the statue was gone. After the mass, he and another priest went to look for it at the same site as before. And there she was, standing on a rock, supposedly because she wanted a church dedicated to her to be built on that very place, which is what happened.

August 2nd is still today dedicated to *La Negrita*. On that day, each year, thousands of pilgrims from all over Costa Rica come to Cartago, many on foot, some walking for days from different parts of the country. According to what I read in the local media in 2007, more than half of Costa Rica's four million citizens participate in the *romería*, as the pilgrimage is called in Spanish. The highway from San José to Cartago is closed each August 2nd, filled with walking people whose journey ends in the basilica, in which they proceed on their knees to the altar where the statue is placed.

The cultural history of *La Negrita*, related to Costa Rican nationalism, class and racial conflicts, as well as to tensions between the state and the Catholic Church, has been the interest of some scholars, if not of many (for example, Zúñiga 1985; Sharman 2006). By and large, the cult has been given astonishingly little study by Costa Rican historians, anthropologists, or scholars of religion.

The history of *La Negrita's* cult is a story of how a marginal cult of marginalized people become a national(ist) symbol that supposedly unites the Costa Rican nation. One of the national myths of Costa Rica is that the country is both "whiter" (European) and more egalitarian than its neighboring nations. However, Costa Rican blacks – who live mostly on the Caribbean coast – as well as the indigenous people such as the *bribri* still suffer racism and marginalization. For them, the image of an egalitarian Costa Rica is a nationalist myth, created by governing elites to form a unified nation. The common interpretation of the

story is that *La Negrita*, being herself dark-skinned and having appeared to a person of despised race, had a clear message: that both “whites” (*blancos*) and “blacks” (*negros*) are God’s children and thus equal.

The cult of *La Negrita* has elements similar to those of other personifications of Mary in Latin America, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, but is specifically local in some of its meanings. Like *La Negrita* and Guadalupe, other Marian apparitions in Latin America have often happened to lower-class people, racially and otherwise marginalized, Indians and slaves, in times of turmoil. Church authorities have not believed them at first, but the apparition and the symbol itself have finally convinced them. Marian apparitions have been explained both as the motivation for the evangelization and control of the Indians and the blacks and as a story of their empowerment and greater social and racial cohesion – in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, even as the core of the Mexican *mestizo* identity (Paz 1959). One of the unique elements of *La Negrita* is that she appeared as a concrete object made of stone and not “in person,” as is the case with most other apparitions of the Mother of God, in Europe and elsewhere. Nor did she have any specific message to impart.

In the basilica itself, the little image is surrounded by nationalist symbols of the Costa Rican state such as the flag, reflecting her contemporary meaning principally as an “invented” symbol of what it is to be Costa Rican, having changed (been made) into that from a marginalized local cult of segregated black people, over the centuries. The racial conflicts, including slavery and the prohibition until the 1930s of travel by blacks from the (“African”) Caribbean coast to the (“Hispanic”) central valley of Costa Rica, are not remembered and recounted in the current interpretation and official version of the legend. Instead, the nationalist myths of a “whiter” Costa Rica and racial and ethnic equality are somewhat contradictorily combined in the current interpretation. Even her popular name, *La Negrita*, which literally means black (*negro/a*), is emptied of its original meaning of a black Madonna appearing to a poor black woman, and given a more *mestizo* sort of meaning: that the Costa Rican people is one and the same, united, and with a commonly shared national identity.

Downstairs in the basilica is the more popular (not necessarily as opposed to nationalist or hegemonic) materialization of the devotion, mainly in the form of small *exvotos*, locally called *milagros* (miracles) or *promesas* (promises). They are tiny metal carvings given as signs of thanks or request to the Virgin. Most often they represent the human body, everything from a full-size human figure – child or adult, male or female – to lungs, eyes, breasts, or legs. Besides these, people have brought to her clothes, toys, and even trophies of soccer teams who supposedly won their matches due to *La Negrita*’s help. Behind the basilica, there is a built-in fountain believed to contain *agua bendita*, water blessed by the Mother of God.

Both men and women, young and old, participate in *La Negrita's* devotion. She is not the only personification of the Virgin Mary, even in Costa Rica. When my informants spoke of the Virgin Mary, they mostly did so in the broad sense (*La Virgen María* or *La Virgen*), as did I, since the object of my interest was not specifically *La Negrita* of Costa Rica but the meaning of the Virgin Mary in general. However, since I conducted my interviews in Costa Rica, my informants often spoke of *La Negrita*, not interchangeably with the Virgin, but mainly as a specific, local aspect of their devotion, which also takes specific forms such as the August 2nd pilgrimage or bringing *promesas* to the basilica. Most of my informants stated that among all the different personifications of the Virgin Mary, *La Negrita* is known as being especially miraculous.

Tensions between the official and the popular, between the elite and the common people, were visible at the mass of August 2nd in 2007 which I attended together with thousands of *ticos*, as Costa Ricans are called in popular parlance. The open-air mass was held in the plaza facing the church and was presided over by the Archbishop. Members of the local political and social elites had reserved seats to which they walked through a pathway demarcated by cords. The rest of the audience either watched them, reminding me of an Oscar gala, or were lining up to get blessed water from the fountain behind the church. The line was long under the heat of the sun. Young and old, women and men, entire families, had brought bottles to be filled with water and taken home.

### **Costa Rican women and *La Negrita***

All my informants in Costa Rica were Catholic and self-identified devotees of the Virgin Mary, which many of them expressed in terms of being *muuy marianas*, very Marian. They were both urban and rural, most of them of the lower middle class, some with very little formal schooling, but some of the younger ones with even a university degree. My main question for them was “What does the Virgin Mary mean to you?” With this simple question, I wanted to understand why the Virgin Mary has become the woman “feminists hate and women love,” as I once described it somewhat provocatively in the title of a conference paper.

The ordinary as women's everyday (often primary) sphere in which they needed Mary's help was expressed by my informants in a variety of ways. For example,

If I lose something – something very common for us women, right? That we put a thing somewhere and then we forget about it – And me, more than once, I have told my female friends that at times when ‘Look, I lost such-and-such thing and cannot find it anymore,’ I tell them ‘Say to the Virgin (of Light, *Virgen de la Luz*) that she would search for it or give a little bit of light.’ And wow, it works for us. She gives it to us, if we ask with a lot of faith. (Olivia, interview February 9, 2006, San José)

Or,

The Virgin is like a telefax (laughs) which arrives to us just like that (snaps her fingers). It is she who intercedes in front of her son for us. As the woman that she is. As mother. As helper. She with her merciful heart, full of love, affection, and tenderness. As we women are. Tell me, don't we women always have more sensitive feelings than the men? We have a sixth sense that helps us see things that men do not see. (Olivia, interview February 9, 2006, San José)

The mundane, ordinary issues, which can vary between finding a parking spot or a spouse and having a difficult labor, are not too “lowly” to express to Mary. She is not judging; she wants to help and comfort. She is miraculous and has power. Above all, she understands.

It is really strange that, well, I always drive the car and my mother talks like crazy to her (Virgin Mary), really, ‘Ay, Little Virgin, I need a parking spot, but a big one,’ you know I am not that good a driver, well, ‘Find me a space,’ or if I am running late, my mother says, ‘I need a favor, why don't you ask the Virgin to do it.’ (Eugenia, interview February 8, 2006, Heredia)

And,

Because she (the Virgin) always has been on my side in the most difficult moments. I had a really, really difficult labor, in Germany, and I remember that I just surrendered myself, or, in fact, ‘If you did it, I can do it.’ (...) It has been very, very special, in the most difficult moments of my life, I have felt her tremendously by my side. (...) On another occasion, I lost my job, it was devastating for me, very, very impacting, and it turns out that it is the day of the Virgin of Fátima. And I remember that I went to mass like on any Sunday, and it happened to be the celebration of her, right? And I felt her hugging me, or, I felt her consolation, really, it wasn't like that all things would be resolved, but it really was like a consolation, her protection – that everything will be all right. (Eugenia, interview February 8, 2006, Heredia)

In a discussion with three middle-aged women from the popular education group of the Claretian Brothers in San José, the theme of giving birth and labor came up. One of them, Gisela, started to talk about her experience of a prayer

to the Virgin so intense that she did not feel any pain. Another woman, Laura, said, “She helps in labor when you ask her.” Gisela explained:

I feel that she helped me. Well, I can't say it was a miracle or what is a miracle, but I, for example, I have felt – well, her accompaniment, or, let's say, I am used to asking, ‘Little Virgin, help, so that Dad's operation will go fine,’ or that my baby would be fine, and so on, that her intercession has always worked. Well, is it faith or what is it, right? But I have never attended the *romería* [the pilgrimage for *La Negrita* on August 2nd each year], I never promised to do it, never, right? Well, I have crossed the church on my knees, but never the pilgrimage. I have bought the *milagritos*, though. (Gisela, interview February 8, 2006, San José)

Laura continued:

For me, (the Virgin) as mother, as the woman that she is, understands women well. Right? She understands us well because she is like us. Only that she is chosen among all the women to be a pure woman, a clean woman, to be the first sanctuary, in which Jesus was formed. (Laura, interview February 8, 2006, San José, continuing a story of her ectopic pregnancy and how the Virgin, *Mamita María*, helped her in her great pain and near death)

My informants' relationship to the Virgin Mary in general, and to *La Negrita* in particular, is that of intimacy, trust, love, and help. Women both internalize the teachings of the Church, including its official Mariology, and negotiate with them. In my informants' experience, Mary is primarily a channel between humanity and divinity.

All my informants emphasized Mary's role as *Mediatrice*, the mediator or intercessor, which is one of the most important roles of Mary in official Catholic Mariology as well. It is in this role of *Mediatrice* that Mary's both-and character becomes crystallized: Mary both as other women (human) and as different from them (divine). When praying to Mary, my informants emphasized her mediating role not only as something between divinity and humanity, but also as an active role: she is the *intercesora*, the intercessor, who has a power to act, to intercede. Since she is experienced as being closer to human beings, especially women and mothers, than God and Jesus, my informants felt that they could talk of anything to her without having to “control” themselves or ponder whether some mundane everyday worry is too small or insignificant to express. In this, they expressed Mary's womanhood, not just maternity, in the very same terms in which they defined themselves, in relation to men and children. My interest here is to stress the gendered, feminine, continuum between these women and Mary

as they experience it, not to judge their understanding of gender roles.

People turn to *La Negrita* either in order to participate in the national(ist) commonly shared fervor of certain days or at times of great anxiety and special need for miracles. Most often these had to do with health issues, relationships, family problems, unemployment, and poverty.

It seemed to me that people were well aware of the magical thinking related to the *promesas*, little artifacts in the form of a baby, a limb, or an eye, and that this kind of thinking is not encouraged either by the Church or by the secular society. However, it is obvious to anybody who visits the basilica how common it is to bring them to *La Negrita*. The most common business around the basilica, besides small restaurants, is the selling of the *promesas* and other religious artifacts. My informants were well aware that the Church does not accept Mary's divinity, she is not a goddess. At the same time, their lived religiosity blurs the line between her humanity and divinity. Mary is considered as (sometimes the ultimate) source of help. The devotion of *La Negrita*, in this sense, reflects the ambiguity of the official and the popular, institution and lived religion, doctrine and faith.

This uncertainty about the *promesas* and the blessed water are an example of another built-in tension in the cult. *La Negrita* is simultaneously a national(ist) symbol, the patroness of the nation-state, the highest symbol for formal Catholicism and its links to the Costa Rican state, and an object of people's greatest fears, hopes, and losses, which become visualized and materialized in the form of the *promesas* and the blessed water, on the one hand, and are experienced potentially as some kind of excess, magic, heresy, or backwardness, on the other.

## Conclusion

It is important to analyze critically what kind of "difference" it is that religion makes in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and class. *La Negrita's* cult is one example of how these intersections are always local and should not be too easily universalized, either. At least the following tensions or differences can be traced in *La Negrita's* cult.

First, the tension between the "official" and the "popular" is particularly important in religious traditions in which these are divided according to gender, as is the case of Catholicism. Even though both men and women participate in *La Negrita's* cult, it seems that there are gender-specific elements in Marian piety. The main reason for this is that the Mother of God is herself a woman and, thus, also a strongly gendered religious symbol.

Second, from another angle, the line between the "secular" and the "religious" is practically impossible to draw in the devotion to *La Negrita*. She is simultaneously the main symbol of a secular state and the most important

religious symbol of Costa Rica. Third, the history of racial and ethnic conflicts is explicitly present in *La Negrita's* cult, even in the visual form of the statue itself. However, this tension has not been much analyzed. Fourth, the difficulties of including religion and religious identity in feminist theorizing about identity, intersectionality, and empowerment are another example of a tension present in *La Negrita*: feminism can draw a negative and one-sided picture of an important source of empowerment and selfhood for Catholic women.

And finally, the ideal of an equal Costa Rica is in clear tension with the class aspects in *La Negrita's* cult. Even when she is loved by both elites and lower classes, it is especially the poor and marginalized who turn to her in their concrete needs. The elite tends to see her as a symbol of Costa Rica; for ordinary people she is a source of help, understanding, and miracles, which give a horizon of hope for the ordinary life so often filled with real worries about income, health, and family relations. She is both the patroness of the nation-state, used for political ends, and the dark-skinned mother of the lower classes. It is also clear that *La Negrita* combines elements from both European Catholicism and more indigenous, possibly pre-Colombian, beliefs: she is American, African, and European, as are so many of her followers.

## Notes

1 The following section of the article has been published in part in Vuola 2010.

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## 11 Extending the dimensions of ethnicity and gender in the indigenist prose of Rosario Castellanos

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The main objective of this article is to show how intersectionality can be applied in the analysis of literary material. Compared with the results of previous analyses of the work of the Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos, an intersectional approach gives novel conclusions when extended to analysis of the identity formation of the narrative subjects and the power relations between them. In *Balún-Canán*, the first volume of Castellanos's indigenous trilogy published in 1957–1962, gender and ethnicity are not the only variables that define the positions of the characters of the novel. Class, religion, and sexuality tease unconventional power relations out of the traditional binary opposition between masculine/feminine and *mestizo*/indigenous, showing the impotence of the presumably powerful people and their submissiveness to a tradition they cannot control. What feminist theories share with critical discourse analysis is a visibly biased, qualitative approach that takes the side of the dominated people by contrasting their voices with the dominant ones and introduces them to a consciousness-raising process that involves both sides. In Castellanos's prose, neither masculine gender nor *mestizo* origin protects from marginalization. Concentration on the less obvious indicators of marginalization or on factors that even suggest possession of social power may reveal new information on situations described in literature which can then be applicable to real-life situations that need new perspectives. This is why it is important to bring intersectional analysis to literature.

El objetivo principal de este artículo es justificar la aplicación de interseccionalidad al análisis del material literario. En el análisis de la obra de la escritora mexicana Rosario Castellanos, el acercamiento interseccional ofrece novedosas posibilidades al extender el análisis a la formación de la identidad de los sujetos narrativos, o a las relaciones de poder entre estos. En *Balún-Canán*, primera parte de su trilogía indigenista publicada entre 1957 y 1962, el género y la etnicidad no son los únicos variantes que definen las posiciones de los caracteres de la novela. Combinados con la clase, religión y sexualidad, las oposiciones binarias entre lo masculino/femenino, o lo *mestizo*/indígena sugieren unas relaciones de poder poco convencionales dentro de las cuales las personas supuestamente poderosas no pueden luchar contra la tradición que les subsume. Las teorías feministas, unidas al análisis crítico del discurso representan un acercamiento cualitativo abiertamente parcial que defiende los derechos de los dominados en la sociedad. La voz de los dominados es comparada con aquella de los dominantes introduciendo ambas partes en un proceso de concienciación. En la prosa de Castellanos, ni el género masculino ni el origen *mestizo* llega a proteger a los sujetos de la narración de marginación. Cuando se concentra en los indicadores menos obvios de la marginación, indicadores que hasta implican posesión de poder social, se puede encontrar información antes conocida a través del análisis de situaciones descritas en la literatura que después pueden ser aplicadas a situaciones de la vida real que requieren nuevas perspectivas.

## Introduction

The focus of this article is the indigenist trilogy of the Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos. The main objective is to extend analysis to other dimensions of gender and ethnicity than those previous studies have concentrated on, either in the biographical analysis of the author or in the narrative strategies used in Castellanos's work. The trilogy offers a rich source of material for an intersectional approach due to its meticulous description of power relations on both the individual level and the collective level between different social and ethnic groups. At the same time, an analysis of the constitution of the narrative subjects in the gallery of literary characters as described in Auli Leskinen's work gives us the chance to concentrate on the identity formation of the characters. Thus, of the options to theorize either identity or social power mentioned by Elina Vuola, my intention is to touch upon both possibilities through some examples analyzed in this article.

Rosario Castellanos was born in Comitán, Chiapas, in 1924 and suffered an accidental death at the age of forty-nine in Tel Aviv, where she was the Mexican ambassador to Israel, in 1974. In this article, I will discuss the possibilities of applying the intersectional approach to a literary work and will concentrate on the first book of her trilogy, the novel *Balún-Canán*, which was published in 1957. The trilogy was later completed with *Ciudad Real* in 1960 and *Oficio de Tibieblas* in 1962.

In most analyses of the work of Castellanos, the focus has been on the marginalized positions of the characters, produced either by gender or by ethnicity (Cresta de Leguizamon 1976; Ahern 1980; Gil Iriarte 1997, 1999; Lemaître León 2005; D'Lugo 2009). As Margrét Jónsdóttir suggested in 2004 in her analysis of the strategies of contempt toward woman in the work of Castellanos, Castellanos has contributed to feminist research in the relationship between men and women (Jónsdóttir 2006). In this article, I argue that Castellanos's work does not draw solely on the marginalization of women and indigenous people in their relationship with men and *mestizos*. The significance of class and age has been admitted in previous studies, but in intersectional terms, religion and sexuality deserve a more detailed analysis.

This follows the lines of Priscilla Meléndez in "Genealogía y escritura en *Balún-Canán* de Rosario Castellanos": "No se puede identificar un sólo vehículo de opresión que revele la situación particular de un individuo" (It is not possible to identify just one vehicle of oppression that would reveal the particular situation of an individual) (Meléndez 1998: 343). Another observation in line with Meléndez's observation on the multiple oppressions that a feminine character in Castellanos's prose might encounter is the question of the limited number of possibilities of the masculine characters to break from their traditional role, defined primarily by gender and ethnicity.

### Setting the scene

In a way that is similar to how a woman's position may be articulated in different ways depending on her ethnic and social background, a man's life, too, seems to carry the same marking points. Masculinity alone does not give protection from marginalization. In *Balún-Canán*, signs of change can be perceived: what happens when a person wants to change or redefine his or her position, or the position of others?

The examples I will analyze, keeping in mind the variables on top of gender, are the situations of Ernesto, the illegitimate son of the uncle of the novel's protagonist, a nine-year-old girl whose name is never mentioned (whereas her younger brother, who dies at the end, has a name); and of Amalia, one of the novel's spinster or old-maid characters, who organizes religious ceremonies in her home during the post-revolutionary period when religion was banned in Mexico.

The samples here are analyzed within the feminist theoretical-methodological framework of intersectionality, with a focus on the function of power relations between the characters of the novel. I am suggesting yet another reading of Castellanos's work that offers a possibility of approaching the problematic of power relations from an innovative and alternative perspective. In addition to the binary opposition between masculine/feminine or indigenous/*mestizo*, the results show the impotence of the presumably powerful people and their submissiveness to a tradition they cannot control.

### Theoretical considerations accompanied by methodological demonstrations

One of the ways to define intersectionality is to see it as the relationship of the multiple forms of oppression and social identities where gender is one, but not the only, category that produces social limits and inequalities. I lean on the original definition by Kimberlé Crenshaw, reinforced by her again in 2009, according to which the main characteristic of intersectionality is the factors that together produce marginalization. None of these factors alone, but their combination and their simultaneous presence in a person, produces it (Crenshaw 2009).

It is also important to analyze how specific positions and identities along with political values are constructed, how they are related to each other, and what effects they have in particular places and contexts (Yuval-Davis 2006: 200). These identities are not necessarily related in the sense that an indigenous person would inevitably be poor, although it is not uncommon that in a historical context, people who are positioned at a specific spot on one of the axes of power based on different social divisions tend to accumulate or concentrate at another specific spot on another axis that resembles the first one. The axes I am referring to in this intersectional approach can be imagined as sticks or poles that cross each other at certain points.

If and when the multiplicity and variety of these factors that have influence on a woman's position can be accepted and admitted, the discussion nowadays revolves around the different ways intersectional research can be done (McCall 2005). I base my offer of a multidisciplinary model that might be applied to literature on this methodological challenge and argue that in the prose of Rosario Castellanos, these influential factors are relevant in a man's position as well, and that one of the methods for studying these simultaneously present differences is through language use. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, and to change the ways power is distributed in a society in a short- and long-term perspective (Wodak and Meyer 2001: 11).

Within intersectional theories, two approaches can be distinguished: the systematic and the constructive. According to the constructive approach, the ideas and actions of an individual contribute to subject formation. Indicators such as gender, ethnicity, or class are not only restrictive forms of categorization; they also imply empowering and narrative resources (Prins 2006: 280).

One proposal that feminist theories and critical discourse analysis share is that both represent a qualitative approach that is visibly biased, taking the side of the dominated people, giving them a voice that is contrasted with the voice of the dominant people, and introducing both into a process of consciousness raising that "opens the eyes" of all participants in the process (Vickers 2002: 68–69). In the prose of Castellanos this voice is given to women and indigenous people, but nevertheless, as I have mentioned before, I aim to amplify the focus, stating that neither masculine gender nor *mestizo* origin is protection from marginalization. Identity formation is more complex, and the intersectional effect depends on the combination of the factors that produce social inequality. In Castellanos's work, conflictive and inextricable relations are not limited to those between men and women, or between *mestizos* and indigenous people, but also in woman-to-woman and man-to-man relations. More possibilities are opened for women and indigenous people (both women and men) to solve situations that look desperate from the outside, than for the masculine characters of the dominant class who find themselves trapped in the environment of social changes produced by the Agrarian Reform. In the material that follows, I will proceed to the examples I have mentioned above.

### Historical context

*Balún-Canán* takes place in the post-revolutionary period of Mexican history when ideas about inequality had been seeded in the minds of Mexican *campesinos*. The revolution had also boosted the organization of women in Mexico. This novel describes the consequences of the implementation of the Agrarian Reform during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). While reform had been

decreed by law back in the nineteenth century, it was only introduced in Chiapas twenty years after the founding of the program in 1917 (Benjamin 1995: 230). The Argüello family returns to its *finca* in Chactajal under these circumstances. The Agrarian Reform produces changes in the physical environment of the characters of *Balún-Canán*, but it is at the same time the prevailing global theme that starts changing the spiritual or psychological development of the characters.

The head of the Argüello family is César, who is married to Zoraida. The family leaves its urban residence as news of the restlessness of the countryside reaches Comitán, the colonial city where the events of the first and last sections of the novel take place. The farmhouse is managed by an indigenous couple, Felipe and his childless spouse, Juana. The anonymous little girl, César and Zoraida's daughter, observes the meeting of these two cultures with mixed feelings, gradually realizing that her closest caretaker, the indigenous nanny who had not come with them from Comitán, could not do so for a reason attached to her ancestry. To fulfill the post-revolutionary government's demands for educating the subaltern farm workers, César spontaneously gives recognition to Ernesto, his nephew, who happens to encounter him under favorable conditions. This meeting leads to a close relationship with the family, in which Ernesto's social status is reorganized at various times according to his capacity to meet his new circumstances.

Meanwhile, life in the city of Comitán is transformed due to changes in people's spiritual and economic situations. Surprisingly, religion offers a way out to Amalia, a single, unmarried woman whose options in traditional Mexican society are limited. In the altered situation, Amalia holds the keys to redemption for the suffering mother, Zoraida, who is about to lose her name-carrying son at the end of the novel. Empowered by the possibilities her status as an unmarried woman offers her, Amalia disturbs the established position of a woman and the anonymity of a daughter in a patriarchal society.

In the following sections, I focus on a literary analysis of these two characters, Ernesto and Amalia.

### **Analysis: Ernesto**

The contradictions between social position and biological origin are well articulated in Ernesto's character. Ernesto is the illegitimate son of the brother of César, the father of the anonymous little girl who is the protagonist of *Balún-Canán*. Ernesto is working as a newspaper boy in Comitán when it occurs to César to offer him a position as a rural teacher, a post that landowners who have workers living on their properties are required by law to provide for. Ernesto's mother is blind, and she has fought for the education of her son in a society that does not recognize illegitimate children. At first sight, education seems like a way to ascend the social ladder. When César approaches him and asks him to sit down in his house, Ernesto resists:

- Es que... no quiero faltarle al respeto. No somos iguales y...  
-Pocos piensan ya en estas distinciones. Además somos medio parientes.  
¿No es así?  
-Soy un hijo bastardo de su hermano Ernesto.  
-Algo de eso había yo oído decir. Eres blanco como él, tienes los ojos claros. ¿Conociste a tu padre? (Castellanos: 53)

Ernesto's humble origin is compensated for by his appearance in the eyes of César, who has a number of illegitimate offspring on his ranch. Ernesto's mother describes him: "Es de buena raza. Y no lo digo por mí" (215). But she calls him *kerem*, an indigenous word meaning "child," when she describes how Ernesto has used the coins he has received on his visits to his father: "Y mi *kerem*, en vez de gastarlo en embelequerías o repartirlo con los demás indizuelos, me lo traía para ayudar a nuestras necesidades" (215). Both *kerem* and *indizuelo*, added to Ernesto's mother's notion of race and his uncle's comment on his physical appearance, suggest that he might even have indigenous blood, although his mother describes herself only as a blond, poor, rural woman.

When Ernesto arrives at the ranch, he needs to reconstruct his origin. When César offers him indigenous servants, Ernesto defends himself: "Tengo malos ratos pero no malos gustos, tío" (78). César tries to convince him, referring to his personal experience and the number of half-indigenous children he has on the ranch. Ernesto gets confused and wants to make a clear differentiation between his own ancestry and César's illegitimate children.

Humbleness and humility are transformed into pride in common ancestry with the Argüellos family. On top of failing in his intention to use Ernesto as a teacher, César also finds him unsuited to farm work and sends him to the main house to stay with his spouse, Zoraida. Ernesto feels excluded, especially when he is told to take care of the children of the family. But he gets out of this circle of exclusion through Zoraida's comment on the meaning of language. Ernesto does not speak *tzeltal*, and Zoraida describes the indigenous people to him: "Ellos son tan rudos que no son capaces de aprender a hablar español. (...) Y todavía hay quienes digan que son iguales a nosotros" (93).

Zoraida includes Ernesto in her "nosotros," a "we" that is inferior to the "we" that would have been pronounced by César, but still a "we" belonging to the dominant class. The internal differences in the dominant class are thus constructed by gender and age. The possibilities of climbing the social ladder are diminished by Ernesto's humble social background, and he is capable only of invading a space comparable to that of a woman of the dominant class.

After an uprising by the indigenous farm workers, César asks Ernesto a favor, to deliver a letter to the governor. In secret, Ernesto reads the contents of the letter and starts to dream of a social ascent, made delirious by the idea of becoming the family's savior:

Los indios no eran malos. Lo más que podía decirse de ellos es que eran ignorantes. Le extrañaría tal vez al señor Presidente escuchar esta opinión en los labios de alguien que pertenecía a la clase de los patrones. (Castellanos: 202)

In his vision, the governor is not easily convinced, but in the end, he accompanies Ernesto when he returns to the ranch:

¡Con qué gusto los verían llegar a Chactajal! Él, Ernesto, les había salvado la vida. Y Matilde lo miraría otra vez con los mismos ojos ávidos con que lo vio llegar a Palo María, antes de que las palabras de César le hicieran saber que era un bastardo. Pero ahora, con ese acto de generosidad, iba a convencerlos a todos de que su condición de bastardo no le impedía ser moralmente igual a ellos o mejor. (Castellanos: 203)

Ernesto never reaches the Municipal Hall. He is followed and assassinated by one of the ranch's indigenous workers, who wanted to prevent the delivery of the letter. Ernesto ceases to exist without knowing that his aunt Matilde was pregnant by him. Matilde is César's cousin and another spinster character in the gallery of Castellanos. She does not come to terms with the unexpected pregnancy and tries to commit suicide after learning of her condition. She is rescued once by the indigenous leader of the ranch workers, but after Ernesto's death she surrenders to the *dzulúm*, an indigenous devil, to avoid giving birth to another illegitimate son. That leaves the reader to wonder what would have become of the child of a spinster and a bastard, had he or she had the chance to be born.

The indigenous characters speak through the thoughts of Felipe and Juana in the second section of the novel. The speed of the decline of the upper class is tranquilly observed by the indigenous workers, who are conscious of their enlarged role in changing the society. The character of Ernesto travels through ethnic and social structures despising his half-siblings on the *finca*, children of indigenous women impregnated by his father, and getting himself despised by César when he is moved into the presence of women and children after showing his incapacity to fulfill the norms of a white, dominant-class male in a traditional society.

### **Amalia: Empowerment by restricting factors**

One of the examples of the empowering capacity of the presence of simultaneous differences can be read in the character of Amalia. She lives with her old mother; little by little, time has passed, and by the time Amalia has realized that she was not going to marry, she has also passed the age to join a convent. Her religious



conviction then finds a surprising outlet in an atmosphere that is favorable neither toward unmarried women nor toward religion. The character of Amalia appears for the first time at the beginning of the novel, when Zoraida visits her house with the children: “Cuando nos abren la puerta es como si destaparan una caja de cedro, olorosa, donde se guardan listones desteñidos y papeles ilegibles” (Castellanos: 33).

This observation is at the same time a comment on the social value of an unmarried, aging woman in the society of those times. Something that has a strange odor associated with something that has not been in use for ages, that has lost its color, that no one is interested in, even if that something might have something interesting to tell. Even her physical appearance lacks vivid colors: the shawl she is wearing is “gris, tibio, su cara como lo pétalos que se ha puesto a marchitar entre las páginas de los libros” (Castellanos: 34). And when she smiles, she is actually sad because her hair is losing color and turning grey.

Among the characters of the novel who are single people, Amalia is the only one who stays calm and reasonable. Others, like César’s cousins, have their whims, and all of them go more or less crazy, or at least they seem to do so, and Ernesto loses his life due to an internal division he does not manage to solve. At the very moment Zoraida seeks Amalia’s help toward the end of the novel, Amalia has already transformed herself into the hostess of secret religious ceremonies, hidden because of the conflict between the State and the Catholic Church during the post-revolutionary period.

Amalia’s religious activity is combined with her social position. When Zoraida asks her why she would be willing to take such a risk in organizing gatherings banned by the revolutionary government, Amalia explains that someone has to help the people and offer them religious counsel. According to Amalia, since she is unmarried, it might as well be her, because “a las casadas no les dan permiso sus maridos” (Castellanos: 236).

In spite of the fact that, at first glance, social status and religion could be restrictive for a woman, in the context of the novel these become something emancipating for Amalia. They offer an exit from the mental prison constructed by her mother’s illness and Amalia’s role as a caretaker responsible for her mother’s wellbeing at the same time age is working against her in her desire to devote her life to religion by becoming a nun. She does not need anyone’s permission to organize a banned event at her house, she just moves her mother into another room, which surprises the little protagonist girl: “¿Dónde está la viejecita? ¿Y los muebles?” (235).

This is the same room to which the girl is later sent to play when her little brother is already quite sick and the mother’s last hopes are fixed on a priest they are waiting for in Amalia’s house. As punishment for not behaving well

from the grown-up perspective, the girl is told to play in the same room where the old lady is deposited. It is the space for the most despised people; neither of these two characters has the power to decide her own life. Amalia is in another room that connects her to the outside world, and no one can force her to obey.

## Conclusions

To conclude, I must state that the material offers more differences than these present in the definition of the characters' identities. If we concentrate on the less obvious indicators of marginalization or even on indicators that suggest the possession of social power and take into account the existence and effect of various factors in an individual, we may have the chance to reveal the "blind spots" hidden by other kinds of literary analyses.

In real-life situations, the significance of these factors simultaneously present in a person depends on the context and the physical environment of the subject analyzed. The recognition of these blind spots produces new kinds of information and positions people in a different way than when these factors are analyzed separately.

In going back and rereading literature that has been analyzed earlier with different tools, new kinds of information can be obtained and new kinds of knowledge can be produced about the situations described in the literature. Again, this could be applied to real-life situations that need new perspectives.

Gender and ethnicity play an important role in the study of Rosario Castellanos's work. Still, extending the study of gender to the masculine characters in a description of a patriarchal society that supposedly discriminates against women may produce surprising conclusions when other factors are included in the analysis. Masculinity does not guarantee a strong social status in a very traditional society based on social class divisions where marital status has different effects on the offspring born outside marriage and on the actual participants in the institution of marriage. Ernesto overestimated his position as a masculine descendant of the Argüello family and Amalia became liberated by factors that would seemingly restrict her action: female gender and religion. Previous studies on gender and ethnicity in Castellanos's work have concentrated on the marginalized ethnicity, but I insist that turning the gaze to the ethnic majority or the dominant gender in a specific context may bring with it other factors worth including in the intersectional analysis.

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