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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

(Des)Madres:

Motherhood in Contemporary Latin American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Hispanic Languages and Literature

by

Brenda Sarai Jaramillo

2026

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

(Des)Madres:
Motherhood in Contemporary Latin American Literature

by

Brenda Saraí Jaramillo
Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literature
University of California, Los Angeles, 2026
Professor Jorge Marturano, Chair

This doctoral thesis links three different authors writing about motherhood in Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia to analyze how women writers throughout Latin America are representing the institution of motherhood. By focusing on the dissonance between institutional motherhood and individual mothering, this dissertation explores how women produce and reproduce knowledge about motherhood, an institution that interpellates them as gendered subjects. Specifically, this dissertation explores how women strategically appropriate, reject, and subvert patriarchal motherhood, paying close attention to their unexamined expectations and the moments of negotiation that unsettle them.

The principal objects of analysis include Clarice Lispector's *Laços de Família*, Pilar Quintana's *La perra*, and Camila Sosa Villada's *Las malas*. These texts use motherhood as a site of discursive identification wherein larger institutions are navigated, subverted, or reinforced. To

ground the texts in their proper thematic and cultural context, this dissertation also engages a variety of other authors and cultural productions, including novels, short stories, memoirs, and translations that illustrate by comparison the principal text's significance.

The analytical arc of this dissertation begins by studying the moment of epiphany in which a mother becomes aware of the extent of her own complicity in the institution of motherhood. From there, it moves on to a marginalized woman's attempt to secure social significance via a strategic appropriation of institutional motherhood. Finally, it ends with a study of a queer mother's defiant care work that directly challenges the state's insistence on binary identification. In all three texts, institutional motherhood is revealed as a tool of control, imposed by an internalized biopolitics of gender that demands obedience and submission to another's needs. This results in a living death: the Claricean walking slumber from which mothers awaken, terrified; a vampiric motherhood rooted in extractive logics of social death; a celebration of a dead mother's mythic breast.

By combining the interdisciplinary framework of maternal theory with the protagonism of mothers in contemporary literature written by Latin American women, this dissertation advances Guadalupe Nettel's call to "de-sacralize" biological motherhood. This dissertation thus bridges the divide between Latin American literary studies and motherhood studies.

The dissertation of Brenda Saraí Jaramillo is approved.

Verónica Cortinez

Patrícia Lino

Elizabeth Marchant

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University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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I would like to extend the deepest gratitude to the entire Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA. My project would not be what it is today if not for the support, cheer, and goodwill of the students, professors, and staff I have had the pleasure of working with. I am especially thankful for my committee members, Professors Verónica Cortínez, Patrícia Lino, and Elizabeth Marchant, who taught me the value of balancing rigor with kindness, and excellence with humor. It is a rare thing to emerge from a major examination with a smile, and yet I did every time thanks to their supportive words, friendly contributions, and amicable enthusiasm.

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resplendent array of brilliant undergraduate students from all academic disciplines. Their insights were invaluable as I thought through some of these texts with them. I cannot fully express how impactful that experience was for my research, as well as how meaningful it was for me personally. To the students of SPAN 98TW: what a privilege it was to learn alongside you.

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VITA

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- 2025 *The Beast of Hungary*. Translation and edition of Lope de Vega, *El Animal de Hungría*, with the UCLA Working Group on Comedia in Performance and Translation. New York: Juan de la Cuesta.

INTRODUCTION

In Guadalupe Nettel's *La hija única*, the protagonist is an avowed childfree woman who scorns the idea of motherhood. It's a limitation, she thinks, something that prevents me from going to the theater, reading for hours, or touring through Paris. In short, it truncates her possibilities as an independent individual and yields her life for the sake of another. Her words echo what Adrienne Rich has termed the "ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" produced by the social mandate to mother. When reproductive motherhood is treated as a natural and therefore inevitable rite of passage into female adulthood—akin to turning fifteen or beginning menstruation—it limits women to their female reproductive value and effectively robs them of an identity beyond their bodies. In Rich's words, "it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them."

This is the institution of motherhood, a system of insidiously naturalized expectations about women's most valuable role in society. Motherhood and its caveat, *good* motherhood, exact social, biological, and economic control over the output of women's labor, literalized as flesh. And as a social framework, it is currently experiencing an unprecedented interest in contemporary Latin American literature. Literary markets on both the national and international scale are increasingly clamoring for women writing women, and especially women writing mothers. This uptick in commercial trend has also achieved critical acclaim. Many novels originating from Latin America whose central themes include motherhood have won major literary awards in either the respective country of origin, in prestigious international competitions, or both. The abundant number of authors awarded include Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, Dahlia de la Cerda, María Sonia Cristoff, Mariana Enriquez, Fernanda Melchor, Mónica Ojeda, Pilar Quintana, Samanta Schweblin, Fernanda Trías, and Marina Yuszczuk, to name just a

few. In the last ten years alone, these women have all been recognized for their resplendent writing ability, sophisticated themes, and evocative narratives about women and mothers. As a group, they represent the best of their respective country's emerging talent, earning the top national literary award (Colombia's Premio Nacional de la Novela; Argentina's Premio Nacional de Novela Sara Gallardo; Uruguay's Premio Nacional de Narrativa) and they have earned the respect of global literary organizations, earning a place on the shortlist for the Man Booker International Prize and the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. These prestigious awards not only evince Latin America's widespread investment in narrativizing the challenges and practices of mothering, but convey the scale of these narratives' global consumption.

The themes explored in these recently published books of fiction and nonfiction alike include environmental pollution, infertility, social isolation, poverty, violence, trauma, communal care, queerness, and mental health, all of which take shape under the eyes of a woman interpellated through the institution of motherhood. Some of the novels voice these themes through a principal mother protagonist who speaks truth to power, whereas others take the legacy of institutional motherhood as a starting point from which to meditate on a woman's possibilities. In both cases, these writers interrogate to what extent are our bodies really our own.

By focusing on the dissonance between institutional motherhood and individual mothering, my dissertation aims to explore how mothering practice, social gender, and institutional oppression intersect. The texts I have chosen to analyze illustrate the extent to which mothering is entrenched in discourses of successful gender performance, negotiated through broader systems of economic, social, or reproductive control. For the mothers I analyze, motherhood exists as both an individual practice and generalized institution, both an ongoing action and a social imperative that structures one's perception of oneself as a gendered subject.

Mothering is not merely gendered; it *is* gender, and as with any minoritarian social identity, it is subject to the slings and arrows of institutional patriarchy. As Nettel's protagonist puts so succinctly, "las familias biológicas son una imposición y ya va siendo hora de desacralizarlas."

Latin American Mothers in Contemporary Fiction

The Latin American literary landscape is studded with major critical and commercial bestsellers whose central theme is mothering. Though the specifics of each text vary widely, all strategically reappropriate the figure of the mother as a starting point from which to meditate on embodied injustices.

Such is the case in Samanta Schweblin's 2014 novel *Distancia de rescate*. An immediate commercial and critical success, the novel narrates the experience of a mother whose maternal instinct is unable to protect her daughter from a mysterious, life-threatening poison. Schweblin uses the figure of the mother to critique exploitative agribusiness practices that pollute the environment and sicken the population. Inherent to Schweblin's ecocritical maternity is the willful neglect of the state, refigured as a patriarchal symbol of domestic neglect. The maternal protagonist does not rebel or chafe against the expectation of maternal care, nor any of the accompanying responsibilities; on the contrary, the major conflict of the novel is that she is unable to successfully carry out her maternal identity due to negative environmental factors—including pollution, pesticide runoff, and genetically modified food products—that flourish in the negligence of the (patriarchal) state. The novel went on to win several awards: the 2015 Tigre Juan Award and the 2017 Shirley Jackson Award in its English translation as *Fever Dream*, which was also shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize. Its success even prompted the 2021 film adaptation. Directed by Claudia Llosa, the film was an international co-production between

Argentina and the US that premiered in Spain at the San Sebastián International Film Festival, where it competed for the Golden Seashell prize for best film.

Fellow Argentine author Mariana Enriquez has experienced a similar commercial and critical success. Both authors are considered integral members of what scholars have called the “Nueva Narrativa Argentina,” or New Argentine Narrative. Direct beneficiaries of the Post-Boom, the women writers of the Nueva Narrativa Argentina similarly “cuestionan las hegemonías discursivas” and in their work, “se defiende la visibilización de la mujer como fuerza de intervención teórica que pone en duda la organización simbólica dominante y como fuerza estética que altera las codificaciones sociales” (Quiñones Gámez, 107). The reshuffling and reorganizing of the symbolic order are reflected in the genre itself: both Enríquez and Schweblin “tienden hacia lo insólito, lo extraño o lo surrealista” in their writing to reveal the uncanny expectations levied upon women (108). Enriquez understands the genre of horror as that which reflects the hidden, silent violences at the heart of the collective national imaginary. Her stories are “built on the ruins of a certain kind of capitalism,” full of ghosts, shadows, and death. Importantly, they are often narrated through the perspective of a woman who reclaims and reconfigures the historic division of labor that contributed to gendered differentiation in order to see the proverbial “factory better from a distance than the man who goes to work there.” Her 2019 novel, *Nuestra parte de la noche*, harnesses this distance by placing a grieving father directly in the center of institutional motherhood. Recently widowed, a man is forced to learn how to mother his young son after the unexpected and traumatic death of his wife, the woman who held the family together. In an oblique way, *Nuestra parte de la noche* explores the same themes that interest me here: the critical reflection on the institution of motherhood that is generated by the distance of the mothering subject from the institution itself. The sociopolitical

context of Argentina's military dictatorship, which forms the present tense of the narrative, complicates and deepens the novel's meditation on motherhood. In this case, the institution of motherhood becomes a measure of the state's reach, itself corroded by its own failings, shortcomings, and corruptions.

The state and its institutions likewise form the backdrop of Mónica Ojeda's *Mandibula*. A horror novel published in 2018, *Mandibula* weaves together two perspectives on mothering and being mothered. Ojeda explores the uncanny through a surprising and lengthy meditation on the various interpretations of the color white, which then allows her to develop a plot thick with silent, growing horror. An impoverished teacher at an elite all-girls school in Ecuador must wrangle control of her students while reliving the trauma of her abusive mother's agonizing death, an indirect result of the family's crushing poverty and Ecuador's steep inequality. Meanwhile, one of the teacher's students, wealthy and privileged beyond measure, forms an increasingly violent cult with her private school friends dedicated to worshipping "El Dios Blanco," a figure of death and destruction. When the death cult's behaviors start to spill over into the school day, the teacher, stricken with grief and rage, kidnaps the leader in order to teach her a lesson, employing the same abusive disciplinary techniques on her female student that her own mother applied to her. The novel reaches a calamitous climax as the two meanings of the word *educación*—teaching and mothering—collide in terrifying fashion. For its provocative horror, crisp originality, and subtle translation, *Mandibula* was shortlisted for the National Book Award for Translated Literature in 2022.

Similarly, Ariana's Harwickz's 2012 novel, *Matate, Amor* forcefully illustrates the intersection of violence, maternal rage, and cognitive dissonance. The novel is focused through the anguished perspective of a new mother whose care work, domestic labor, and sexual desire is

entirely dismissed by a husband who proves to be more dependent and childlike than the newborn baby for which she is responsible. Harwicz's protagonist does not appear to be resentful of her child or of raising him; her resentment stems not from the act of mothering. Instead, it stems from the expectation that she must somehow change, settle, or conform to her husband's expectations of who she must be in order to mother well. Because of this, her husband claims that she is beastly, feral, and undomesticated. This patriarchal reproach suggests that society's investment in institutional motherhood prevents women from exercising agency in their own maternity. With its spiritual overtones of sacrifice and unconditional love, institutional motherhood becomes a paradox for real mothers: a lofty ideal for which to strive, and yet an impossible standard against which they will be harshly judged. Both the novel and the 2025 film adaptation by Lynne Ramsay represent the expectations of institutional motherhood as a restriction on maternal nature. Harwicz's novel suggests that maternal ambivalence is a product of patriarchal society, rather than a biological consequence or moral failing of the mother herself.

Across the River Plate, Uruguayan author Fernanda Trías similarly explores the intersection of gender, care work, and dystopia in her novels. Her 2001 novel *La azotea* is narrated by an increasingly paranoid and agoraphobic mother who must care for both her ailing father and her newborn child in a claustrophobic apartment. The novel's dark psychological elements, including suggestions of incest and suicide, reflect the suffocating bleakness of the narrator's domestic cage, bound as she is by her familial obligations. Similarly, Trías's 2020 novel *Mugre rosa* follows a nanny who must juggle the immense burden of other people's safety when mysterious pink scum washes ashore and transforms the quotidian landscape into a deadly nightmare. Desperate to check in on her own family but unable to abandon the child in her care,

the nanny embarks on a perilous journey to rescue her ailing mother, another woman's child in tow. Present in both novels is a crushing sense of inescapable responsibility paired with the desperate, overwhelming desire to leave it all behind. With *Mugre rosa*, Trías evidently struck a chord with readers throughout the world: the novel went on to win both Uruguay's Premio Nacional de Narrativa and Mexico's international Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in 2021. Additionally, its translation as *Pink Slime* was longlisted for the National Book Award for Translated Literature in 2024.

In Chile, Diamela Eltit refashions the oppressive responsibility of institutional motherhood into a poetic dialogue and reflection between a daughter and her dying mother in her 2010 novel *Impuesto a la carne*. Burdened by the weight of historical memory, the relationship between the two women bears witness to a past dictatorship and its consequences in the future. Its profound complexity and allegorical prose are deserving of a top spot in Eltit's oeuvre, which was awarded Chile's Premio Nacional de Literatura in 2018.

Argentine Claudia Piñeiro similarly explores how death, disease, and the female body intersect in her 2007 novel *Elena sabe*, a narrative about an aging mother investigating the mysterious death of her adult daughter, ruled a suicide by the police. Limited by the disabling effects of Parkinson's disease, the narrator advances in her quest with the help of medication that allows her to move on borrowed time. The narrator's search for clarity about her daughter's death is plagued with the question: to what extent can a woman exert control over her own body? The novel's preoccupation with death, illness, and the body reflects the longstanding trauma generated by the military dictatorship in Argentina, a temporal setting that the novel consistently references in the narrator's memories. Originally published in 2007, *Elena sabe* won the LiBeratur Award in Germany, a prize given to an outstanding work of fiction by a female author

from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Arab World. Its English translation in 2021 by Frances Riddle was shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize. Its success is not limited to the print world: in 2023, Netflix released the film adaptation of the same name, directed by Anahí Berneri, after a limited critical release in theaters. The recently revived interest in Piñeiro's novel, despite its original publication nearly 20 years ago, is a testament to the literary world's thirst for women who narrate institutions of motherhood and the state.

Further north, in Venezuela, writers in diaspora are also using the figure of the mother to reflect on the consequences of dictatorship. María Elena Morán's 2023 novel, *Volver a cuando*, recounts a mother grappling with the consequences of her choice to leave Maracaibo and emigrate to Brazil in search of economic opportunity, leaving her daughter behind in a rapidly disintegrating society. The uncertainty the mother faces in a new country where she commands neither language nor documents is mirrored by her daughter's vulnerability to her father, an entrenched Chavista actively benefitting from the economic collapse. *Volver a cuando* joins a growing cohort of novels by Venezuelan women in exile; in particular, that of fellow Venezuelan writer Karina Sainz Borgo whose novel *La hija de la española* was published just four years prior. Whereas Morán emphasizes the mother's perspective, Sainz Borgo's 2019 novel *La hija de la española* foregrounds a daughter's firsthand experience of dictatorship after her mother—her only confidant in a corrupt society characterized by deceit and distrust—passes away. As the protagonist grieves her mother, her pain becomes an allegory of the grief Venezuelans feel for their country's collapse. Its critical success garnered a film adaptation, directed by Mariana Rondón and Marité Ugas. The film premiered in 2025 under the title *Aún es de noche en Caracas*. Both novels, like *Impuesto a la carne* and *Elena sabe* mentioned above, utilize the mother to reflect upon the brutal price that authoritarian regimes levy upon individuals and

families. The humanitarian crisis that forms the backdrop for their respective narratives takes on a deeper significance when one takes into account that Morán and Sainz Borgo are Venezuelan citizens writing from exile in Brazil and Spain, respectively. Their contributions to the contemporary literary landscape engender critical interventions about Venezuela's current dictatorship as it unfolds, which suggests the nascence of a post-dictatorship literary genre for the country, even as the same regime ostensibly remains in power.

Elsewhere in Latin America, women writers also use the figure of the mother to reflect upon injustice and inequality. Colombian author Pilar Quintana's 2017 novel *La perra*, which I analyze elsewhere in this dissertation, is a stark condemnation of the institutional neglect present in Colombia's poorest communities, where a woman's worth is measured by the success of her progeny and the color of her skin. *La perra* weaves together antiblackness, ableism, and motherhood to reflect critically on the institutional violence levied upon Black subjects. Similarly, Quintana's 2021 novel *Los abismos* explores the intersection of class and privilege with maternal mental health. Reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins' classic feminist text *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Los abismos* explores the consequences of patriarchy in a mother's domestic life as her husband prizes his social standing over and beyond his wife's mental health or his daughter's emotional wellbeing. Both *La perra* and *Los abismos* garnered local and international awards in the years of their respective publications, including the 2021 Alfaguara Prize and the 2017 Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana.

Patriarchal investments and maternal harm also color Mexican author Guadalupe Nettel's 2020 novel, *La hija única*, a narrative that triangulates three separate women's relationship to mothering. A proudly childfree woman, a first-time mother, and a traumatized divorcée come together in a novel about the multifaceted burdens of motherhood at all stages of

maternal identity. Likewise, fellow Mexican author Brenda Navarro foregrounds the consequences of patriarchal maternity in her 2019 novel, *Casas vacías*. By juxtaposing the perspective of a mother searching for her missing son with the narrative of the woman who kidnaps him, Navarro articulates an insurmountable class divide that makes itself known upon women's very bodies.

This tendency to reflect upon motherhood as a form of, or witness to, societal injustice is also notable within recent texts of non-fiction published in Colombia. Piedad Bonnett and Margarita García Robayo have used their personal experience as mothers to meditate upon migration, mental illness, and disability. Bonnett's 2013 *Lo que no tiene nombre* is an autobiographical account of her youngest son's suicide. The title derives from the linguistic vacuum from which to narrate her grief. Unlike an orphan or a widow, whose loss is assimilated into the linguistic identity assigned to them, mothers that have lost a child have no name. Her son's death is a silence she tries to repair through the written word. And so she addresses him directly, birthing him anew: "yo he vuelto a parirte, con el mismo dolor, para que vivas un poco más, para que no desaparezcas de la memoria. Y lo he hecho con palabras porque ellas...son la poca sangre que puedo darte, que puedo darme" (Bonnett 131). In so doing, Bonnett engages maternal identity and prosopopoeia to instantiate her son in textual form, preserve the dialogical exchange between mother and child, and situate her subjectivity back in relation to the other. Vanessa Vilches Norat calls this *matergrafía*: "un espacio discursivo que, retóricamente, escenifica la aporía de dar vida a lo que carece de vida, de restaurar y dar cuenta de la sobrevivencia del sujeto y su unicidad en el código general de la lengua" (Vilches Norat 17).

Naming the sensation, articulating the experience, and the sheer difficulty of doing so, is a fundamental part of Bonnett's mothering experience, as it is for Margarita García Robayo.

García Robayo's 2014 autobiographical work *Primera Persona* reflects on her fraught relationship with her mother, whose unspecified "locura" makes silence the safest interaction, and her own identity as a mother, which is compromised by her body's inability to produce enough milk to sufficiently nourish her son. Faced by these two unpredictable realities—a mother that won't talk and an obstacle that cannot be named—García Robayo uses her writing to work through the jarring dissonance she faced as a mother.

While both Bonnett and García Robayo exemplify the recourse to autobiography, other writers, such as Lina Meruane (Chile), draw from theory to criticize institutional motherhood. Meruane's collection of essays, titled *Contra los hijos* is a manifesto against "la máquina de hacer hijos" that inculcates girls and women with its ideological fervor for reproduction. Beginning in early childhood, this maternity machinery presents itself as a pedagogical tool for instructing girls in appropriate gendered behavior. Objects such as toy dolls, plastic kitchens, and dream houses become early propaganda for institutional motherhood. As the child grows into an adult, she is beset by social discourses that continue promoting her voluntary inclusion in the cult of motherhood. Everything—from family members' invasive questions about her reproductive future to political programs rewarding procreation to national laws limiting women's reproductive agency—aims to persuade women, sometimes by force, to bear children.

These texts are just some of the most lauded texts on mothers and mothering to be published in Spanish in recent years, but the list could be expanded to include other authors whose writing denaturalizes, questions, or strategically amplifies the expectations and consequences of institutional motherhood. What unites these disparate texts despite their differing national origins and specific thematic emphasis is their shared prerogative to engage with institutional motherhood and interrogate its unexamined expectations. I have chosen to

focus on those that valorize maternal subjectivity by allowing the mothering subject to speak frankly and openly about her own practice of mothering, as well as her uneasy relationship to institutional motherhood.

A Brief Introduction to Maternal Studies

In this shared literary commitment to allowing the mother to speak, contemporary Latin American literature has constructed the mother as the sometimes ambiguous, sometimes problematic, but always agential, subject of maternity. Historically, this has not been the case. Maternal theory as it exists today is an inherently comparative and interdisciplinary field, composed of works from gender and sexuality studies, cultural studies, literary studies, psychoanalytic theory, philosophy, history, and sociology, to name a few.

Given its disparate roots and interests, maternal theory is difficult to define. However, Andrea O'Reilly, an American scholar and leading name in the field of contemporary maternity studies, offers a tripart distinction between the core branches of thought in her introduction to the 2007 anthology, *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, O'Reilly contends that the branches are (1) motherhood as experience/role, (2) motherhood as institution/ideology, and (3) motherhood as identity/subjectivity. Each branch offers a different guiding concept for approaching motherhood as an academic discipline, though more often than not, each branch weaves into and out of conversation with the others, making such a distinction difficult to enforce. The personal experience of mothering (the first branch) tends to generate a critical conscience of it as a larger institution (the second), which in turn can catalyze an interpretation of oneself as a gendered ("mothered") subject (the third). This process is not linear; instead, it is more helpful to think of

mothering as a dynamic and fluid cycle that may pass through different stages at different moments in time, or indeed, be constituted by all three simultaneously.

Such is the case with Adrienne Rich, a key figure in the branch of maternal theory that concerns motherhood as experience/role. In her oft-cited, now canonical 1976 text on motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich uses a mix of academic research, personal journals, and critical self-reflection to articulate an important and early division between the individual experience of maternity, what she terms *mothering*, and the social abstraction of the same, what she terms *institutional motherhood*. Published almost two decades after becoming a mother herself and incorporating journal entries written at different moments of her children's lives, Rich's text articulates the chasm between the expectation of motherhood—a woman's hopes, desires, and unexamined assumptions about what it might entail—and its unforeseen reality—the toll that this care work entails. For Rich, as for many women, the reality of motherhood turned out to be an experience of unimaginable anger, infuriating dependence, and overwhelming helplessness, all coexisting with unprecedented, unfathomable love. Indeed, for Rich, "it's in the enormity and inevitability of this love that the sufferings lie" (Rich 2). Rich's major contribution lies in her critique of what Meruane later called the machine: the long-term indoctrination of girls into believing that motherhood is always an empowering, enriching, and transcendent experience that fulfills some ancient, feminine purpose. This discourse denies the existence of mundane, demanding, or frustrating moments of motherhood and in turn creates a heavy silence around these moments that goes beyond mere stagnancy; it is a silence that is dynamic and strategically imposed by drowning out women's lived experiences with an upbeat cacophony of false positivity.

Rich's contribution to the field of maternal studies cannot be overstated. Its interdisciplinary approach demonstrates the interdependence of the three branches to each other, as the personal experience of motherhood is deeply entrenched in both the institution of motherhood and the subjectifying forces of maternal identity. Rich's contemporaries in other fields, such as psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow and feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, adopted a similar approach. Chodorow's foundational 1978 book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, explores motherhood as identity/subjectivity and challenges the assumptions of traditional Freudian psychoanalysis that the mother exists only as a projection of the child's desires and anxieties. Instead, Chodorow articulates the unspoken assumptions of psychoanalysis—that the family is always nuclear, that the mother is the principal caretaker of the child, that the mother-child bond is deep and uncomplicated—in order to lay bare its universalizing, patriarchal narrative. Doing so is an important step away from the mother-blame that pervades traditional psychoanalysis and a method of advancing “the sociological understanding of the organization of gender” (Chodorow 54).

Chodorow's work is part of a larger tapestry of feminist critique of traditional psychoanalysis. French philosopher Luce Irigaray similarly challenges the patriarchal origins of psychoanalysis in her 1974 monograph, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Irigaray explores how patriarchal thought defines the female body in limited terms: an imperfect or incomplete body that must be rendered useful through submission to a gender hierarchy. She argues that “the culturally, socially, economically valorized female characteristics are correlated with maternity and motherhood” (25). Her analysis goes on to describe how women's reproductive function is co-opted by a capitalist patriarchy that constantly seeks to reproduce itself. Characterized by gender envy towards women's wombs, this patriarchy must impose a strict gender hierarchy

through which to justify its control. Ultimately, this results in a gender paradox: women's bodies are useful and necessary, but women themselves are inferior. In Irigaray's words:

It seems, all the same, that one might be able to interpret the fact of being deprived of a womb as the most intolerable deprivation of man, since his contribution to gestation—his function with regard to the origin of reproduction—is hence asserted as less than evident, as open to doubt. An indecision to be attenuated both by man's "active" role in intercourse and by the fact that he will mark the product of copulation with *his own name*. Thereby woman, whose intervention in the work of engendering the child can hardly be questioned, becomes the anonymous worker, the machine in the service of a master-proprietor who will put his trademark upon the finished product. (Irigaray 23)

The mother as anonymous worker is an indispensable characteristic of Irigaray's contribution, and mirrors Chodorow's critiques of psychoanalysis as a factory of mother-blame. The logic they articulate implies that a patriarchal approach to reproduction does not perceive itself as flawed, but the body it produces may be rendered so if the anonymous worker who handles it—the mother—is deemed lacking.

Implicit in the work of both Irigaray and Chodorow is Rich's concept of institutional motherhood, specifically, Rich's contention that "the institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children" (226). Thus, both Chodorow and Irigaray effectively offer a psychoanalytic framework for the critique of motherhood as institution/ideology. Furthermore, Chodorow's argument that "women reproduce themselves through their own daily housework" (Chodorow 36) presages Judith Butler's argument two decades later that "gender always proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 34). Taken together, this suggests that motherhood is an entry point to

gender consciousness. Under this lens, *mothering* becomes the gateway to a deeper reflection of one's own complicity in, or ignorance of, *motherhood*, along with all of the other forces that condition female possibilities.

Rich alluded to this nascent consciousness in *Of Woman Born*. Musing on the negative intensity provoked by her children's needs, Rich wonders, "Perhaps one is a monster—an anti-woman—something driven and without recourse to the normal and appealing consolations of love, motherhood, joy in others..." (2). Rich's evaluation of herself as an anti-woman stems from her inability to find consistent joy in the practice, despite the institution of motherhood's implicit and explicit promises. For Rich, these promises are so beyond questioning—so self-evident and naturalized—that a woman who encounters discontent and animosity in the experience of *mothering* becomes the ontological antithesis of her gender. Lack of fulfillment in motherhood is something so inconceivable in a woman that it undoes the very notion of the same. As such, Rich offers us an ontology of female gender that reveals itself only in the moment of its presumed collapse. Woman is by nature mother, by definition good mother. When one of these categories fails, all of them do.

The existence of negative feelings and behaviors in mothers who otherwise love their children is known as maternal ambivalence, and is a well-established fact of maternal studies. The term emerges from twentieth century psychoanalysis thanks to the work of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott, both of whom acknowledged as summarily normal the conflicting emotional responses that a mother may have towards her infant child. It is from a frank and open acceptance of maternal ambivalence that Winnicott developed the notion of the "good enough mother:" a woman who is able to provide a consistent level of care for the infant such that the child is able to grow out of its early state of total dependence and gain gradual independence.

Importantly for Winnicott, the mother's work does *not* require the complete abolition of unpleasant experiences that might induce anxiety in the infant. Instead, the good-enough mother is she who is able to provide an adequate "holding" environment—defined as both literally holding the infant and generally providing a constant presence for the child's safe development. In this adequate holding environment, the infant may safely internalize the anxiety of separation from its mother and emerge as an independent subject.

Melanie Klein's work on infant-mother relationships similarly posits an ambivalent mother figure whose interpretation may range from hateful to loving, depending on her infant's psychoanalytic development. Unlike Winnicott, who considers the mother's perspective alongside the infant's, Klein focuses primarily on the infant's, postulating the mother as a projection of the child's phantasies. Here, the mother is object, external to the child and mediating the child's understanding of itself as subject, and part-object, that which the child wants to internalize, reject, or destroy. If Klein's work is understood as exploring the infant's ambivalence towards his mother, then contemporary maternal theory turns the lens back onto the assumed and invisibilized viewing subject: the mother herself. The new mother must mediate her emerging maternal psyche through the objects and part-objects around her: namely, the infant who is both other and yet integral to her own body and unconscious life. In the dynamic interpersonal relationship between two newly emerging subjects, ambivalence on both sides is inevitable.

The concept of maternal ambivalence is necessary if we are to dispel deeply entrenched patriarchal notions of what constitutes "good" mothering. While mothering and motherhood manifest differently in different regional, national, and cultural contexts, a foundational abyss separates all mothers from all corners of the globe into two patriarchal tropes: the Good Mother

and the Bad Mother. In their introduction to the anthology *Bad Mothers: Regulations, Representations, and Resistance*, authors Michelle Hughes Miller, Tamar Hager, and Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich have argued that as the Good Mother becomes increasingly defined, everything not explicitly included as a positive trait is implicitly considered negative: the Bad Mother. Such a tightly controlled definition of what passes for good mothering creates impossible expectations that in turn only generate confusion, anger, shame, and guilt in mothers.

In *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, psychiatrist Barbara Almond argues that “the way in which a mother handles her ambivalence is a measure of her capacity to recognize her child as ‘other,’” a necessary skill for the well-adjustment of both mother and child (Almond 14). Nevertheless, the emotional separation between mother and child that Almond promotes contradicts deeply rooted notions of bad mothering in a society that considers it “unwomanly not to love your children *unconditionally*” (Almond 7). This, in turn, makes navigating maternal ambivalence in a healthy manner a very difficult experience, especially for a mother reluctant to admit to needing it.

Thus far I have analyzed maternal ambivalence as a framework for understanding gender and institutional motherhood. This is the approach I apply to the novels and stories analyzed in this dissertation. However, I would be remiss if I did not mention the many scholars who have taken a practical approach to maternal ambivalence in order to argue for a more inclusive expectation of motherhood that welcomes emotional contradiction. In her 1995 book, *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*, Rozsika Parker defines maternal ambivalence as “a dynamic experience of conflict with the fluctuations felt by a mother at different times in the child’s development, and varying between different children” as well as “a crucial clash in the mind between knowledge or the desire to understand, and the aversion to

knowing and understanding” (Parker 6). This definition recenters conflict and conflict-resolution with others and oneself as an essential component of motherhood, thereby transfiguring a mother’s negative or contradictory feelings into an understanding of motherhood as a process of dynamic thinking. Under this definition, ambivalence is also its own solution: Parker goes on to argue that “the suffering of ambivalence can promote thought” (6), and the ability to think clearly and critically about the baby’s needs and one’s ability to meet them is the primary task of motherhood. Thus, Parker views maternal ambivalence as an integration of women’s intellectual and physical labor.

Other writers theorizing motherhood agree. Sara Ruddick, for example, similarly advocates for a recognition of the mother’s intellectual labor. Her book, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* argues that “maternal practice begins in a response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world” (17). Under this rubric, the mother “see[s] the fact of biological vulnerability as socially significant and as demanding of care” (18). She is the person who interprets the child’s biology and makes its continuous protection “a regular and substantial part of one’s life” (17). Mothering is a continuous act of interpretation where the text under consideration are the evolving needs of the child-other. Because mothering fundamentally consists of set actions and behaviors, Ruddick applies a practicalist framework through which to understand its challenges. She reminds us that “distinctive ways of knowing and criteria of truth arise out of practices,” and that people who engage in the practice of mothering are capable of producing rigorous abstract thought suited to the unique conditions of their labor (13). These practices then inform a maternal perspective, one wrought from the thought-full care of a child’s physically and developmentally vulnerable body. Under a practicalist framework that values the

type of thought that emerges from the practice of mothering, being a mother becomes a rigorous philosophy of being.

Given this turn towards the thinking mother, it is no surprise that philosophy is now seeing an increased interest in maternal epistemology. Seeking to expand the canon of maternal theory, Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro addresses the failure of traditional philosophy to take into account the relationship to the mother. Her book, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, critiques the origins of philosophy—the very origins of knowledge itself—as fundamentally anti-maternal. In addition to dismantling the anti-maternal misogyny that characterizes many classical texts on mothers, Muraro is interested in exploring how the invisible internalization of an anti-maternal logic can impact a woman's relation to motherhood. Muraro argues that in its appeal to a higher truth that transcends reality, which it perceives as a limitation on knowledge, philosophy establishes a binary antagonism between the realm of the flesh and the superior realm of abstract thought. The former is symbolized by the mother's body and the latter by the father's autonomous mind, recalling Irigaray's aforementioned stance regarding the mother as an anonymous worker subservient to the father as master-proprietor. Muraro critiques the false dialectic of gender emerging from anti-maternal bias that denies the mother her rightful claim to independent thinking. Institutional motherhood and traditional philosophy hold that, for the sake of her child's survival, the mother must be attached, proximal, and material. It also suggests that for a woman to be considered an autonomous thinker, she cannot participate in the fleshly duties of motherhood. Muraro argues that philosophy's myth of symbolic independence generates “a terrible symbolic disorder” wherein women's productivity is limited to the sexual, thereby ignoring women's function as producers of knowledge and relation.

Chapter Organization

My dissertation lies at this juncture where relation, gender, and knowledge collide. My goal is to explore how women produce and reproduce knowledge about motherhood, the very institution that interpellates them as subjects. The texts I have chosen use motherhood as a site of discursive identification where larger institutions are navigated, subverted, or reinforced. Specifically, I explore how women are unconsciously complicit in patriarchal motherhood, paying close attention to their unexamined expectations and the moments of negotiation that unsettle them. As such, I chose to work with texts whose primary mother figure is also the main character and/or narrator. This criterion inevitably excluded many, many worthwhile novels that pose important questions about the institution of motherhood. For example, my analysis of Pilar Quintana in chapter two does not engage with her second novel *Los abismos*, despite its vested interest in motherhood and its discontents. The novel's exclusion from this dissertation is not a reflection of the novel's merits, which are many and certainly worthy of extended discussion. Instead, its exclusion is due to the simple fact of its narrator. *Los abismos* is narrated by the mother's young daughter who does not experience her mother's postpartum depression or maternal psychosis firsthand. In her capacity as witness, the daughter-narrator is undoubtedly deeply affected by emotional turbulence of her mother, but she cannot comprehend or recount the subjectifying forces that interpellate her mother except through its secondary effects. The narrative offered in this compelling novel is therefore not of motherhood, but of girlhood: how a daughter interprets her mother's silences, absences, and dissatisfaction.

Many of the novels I considered for inclusion were ultimately left out for this same reason. Fundamentally, my project aims to analyze the mother's perspective of motherhood, not the child's. For that reason, I have chosen to not write about many other novels that explore the

topics that interest me. Nevertheless, these novels, and many others, deserve recognition in this thesis for their brilliant handling of sensitive and all too often underexplored issues related to mothers and mothering: maternal illness and senility, birth deformities, maternal loss, matrilineal citizenship, environmental justice, queerness, and many others too numerous to recount.

I begin exploring a mother's reaction to motherhood in Chapter One, which analyzes four stories from Clarice Lispector's 1960 short story collection, *Laços de Família*. These four stories have been specifically curated following the aforementioned criteria and function as examples of maternal becoming and maternal ambivalence. Their respective plots share a lingering curiosity regarding the construction of maternal identity, its possibilities, expectations, and limitations. Following Butler and Halberstam, I argue that Lispector's female protagonists experience a jarring moment of uncanny recognition that reveals the construction of female gender when they are perceived as maternal subjects. This realization is repressed, with varying degrees of success, in order to continue the maternal performance that they had previously believed to be organic. In this way, the maternal subjects initiate a process of erasure that rids them of the knowledge of a life beyond motherhood, a process that trades the revelation of their own limitations for the comfort of gendered compliance. This is best exemplified by three of the maternal subjects analyzed: Ana, the protagonist of "Amor;" the unnamed protagonist of "Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga;" and the titular hen of "Uma galinha." These protagonists experience epiphanies about their lives and choices that force them to examine their previous assumptions about the institution of motherhood. The fourth maternal subject, the titular mother of "A menor mulher do mundo" offers a counterexample of what happens when that same line of maternal questioning is projected outwards onto the patriarchal figure. I maintain that this constellation of short stories offers an early and ultimately optimistic view of maternal ambivalence. Furthermore, I argue that

for Lispector, what passes for female-gendered behavior is none other than motherhood itself. Lispector's stories are a bildungsroman of how a body becomes female by passing first through reproductive intelligibility.

Chapter Two analyzes maternal ambivalence as it intersects with race, geography, and Colombian national history in Pilar Quintana's *La perra*. Fundamentally, this chapter is invested in tracing how colonialism and mothering are imbricated in the dynamics of master/slave and mother/nature. Using Barbara Almond's notion of vampiric motherhood, I analyze how the specters of colonial extraction haunt the novel's protagonist, Damaris, and conditions her relationship to her canine daughter. Furthermore, I study how the violence of the jungle, teeming with ghosts of cruelties both past and present, subverts the expectations of motherhood consolidated by the national romances of the nineteenth century and the "novelas de la selva" popularized during the early twentieth century. *La perra* defies these two literary traditions by revealing their mutual colonial foundations. Furthermore, motherhood itself becomes a doomed act, a type of forced servitude that mimics that of Colombia's captive ancestors.

Chapter Three again studies the intersection of gender and maternity, this time by analyzing Camila Sosa Villada's *Las malas*, a narrative of a travesti mother and her foundling son. The novel meditates on the intersection of queerness, gender, and the symbolic child, as mediated by the state's institutions. Central to my argument in this chapter is Lee Edelman's notion of the binary between queerness and the symbolic child, which the state requires as a starting point for all future politics. By putting these two figures together in an impossible, unsanctioned parental relationship, the figure of the queer mother reveals more fully the ideological investments of the State: patriarchy, heterosexuality, the invisibilization and neglect of politically vulnerable populations. Furthermore, I argue that the queer conditions of the

mothering environment allow a collective consciousness to flourish, one imbued with a shared commitment across multiple individuals to protect, preserve, and nurture the individual, whether child or adult, whether queer or straight. The novel explores the gender-affirming, community-building possibilities available through queer mothering practices.

My project is precisely situated at the intersection of maternity studies and Latin American Literature, two fields that, despite recent and increasing interest, remain woefully understudied. Despite the prevalence of gender roles and a generalized understanding of gender roles and how they function, despite multiple examples from history, Latin American literature continues to be taught without a framework for thinking about the role of mothering as an institution, and how it affects women's subjectivity. By combining the psychoanalytic framework of contemporary maternal theory and the protagonism of mothers in contemporary literature written by women throughout Latin America, I hope to advance Guadalupe Nettel's call to "de-sacralize" biological motherhood. My dissertation thus bridges the divide between Latin American literary studies and maternity studies, linking them together in a productive union that is sure to bear rich fruit.

1 MATERNAL GENDER AND QUEER TIME IN CLARICE LISPECTOR'S *LAÇOS DE FAMÍLIA*

Amor de mãe era duro de suportar.

Clarice Lispector

1.1 Introduction

In Clarice Lispector's "Feliz Aniversário," a presumably normative Brazilian family gathers to celebrate the eighty-ninth birthday of their beloved matriarch. Despite the festive decorations, the party is anything but cheerful. The Dona lies forgotten at the head of an empty table, ignored by her anxious daughter and caretaker, who is overwhelmed with responsibilities; the Dona's sons are delayed by their jobs but send their hostile wives, both of whom refuse to engage with each other or anyone else; the grandchildren are unruly and misbehaved; and the oldest son—the Dona's cherished firstborn—has not lived to see his mother's landmark birthday. The growing tension in this ostensible celebration appears to dissipate with the arrival of the Dona's second-oldest son who assumes the role of ceremonial patriarch and officially begins the party. However, this brief reprieve from the tension that characterized the pre-party—composed exclusively of bitterly wronged mothers and their irritating children—ultimately fails to solidify, and animosity once again takes hold. As the performative nature of the family's gathering becomes increasingly obvious, the Dona is shaken from her silent stillness and beset by a growing contempt for those gathered around her. "Ela era a mãe de todos. E como a presilha a sufocasse, ela era a mãe de todos e, impotente à cadeira, desprezava-os" (60).

The Dona's sudden rejection of the generations of individuals she has directly or indirectly brought to life is both shocking and, in the story's logic, inevitable. The party-goer's superficial enthusiasm and performative happiness reveal a complete ignorance of the mother's

actual desires and preferences, decentering her from her own birthday celebration. By celebrating the mother exclusively, and performatively, for her reproductive primacy in their lives, and not for the individual that she is, the adult children unwittingly debase her and render her mere prop in their own lives. Given this repeated erasure of her individuality, it is hardly surprising when the Dona finally snaps and hurls insults at her children and their families, calling them a “corja de maricas, cornos e vagabundas” (62).

This process of dawning awareness and subsequent rejection of the maternal role is the primary focus of this chapter. Unlike the Dona’s adult children, who ignore the insult and smile blankly ahead, this chapter will insist on facing the mother’s discomfort directly. To do so, I focus on four stories in Clarice’s first collection of short stories, *Laços de Família*. The female protagonists in the selected stories have all marched unthinkingly toward a future that seems natural, unquestionable, biologically destined. And suddenly they awaken as if from a reverie, like the Dona in “Feliz Aniversário,” and realize the insidiously constructed conditions of the maternal role. Scholarship has long pointed to the gendered nature of Clarice’s stories, and to this field of scholarship I add that for Clarice, female subjectivity is inseparable from the maternal. To have been led for so long down a path that is perceived to be so natural that it is inevitable—and then to realize it was a choice all along. That is the revelation the maternal protagonists confront in Clarice’s stories. They are women facing their own rapidly forming consciousness, catalyzed by their previously unexamined complicity in the myth of biological destiny.

In her 2017 monograph titled *Regretting Motherhood*, Israeli sociologist Orna Donath argues that institutional motherhood is tied into notions of a woman’s biological destiny, something that “tends to be seen not only as normative but as ideal—as if there is no story to be told” (17). There is no story to be told here, the myth of motherhood assures us, everything is

exactly as it seems. This chapter is structured around the governing principle that motherhood is indeed a story to be told. In fact, there are many. Clarice Lispector's *Laços de Família* turns the apparent lack of story in motherhood on its head, making the lack—of choice, of knowledge, of consciousness—the story itself.

The maternal protagonists of these family tales discover a universalizing narrative of motherhood that astonishes, overwhelms, limits, and protects. The protagonists include a chicken who postpones death by laying an egg; a mother who experiences an existential crisis when faced with an unexpected sight on the tram; an aimless stay-at-home mother whose children are nearly grown; and a tiny woman whose tiny pregnancy upends the global community's notion of modernity. For some of the protagonists, such as Ana from "Amor" and the titular mother from "Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga," motherhood and normative time are revealed as co-conspirators who have shepherded women into a choice they did not realize they were making. For others, such as the hen from "Uma Galinha" and Pequena Flor from "A menor mulher do mundo," motherhood is a tool of protection, capable of securing, at least temporarily, an existence removed from the existential threat of mortality. Together, what these stories demonstrate is Clarice's articulation of that which is unsaid in maternal discourse: the transition from non-motherhood to motherhood as an insidiously imposed social process that "often occurs when norms are experienced as a given that does not demand any investigation or hesitation" (Donath 14). Under these conditions, a woman's experience of time is the inexorable march towards maternal becoming. Using Jack Halberstam's notion of queer time and Orna Donath's notion of regretting motherhood, I argue that, for Clarice, motherhood reveals itself as a temporal interruption, a state of being powerful enough to stop time in its tracks. In this way, the time of

Claricean motherhood is a queer time in which a woman confronts the tension between the reality of her body and the ideological construction of maternity.

1.2 Clarice Lispector: A Publishing History

Before delving further into analysis of *Laços de Família*, it is important to explain Clarice's inclusion in a dissertation grounded in contemporary literature. Clarice was born in 1920, began stunning the literary world in 1943, and passed away in 1977, years before most of the other authors studied in this dissertation were even born. So why begin with her?

The choice to include Clarice is driven by thematic importance and contemporary relevance. Thematically, her stories exemplify the processes of maternal subjectivity that this dissertation is invested in, and currently, her work is experiencing an unprecedented market popularity. It is a new wave of "Lispectormania," as one of her contemporary American translators, Katrina Dodson, has persuasively argued. Translations into English and Spanish for the Anglophone and Hispanic literary landscapes have been published with new translators, new editors and new cover designs at a steadily increasing pace since the early aughts. The most recent example of this phenomenon is the 2025 DeBolsillo edition of *Cerca del corazón salvaje*, translated into Spanish by Florencia Garramuño only five years earlier in 2020. Originally published in 1943, Clarice's first novel, the one that catapulted her into the Brazilian literary limelight, is now primed for new Spanish speaking audiences eager to reintroduce themselves to her oeuvre.

From whence this interest? Certainly, Clarice's popularity is not a new phenomenon. More than thirty years before its first translation into Spanish in the 70s, *Perto do coração selvagem* would arouse immediate and enduring interest in Brazilian literary circles. Clarice

Lispector was praised widely for her powerfully expressive prose that luxuriated in the minute details, thereby “construyendo una narrativa que privilegia los estados interiores por sobre los acontecimientos de una trama narrativa” (Garramuño 11). Countless scholars and literary critics have pointed out how her unique style and function break from narrative tradition, revealing a rupture at the heart of the creative act that allows for new and unexpected associations to form (Nunes 1966, 1973, & 1989; Peri Rossi 1988; Cixous 1990; Gotlib 1995; Garramuño 2020; Elias & Witzel 2023). Benedito Nunes, Brazilian literary critic and prominent Claricean scholar, was one of the first to associate this unique trait to broader currents in literature and philosophy. His 1966 book, *O Mundo de Clarice Lispector*, studies the ubiquitous preoccupation with ontology and existentialism in Clarice’s oeuvre through the lens of nineteenth and twentieth century European philosophy. This initial and canonical study on Clarice was expanded and republished with the title *Uma Leitura de Clarice Lispector* in 1973, and again in 1989, now heavily reworked, under the title *O Drama da Linguagem*.

With *Perto do coração selvagem*, Clarice made an indelible mark on Brazilian literature and ushered in a new literary era, wherein female subjectivity openly and unabashedly meditates on its own construction. Rather than reproducing a dialogic plot between a protagonist and their external circumstance, Clarice placed the subjectivity of her protagonist at the foreground, exploring in exquisitely minute detail not only the construction of thought and memory, as Garramuño suggests, but also of a distinctly feminine subjectivity. In this way, Clarice “da vida a objetos y situaciones mínimas...pero fundamentales en tanto narración de una vida” (Garramuño). In his introduction to Alison Entrekin’s 2012 English translation of *Near to the Wild Heart*, Benjamin Moser argues that Clarice’s prose demonstrated “the possibility of uniting a thing and its symbol, of reconnecting language to reality,” which he ascribes to “the sacred

realms of sexuality and creation” (Moser, xi). Likewise, contemporary Brazilian scholars argue that “Clarice trouxe para a luz dos holofotes, o sexo, outrora dado como defeituoso, alheio aos ambientes públicos y sociais, desordenando o que fora dito e construído a respeito do feminino” (Armelin Elias & Witzel, 11). With a reception in Brazil so immediately secured, it is no surprise that Clarice’s first novel was soon translated into Spanish for the neighboring countries of the Southern Cone. However, as Lucía Tennina points out, these early translations often reduced, modified or removed the signature strangeness of her expressions. It was not until Cristina Peri Rossi’s translation of *Lazos de familia* in 1988 that the distinctiveness of Clarice’s voice was made available to Spanish-speaking readers. Peri Rossi is credited with the first translation of Lispector’s short story collection *Laços de Família* in 1988 and *Silencio*, selected stories, in 1995. Subsequent reprints of this particular collection have maintained Peri Rossi’s original translation, such as the 2014 publication of *Lazos de Familia* by Montesinos press, though many translators have published new versions since.

Outside of Latin America, Clarice enjoyed her first translation into English in the 1960s, following the first English translation of *Near to the Wild Heart* in 1961 by Gregory Rabassa. However, this initial publication of Clarice for the American market—almost twenty after her meteoric rise to literary fame in Brazil—was overshadowed by Rabassa’s translations of the male Latin American writers that would later become known as integral components of the Boom. Though Clarice earned the American academy’s recognition, her work did not enjoy the same commercial privilege as the male writers of the Boom. Losada Soler speculates that this exclusion may have been due to a lack of Latin American exoticism, rather than gender alone: “Si leemos a Clarice Lispector aislada, podría ser una escritora norteamericana o rusa; es decir, el elemento exótico, autóctono, de un García Márquez, de un Vargas Llosa, de un Carlos Fuentes,

no existe en ella” (Losada Soler). As a result of this exclusion, widespread interest in her work remained lukewarm in the English-speaking world, and she remained virtually unheard of outside of elite academic spaces.

Clarice’s relative anonymity changed, however, with French scholar Hélène Cixous’s influential lectures to the French academy in the 1960s. Inspired by Clarice’s writing style, Cixous coined the term *l’écriture féminine*, or feminine writing, to describe a writing style that insists on women’s recognition of the significance of their own bodies. In feminine writing, the author’s “flesh speaks true,” “she lays herself bare,” and “physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body” (Cixous, 881). In so doing, feminine writing reveals its preoccupations with the mother: “there is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (881). The impact of Cixous’s writings on Clarice sent ripples through the French academy, and the first French translations of her work were published shortly thereafter in the late 1970s. These are widely credited with introducing Clarice to a European market, which in turn renewed American interest and piqued British curiosity in Clarice.

Two decades later, the 1990s saw a new wave of translations into English. Translated primarily by Giovanni Pontiero in the U.K. and by Earle Fitz and Elizabeth Lowe in the United States, these third-wave translations evinced the growing international success of Clarice’s uniquely feminine writing. Now more established in the American academy and literary circles, Clarice’s work nevertheless remained synonymous with cultural elitism, nowhere near the widespread fame that has made her a household name in Brazil. This changed in the late aughts, when Benjamin Moser published in 2009 a comprehensive biography and study of Clarice’s life and work. Titled *Why This World*, the biography ignited a fourth wave of “Lispectormania,” as American translator Katrina Dodson puts it. Originally published in English, Moser’s biography

was quickly translated and sold in Brazil then Argentina, where it spurred new translations of her work for the twenty-first century.

What makes the fourth wave distinct from the others is its exhaustive catalog and global scale. The American-led “Lispectormania” has catalyzed global translations of Clarice’s works in the last fifteen years. Beyond translations of individual works, which had already circulated internationally in previous waves, the contemporary publishing spree of Lispector in English also aspired to produce, for the first time in any market, a complete anthology of Clarice’s short stories, as well as definitive translations of Clarice’s children’s books, which had previously been largely ignored in both English and Spanish language markets. The 2015 publication of Katrina Dodson’s comprehensive anthology of Clarice’s *Complete Stories* was quickly followed by the Brazilian edition of the same. *Todos os Contos* (2016) was sold with the same cover design and image as the English translation, hoping to replicate its international success in the domestic literary market. Two years later, in 2018, the first complete anthology of Clarice’s short stories was also published in Argentina, thanks to Elena Losada Soler’s translation.

Though the translation frenzy has been consistent across linguistic markets, its effects in Latin America have yielded different products. In Brazil, where Clarice has enjoyed an enduring fame since her first publication in 1943, new editions of her work do not inspire the same degree of revelation as in other countries. Instead, these translations have been accompanied by a flurry of original non-fiction exploring Clarice’s public and private life. An example is 2018’s *O Rio de Clarice: Passeio Afetivo pela Cidade*, an exploration of Clarice’s favorite spots in the city, written by Brazilian scholar Teresa Montero. Montero is also credited with a wealth of publications on Clarice, in part due to the 2020 centennial celebration of her birth. These include a collection of all of her letters in 2020 (*Todas as Cartas*) and a new, definitive biography in

2021 (*À Procura da Própria Coisa: Uma Biografia de Clarice Lispector*). The latter biography expanded on Montero's earlier biography in 1999, titled *Eu Sou uma Pergunta*, which coincides with what Dodson would call the third wave of Lispectormania in the 90s.

In Spanish-speaking markets, the fourth wave has been swelling since the early aughts. Elena Losada Soler, a professor of Spanish & Portuguese at the Universitat de Barcelona, is largely responsible for the Hispanic world's sustained interest in Clarice. Though Peri Rossi was the first to introduce Spain and Latin America to Clarice in the 80s, Losada Soler has continued and expanded that effort. Since 2002, Losada Soler has steadily translated the majority of Clarice's oeuvre in both Spain and Argentina through the publishing houses Siruela and Cuenco del Plata, respectively. New editions of Losada Soler's translations continue to be published, including a newly redesigned Siruela edition of *Cerca del corazón salvaje* in 2025. This edition is accompanied by Florencia Garramuño's translation of the same novel in 2020, oriented towards a specifically Latin American market.

This timeline demonstrates the recursive nature of Clarice's fame at an international scale by generations of readers that constantly rediscover her. Clarice is not a revelation to Brazilians, nor is she unknown to elite academic circles where she has been studied by various disciplines, including literary criticism, feminist studies, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. However, this fourth wave of "Lispectormania" is marked by a pronounced *commercial* success that Clarice had not previously enjoyed in the Hispanic or Anglophone market. Her work is just as relevant today than it was in its original date of publication. This is certainly the case for non-Lusophone readers, many of whom have only just been swept away by the tide of her prose for the first time.

While this dissertation doesn't claim to dissect the demographics of the international literary market, it is interested in exploring what themes are gaining, or regaining, prominence in the current landscape of Latin American literature. What about Clarice's stories has made her stories so appealing as consumer objects? Cixous would argue that the contemporary world's return to Clarice is a key characteristic feminine writing, which orchestrates "an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (886). It is a "returning, arriving over and again, because the unconscious is impregnable" (877). Clarice's relatively recent breakthrough success reveals a larger trend toward cultural and literary representations of female gender that explores its imbrication with maternal becoming.

Studying Clarice through the lens of the maternal is not new, as Cixous's argument demonstrates. Many other scholars have noted the various aspects of maternity and birth that appear throughout Clarice's oeuvre (Williams, 2006). What this chapter attempts to uncover is the contemporary social institutions structuring the revived interest. Like the adage of the chicken and the egg, it is impossible to say whether the Latin American literary trend toward maternal representations came first, or whether interest in Clarice Lispector did. What is clear is that they have unfolded at the same time, subtly linked in curious symmetry. Their global rise as matters of international literary and social interest indicates a marked interest in women's writing that uncovers and questions the maternal.

1.3 *O Estado De Galinha*: Maternity as Gender In "Uma Galinha"

The short story "Uma Galinha," also included in *Laços de Família*, exemplifies, via the figure of a fugitive chicken-turned-hen, Lispector's tendency to construct female identity as

coterminous with maternity. A feminist analysis of her texts must resist the urge to interpret this equivalence in Lispector's works as a discursive limitation. Instead, one must consider the imaginative potential inherent to the naturalized construction of woman-as-mother. How is the woman-as-mother interpellated? How does she enter into relation with the space and time that mold her?

Consider the chicken-turned-hen of Lispector's "Uma Galinha." A chicken anticipating her imminent death on the butcher's block makes a wild dash for freedom. She escapes the kitchen, where she had been confined, and scurries across the patio and rooftops before finally being cornered by the family. Out of fear and exhaustion, the chicken lays an egg, at which point she is interpellated as a mother and consequently earns the respect and love of the family that would eat her. This manifestation of reproductive ability is the condition for the chicken's ultimate freedom: the family decides to spare her life, deciding instead to take her in as a pet.

The narrative arc of "Uma galinha" in which a chicken's life becomes valuable through a display of successful reproductive function is theoretically rooted in a feminist critique of the institution of motherhood. Contemporary queer theory, following second-wave French feminism, posits that what is commonly understood as "woman" is a social phenomenon predicated on the division of labor in a heterosexual society. Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949) and Monique Wittig's equally monumental assertion that "lesbians are not women" (1978) stem from an understanding of gender not constituted by anatomy but by social conditions of gendered domination. Judith Butler's writing on gender and performativity takes this assertion and applies to it a constructivist lens. According to Butler, a subject "is itself produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations" (Butler 7) which, if one follows the logic closely, necessarily means that the gendered subject reproduces the

expectations of gender to which it was subjected. In this way, “the girl is ‘girled,’ brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender” (Butler 7).

While there are no universal criteria of what specific practices and behaviors constitute the process of being “girled,” there nevertheless exist some general assumptions. In her article, “Mujer y maternidad: la falacia del espacio privado,” G. Raquel Pina argues that at the heart of the process of being “girled” is the patriarchal myth of the perfect man. “Este ‘hombre perfecto’ se convierte en un significante vacío...Lo que es importante es que el lugar simbólico existe y está allí para ser ocupado: el lugar del hombre que será el padre y que hará de la mujer una madre” [This ‘perfect man’ becomes an empty signifier (Lacan). What matters is that the symbolic place exists and it is there to be occupied: the man’s place is to be the father that makes the woman a mother.”] (Pina, 309). In “Uma Galinha,” this perfect patriarchal man is “o homem da casa” (“the man of the house” [Lispector, 127]) who grants patriarchal validation to the chicken’s maternal subjectivity. Though the whole family witnesses the chicken lay the egg, it is the father who first recognizes the change in the chicken’s identity and declares it to the family. He even laments having chased the chicken across the patio and through the house before she laid the egg: “E dizer que a obriguei a correr naquele estado!” (“And to think I made her run in that condition!” [Lispector, 128]). Due to his patriarchal interpellation of the chicken as hen, and thus as mother, the animal becomes intelligible within the patriarchal value system that taxonomizes reproductive and nonreproductive bodies. Thus, the chicken is “girled.”

However, this process of becoming “girled” is unique to the social conditions under which it takes place. The eponymous chicken of Lispector’s story is interpellated as a mother due to the upper middle-class values that characterized Brazilian domestic sensibility in the midcentury. According to Monica Bülow, this was a time in which family life “era muito

dominada por um ponto de vista patriarcal, que fazia com que as famílias vivessem em ideais matrimoniais que dizem que o lugar da esposa é dentro do lar, cuidando da casa e dos filhos” [“was dominated by a patriarchal point of view, which made families live by matrimonial ideals that held that the wife’s place was in the home, taking care of the house and children”] (Bülow, 5). In this context, it is not surprising that the chicken’s interpellation as mother is accompanied by her integration into the domestic space of the family. As Bülow reminds us, the time and space of the home is fundamental in the construction of normative womanhood, which is inextricable from motherhood. If we return to Butler’s neologism, we start to see that in Lispector’s stories, the idea of being “girl” anticipates a future in which the female subject “grows up” to become wife-and-mother. The notion of “womanhood” is merely the name of a spatiotemporal process by which a nonreproductive female subject (“girl”) becomes reproductive (“wife-and-mother”). This process explains why more often than not, a woman’s performance of gender is not considered complete until she fulfills her reproductive potential and bears a child. The female subject is always already “girl,” but her reproductive success can make her *more* of a woman. The converse is true: women who are not mothers, or who are not good enough mother figures, are understood to be *less*. Female gender can therefore be understood as amplified by its proximity to mothering. Indeed, many of Lispector’s female protagonists, including G.H. from *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* and Lóri from *Uma Aprendizagem Ou O Livro Dos Prazeres*, define themselves in relation to mothering, despite not being mothers themselves. Though motherhood and female gender are not naturally inextricable, motherhood is nevertheless naturalized as a structuring element in the heteronormative performance of womanhood.

The chicken in “Uma Galinha” exemplifies this process best, as her incorporation into the fold of domestic motherhood is predicated on a recognition of her gender. In an article titled “Ser galinha. Ou: o estado de galinha em Clarice Lispector,” Davi Pimentel argues that the figure of the chicken, a recurring metaphor in Lispector’s literary corpus, symbolizes a state in which the female characters are “alheados da realidade que os oprimiria ou mataria caso rompessem com a sua idealização de mundo, de casamento e de relação com o outro” (“alienated from a reality that would oppress or kill them if they were to break free from their idealization of the world, of marriage, and of their relationship with the other” [Pimentel, 52]). For Pimentel, this primitive state of fear and alienation can only be circumvented by the metaphoric “birth” of discursivity: either the frightened chicken gives birth to the egg and therefore enters the fold of discursive recognition, or it remains unintelligible to the world and to itself. Pimentel’s argument is intriguing and convincing in relation to Lispector’s writing style and her female characters who are also writers, but it does not consider motherhood in its formulation of the chicken state. Because it conceptualizes the state of being a chicken as a choice to not engage with the world, it does not properly account for the experience of mother characters who are alienated from the world due to their direct engagement with the patriarchal mandate to mother. In other words, Pimentel does not consider how the chicken state could be a symbol of the alienation a woman feels as a result of responding to the expectations of motherhood in a patriarchal world. As “Uma Galinha” demonstrates, the institution of motherhood animates a woman’s subjectivity in patriarchal society: being a mother is the condition of possibility for her legibility as a normative adult woman. However, this transformation in subjectivity simultaneously inscribes her to a limited domestic existence in which she has no future beyond her reproductive function. The

logic is clear: women who are not mothers are always already in a chicken state, alienated from themselves and of little societal value. Mother hens, however, are worth keeping around.

But what happens when the mother who has escaped the chicken state relapses? The life cycle of Lispector's chicken provokes inquiry regarding the time of motherhood and the spatiotemporal conditions under which motherhood ceases to be valuable in a patriarchal society. The chicken's interpellation as mother is instantaneous and relatively long-lasting, but it ultimately does not prevent her from being killed and eaten. This begs the questions: if a woman can become a mother, can a mother become a woman? If so, at what time? I found J. Halberstam's notion of queer time helpful in considering these questions, as it deconstructs the role of reproductive heterosexuality in the perception of time. Halberstam, reading David Harvey's work on postmodernism, explains that time is commonly perceived as a linear progression from birth, sexual maturation, reproduction, and death. However, this timeline relies on the assumption of heterosexuality as a structuring element and therefore fails to account for the temporal perception of non-heterosexual, non-reproductive, or post-reproductive individuals. According to Halberstam, queer time functions "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" and imagines a life "unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (Halberstam 2). Though Lispector's mother characters are explicitly heterosexual and largely defined by their relationship to the family, they become queer subjects when, like the chicken at the end of the story, they lose their intelligibility as mothers and are consumed by the very family that once imbued their existence with meaning. Thus, the otherwise hegemonic perspective of the heterosexual wife-and-mother can be understood through the lens of queer time at the moment in which the value assigned to the reproductive female body collapses. The framework of queer time will serve as an entrance point to my

analysis of Lispector's stories, wherein mother-protagonists are unexpectedly ushered into queer time and subsequently abstracted from their gendered existence. Their sudden transcendence from the time of maternal identity allows them to glimpse, if only briefly, the matrix of gendered time that materializes their bodies as mothers.

It would be remiss, however, to argue that theory alone is enough to explain the compelling, deeply touching nature of Lispector's stories. On the contrary, reducing her prose to mere discourse does not convey the powerfully atmospheric quality of the work in question. Her stories are powerful precisely because they do not name or accuse; each character experiences as if for the first time the temporal nuance of their gender identity and entangled motherhood with curiosity, awe, and fear. They do not seek to vilify or condemn the patriarchal mandate which would pressure them to seek a limited domesticity. In fact, more often than not, the female protagonist returns, relieved, to heteronormative motherhood after her brief unmooring from gendered time. Her re-entry into the maternal matrix reveals a fear of freedom: a freedom from reproductive gender that threatens to destabilize the foundation of her life.

1.4 Maternal Gender, Time, And Space In "Amor"

A similar crisis of time, space, and maternal death confronts Ana, the protagonist of Lispector's "Amor." A stay-at-home mother content with her structured, tidy existence, Ana diligently organizes her time to avoid ever lapsing into the temporal nothingness of not being needed. This is easily avoided while her husband and children are at home and occupying her attention, but the hours of their absence must be filled with domestic tasks to stave off a looming, undefined crisis. One day as she commutes home from the grocery store, Ana is startled to see a blind man chewing gum. The unexpected combination of an innocuous action performed in a

sightless context upends her strictly ordered perspective on the world around her. In a terrified daze, Ana awakens to an overwhelming reality full of violent, riotous life that she had previously not been able to see. Like the narrator of “Devaneio,” Ana’s experience of maternal temporality and its interruption is entangled in a growing understanding of herself free from prescriptive notions of motherhood and domesticity. Her awakening takes her to the Botanical Garden where she senses the fullness of life all around her in a dizzying crescendo. Sometime later, she returns home, still dazed, where her interactions with her son and family slowly lull her back into the comforting slumber of maternal domesticity.

It’s important to note here the role of the senses in Ana’s experience. As one of the primary senses through which human beings interact with the world, sight is a classic metaphor for the perception of truth. Plato relies on sight to develop his famous allegory of the cave, wherein not seeing the chains bolting them to the wall is the source of the prisoners’ ignorance. However, in Plato’s imagined scenario, not seeing also signifies the prisoners’ conformity to the cave, to which they choose to return after turning away from direct light. In other words, the choice to not see represents a willful ignorance, one in which the participant chooses the comfort of a known fate, their shackles, over a fearful freedom in an unknown world. For Ana, the blind man on his own does not signify a shock, since blindness is the condition of the allegorical cave within which she assumes he exists. However, the fact that he is chewing gum is shocking because it reveals to her a possibility of truth that she was formerly unable to perceive in the darkness of her own cave: a sensory perception of truth. The blind man does not see reality; he savors it. Up until this point, Ana had been content limiting her existence to the fragile meaning she could assign to her duties as wife-and-mother. According to Pimentel, Ana prefers “ter a verdade, ou a suposta ideia que se tem dela, e sua pretensa solidez a ter uma vida sempre

assombrada pela incerteza das coisas e dos estados humanos suscetíveis ao erro” (“to have the truth, or a supposed idea that it can be had, and its pretend solidity than to have a life always haunted by the uncertainty of things and human states susceptible to error” [Pimentel, 53]). The realization that she has accepted a false truth of maternal fulfillment and unknowingly exiled herself from a world she can savor and into the familiar, unsatisfying role of wife-and-mother is the impetus for her changed perception of reality.

To illustrate this notion of a safe, though fragile, truth, Lispector once again recurs to the motif of eggs. As elsewhere in Lispector’s corpus, eggs symbolize Ana’s gendered condition as woman and mother, which, as Lispector demonstrates throughout her collection of short stories, are one and the same thing in a heterosexual and heteropatriarchal society. Like the chicken-turned-hen in “Uma Galinha” who transcends death due to the cultural reverence surrounding the maternal function, so too does Ana achieve safety and social value via her identity as a mother. Unlike the chicken, however, Ana’s eggs break: they are launched from Ana’s hands and onto the floor when the tram she is traveling on lurches forward. In that moment of rupture, everything stops: the tram halts, the passengers stare, and Ana freezes in place. The only movement is the dripping of egg yolks onto the floor. Indeed, like the eggs, Ana tumbles from the stability of her existence, and the previously bounded, clearly defined truth she had cultivated for herself unexpectedly breaks open and gushes forth into the world. Without the protective shell of her egg-truth, Ana can perceive just how much she has relied on it for her own existence:

Ela apaziguara tão bem a vida, cuidara tanto para que esta não explodisse. Mantinha tudo em serena compreensão, separava uma pessoa das outras, as roupas eram claramente feitas para serem usadas e podia-se escolher pelo jornal o filme da noite – tudo feito de

modo a que um dia se seguisse ao outro. E um cego mascando goma despedaçava tudo isso.

She had pacified life so well, taken such care for it not to explode. She had kept it all in serene comprehension, separated each person from the rest, clothes were clearly meant to be worn and you could choose the evening movie from the newspaper—everything wrought in such a way that one day followed another. And a blind man chewing gum was shattering it all to pieces. (Lispector, 119)

Pimentel notes that these broken eggs mark a “*drástica mudança* temporal, espacial, discursiva e de estado” (“*drastic change* in a temporal, spatial, discursive state of being” [Pimentel, 55]). To use Butler’s term again, this is the moment in which Ana becomes aware that she has been “girled,” and thus marks the shift from the before of maternal time to the after of independent subjectivity. By independent subjectivity, I mean a claim to selfhood that is not tied to the mutual construction of gender and maternity. Overwhelmed, Ana has the uncanny realization that she has used the societal mandate of maternity to construct a domestic order for herself that allows her to overcome reality instead of existing fully within it. Her protection, represented by the unbroken egg, is temporal and domestic: it is the illusion of the flow of time in the home. She measures her days by the completion of a series of small acts, such as the sorting of laundry and the election of a nightly film, to affirm her identity and assert control over and against nature. However, when the egg of this comforting illusion breaks, what seems like a natural order of domestic temporality is instead revealed to be a concentrated effort to tame—quite literally domesticate—the seemingly impossible project of constructing subjectivity not tied to the institution of motherhood.

Furthermore, Ana's sudden awareness of her domestic shackles is made all the more unsettling by the revelation of her unconscious participation in her own confinement. In this revelation of a repressed truth, we find a clear line that traces back to Freud's notion of the uncanny. It is useful to refer to the original German here, as Freud's elaboration of the phenomenon relies on the semantic use of the word *heimlich*. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the word *heimlich* is an adjective that describes both that which is familiar and domestic and that which is concealed. Its opposite, *unheimlich*, serves as antonym to both definitions without contradicting either. The word *unheimlich* thus refers to "nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 241). Furthermore, Freud reminds us that the uncanny is a repression that recurs regardless of "whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some other affect" (Freud 241). Thus, the uncanny is always already temporally marked as a past truth that interrupts the present time. That interruption of time is fundamental to the creation of an uncanny atmosphere, regardless of the nature of the repressed truth that has come to light. For Ana, both the repressed truth of a preternatural temporal order and the queer time of non-maternity it heralds contribute to the experience of the uncanny.

However, unlike the narrator of "Devaneio," Ana does not experience the queer time of motherhood as a temporal abyss of maternal obsolescence. Instead, she grapples with quite a different problem: she feels dangerously drawn to the violence and compassion of the world outside of her maternal identity. Following her observation of the blind man, Ana begins to perceive the world around her as brutally free. Through this newfound gaze, the most mundane events—a couple holding hands, a woman shoving her son—become moments of savage

compassion in which “seu coração se enchera com a pior vontade de viver” (“her heart had filled with the worst desire to live” [Lispector 123]). In this declaration, Ana juxtaposes her life as wife-and-mother to the overwhelming life she perceives around her. Clearly, the domestic order in which she has confined herself is what keeps her from the life she now wants to join. The strict, partitioned order of the home is revealed to be a temporality organized around a living death.

The temporal element of Ana’s revelation is most clearly displayed in the Botanical Garden, where Ana exits the tram, and where blossoming beauty intermingles with death and decay. Here, various lives coexist in seemingly contradictory ways and times: it is a place where “vitórias-régias boiavam monstruosas,” (“giant water lilies floated monstrous”), where “o mundo era tão rico que apodrecia,” (“the world was so rich it was rotting”) and where “a decomposição era profunda, perfumada” (“the decomposition was deep, perfumed” [Lispector, 121]). Nothing in the Garden obeys any rule of organized temporal division; on the contrary, life and decay overlap in beautiful, grotesque, sensuous intensity. The Garden represents for Ana a primal, original existence, where the natural entropy of the world reestablishes itself. It is the Biblical Paradise of divine creation where all things are made in the image of God, a garden “tão bonito que [Ana] teve medo do Inferno” (“so pretty that [Ana] was afraid of Hell” [Lispector 121]). As such, the Garden stands in stark opposition to the home, where Ana’s desire for temporal control asserts itself as a destructive impulse to annihilate the unknown potential of non-familial life. Upon remembering her children, Ana exiles herself from the Garden and into the domestic sphere of the home. However, her experience of the Garden lingers: her physical presence back in the home does not immediately signify an assimilation to domestic motherhood. Her return home after the uncanny revelation of her tidy existence means encountering a domestic space

that is suddenly ominous, inhospitable, and virtually unrecognizable. She notices for the first time that her kitchen is replete with life and movement that exist, to her dread, despite of her efforts at control:

O pequeno horror da poeira ligando em fios a parte inferior do fogão, onde descobriu a pequena aranha. Carregando a jarra para mudar a água – havia o horror da flor se entregando lânguida e asquerosa às suas mãos. O mesmo trabalho secreto se fazia ali na cozinha. Perto da lata de lixo, esmagou com o pé a formiga. O pequeno assassinato da formiga. O mínimo corpo tremia. As gotas d'água caíam na água parada do tanque. Os besouros de verão. O horror dos besouros inexpressivos. Ao redor havia uma vida silenciosa, lenta, insistente. Horror, horror.

The little horror of the dust threading together the underside of the oven, where she discovered the little spider. Carrying the vase to change its water—there was the horror of the flower surrendering languid and sickening to her hands. Near the trash can, she crushed the ant with her foot. The little murder of the ant. The tiny body trembled. The water droplets were dripping into the stagnant water in the laundry sink. The summer beetles. The horror of the inexpressive beetles. All around was a silent, slow, persistent life. Horror, horror. (Lispector ,124)

As in the Garden, the persistence of life renews the paralyzing experience of the uncanny. It is unclear if Ana experiences horror because she uncovers the hidden but omnipresent disorder that is always already compromising the integrity of her hermetically sealed home, or because she confronts for the first time her own capacity for active violence in the casual, unthinking murder of an ant, or because life continues in the face of her violence, undaunted and indifferent.

Regardless, all three are tinged with the acknowledgment of a simultaneity of time that queers her experience of motherhood and renders her incapable of reclaiming maternal subjectivity.

Ana further queers time by inverting the maternal function in a significant interaction with her son. She wraps him in a desperate embrace and says, “a vida é horrível [...] tenho medo” (“Life is horrible [...] I’m scared”). Ana ends their embrace telling him, “Não deixe mamãe te esquecer” (“Don’t let Mama forget you” [Lispector 123]). This interaction is significant for several reasons. It reveals to her child that the domestic order the family has thus far enjoyed is now under threat by an unknown external agent. It also implies that Ana exists outside of her identity as mother, and, furthermore, that her non-maternal identity might negatively intervene in the fulfillment of her maternal duty. However, perhaps the most daunting consequence of this interaction is the displacement of maternal care onto her son, who is discursively recast as the guarantor of Ana’s domestic submission. Her child rejects this role and escapes from his mother’s arms. The hard look with which he regards his mother transforms him into the representative of heteropatriarchal society’s loathing of non-maternal women. In a totalizing heterosexual society where women are lauded for paring their existence down to the maternal instinct, Ana’s implicit threat of abnegating motherhood is a profoundly subversive taboo. It is the taboo of the selfish mother. “Institutionalized motherhood,” as Adrienne Rich writes, “demands of women...selflessness instead of self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (Rich 25). The mother who dares to have a self, who dares to exist unfettered from the confines of her children’s existence, is perceived as a loathsome aberration.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Ana is absolved of her son’s loathing by her husband whose seemingly benevolent gesture of practiced conformity restores the maternal order of Ana’s existence: “Num gesto que não era seu, mas que pareceu natural, segurou a mão da mulher,

levando-a consigo sem olhar para trás, afastando-a do perigo de viver” (“In a gesture that wasn’t his, but that seemed natural, he held his wife’s hand, taking her along without looking back, removing her from the danger of living” [Lispector 126]). His successful reintegration of Ana into the safety of domesticity, symbolized by the space of the heterosexual marriage bed to which he leads, retroactively characterizes Ana’s interaction with her son as a plea for patriarchal imposition. The destabilizing freedom inaugurated by the blind man chewing gum threatened Ana’s commitment to motherhood so deeply that she sought the patriarchal dominion that would eliminate the paralysis of choice and restore her to normative motherhood. It’s important to note that Ana willingly submits to this reentry into the domestic order. Like the prisoners in Plato’s allegory, she rejects the harsh light of the external world and gratefully returns to the safety of her domestic cave.

Given the self-doubt and questioning that Ana experiences, and the cruelty and loathing she perceives around her, is her choice to be subsumed within motherhood the act of love promised in the story’s title? Pimentel proposes an interpretation of love in Lispector’s work that renders Ana’s performance of motherhood a refusal of love. He writes:

Mas, se o amor é uma total perda de si e uma entrega quase sacrificial ao outro, esse amor somente pode ser experienciado na realidade do mundo, e não em sua projeção mais asséptica. Nessa perspectiva, Ana não abdica simplesmente da realidade do mundo, a personagem abdica, na verdade, do amor presente no mundo. (Pimentel, 56)

However, if love is a total loss of the self and an almost sacrificial surrender to the other, that love can only be experienced in the reality of the world, not in its most aseptic

projection. From this perspective, Ana does not simply abdicate the reality of the world, the character abdicates, in truth, the love present in the world.

This reading of love in the story is implicitly based on Lacan's notion of love. Rogério de Casto Ângelo explains in his reading of Lispector's stories that love, according to Lacan, is something that is offered to the other as a welcome, though unnecessary supplement to their life. This elective offering of love "de alguma maneira supre uma coisa que está sempre presente no ser humano: a falta" ("in some way stands in for the thing that is always present in the human being: a lack" [Ângelo, 84]). However, if we accept the premise that love is giving what one does not have, then Ana's surrender to the fold of maternal domesticity does in fact constitute an act of love. Contrary to Pimentel's argument, Ana does not abdicate love. Instead, she sacrifices the self she could become in the external world and offers the resulting lack of subjectivity to her family in the form of dutiful motherhood. Under this rubric, motherhood becomes an emptied potential of *becoming* that is offered to the family as a gift of love.

Of course, it remains unclear, as Pimentel well points out, whether refusing to exist in the external world due to fear constitutes an act of familial love or an act of self-love. Ana's choice of domestic motherhood at the end of the story begs the question: is being an agent in one's own self-effacement better than cultivating an independent subjectivity constantly subjected to the risks of an aleatory world? The ambiguity of Ana's choice demonstrates just how fragile the domestic mandate of motherhood is, and how the radical denaturalization of motherhood is not undone by her restitution in the domestic space of the home.

1.5 Post-Reproductive Gender In “Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga”

Such is the case in “Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga.” Translated by Katrina Dodson as “Daydream and Drunkenness of a Young Lady,” it recounts the story of a young mother who, during the few days her sons are away visiting their aunt, relinquishes all domestic responsibility and stays in her room to daydream. She refuses to be the wife-and-mother her husband expects her to be, which she understands as just more work: cooking, cleaning, performing sexual favors. Sometime later, she accompanies her husband to a business dinner where she gets increasingly drunk. The boozy haze of her daydreams is cut short by another diner, a woman in an elegant hat whose performance of womanhood the narrator internally criticizes. However, once the harshness of the protagonist’s drunkenness fades, she is left to contemplate the heavy and peculiar sadness she experiences in her quotidian life. The story ends with the unnamed mother at home, settling into an uneasy and unsatisfying domestic existence.

The signature characteristic of the protagonist is her impatient anticipation for nothing in particular. Her experience of time is carried on the current of her daydreams, all of which maintain the stasis of her life at home even while offering a welcome distraction from it. Her fantasies about unexpected visits (Lispector 106), a future love (107), and a romantic sickness (107) are ways to populate the impatience she feels with imagined events that could retroactively qualify her empty anticipation and quell her desire for novelty. All three fantasies are appealing because they transport her outside of her present time, into a parallel time that is also circumscribed by the walls of her imagined home. In other words, they promise an interruption in time that nevertheless reinscribes her domesticity. Her daydreams thus problematize the fantasy of maternal domestic fulfillment. If, as Halberstam posits, reproductive heterosexuality structures the illusion of progressive time wherein one event follows the other in a neat sequence

that becomes the future, then the young woman's fantasies of a parallel future that never comes to pass reveal the *lack* of futurity she experiences as a woman and mother. In no fantasy does the visitor, lover, or sickness affect her placement inside the home. They are all imagined as entering the domestic space alongside her; she does not imagine leaving it. Here we begin to see the convergence of maternity, time, and space: by staying indoors, even in her fantasies, the young woman delimits the spatial dimensions of her experience of time.

Frustrated with the gendered lifestyle in which she is entrenched and yet unable to envision an alternative, the protagonist conveys her unconscious dissatisfaction with the construction of woman-as-mother. With the children's absence, the home is not the site of maternal labor it usually is. Like the chicken in "Uma Galinha," the protagonist of "Devaneio" experiences maternity as that which suffuses her performance of gender with power, agency, and respect. However, her identity as a woman and mother is void during the time that her family does not require her mothering. Deprived of this maternal significance, the narrator's childless home becomes the locus of a maternal obsolescence. Left with nothing but comforting fantasies to occupy her mind, the narrator daydreams as a strategy to avoid staring into the abyss of a life stage not imagined in normative time: post-reproductive maternity. In this interruption of the maternal function, populated by fanciful thinking, both reader and narrator understand that even the most successful performance of maternal womanhood will inevitably be rendered obsolete.

This unconscious comprehension may be responsible for the protagonist's contradictory reaction towards the diner she spies during a business dinner with her husband and his client. The unknown diner—elegant, fashionable, and apparently childless—becomes the object of the narrator's jealous criticism:

Logo d'entrada percebera-a sentada a uma mesa com seu homem, toda cheia dos chapéus e d'ornatos, loira como um escudo falso, toda santarrona e fina – que rico chapéu que tinha! – vai ver que nem casada era, e a ostentar aquele ar de santa. E com seu rico chapéu bem posto. Pois que bem lhe aproveitasse a beatice! e que se não lhe entornasse a fidalguia na sopa! As mais santazitas eram as que mais cheias estavam de patifaria. E o criado de mesa, o grande parvo, a servi-la cheio das atenções, o finório: e o homem amarelo que a acompanhava a fazer vistas grossas. E a santarrona toda vaidosa de seu chapéu, toda modesta de sua cinturita fina, vai ver que não era capaz de parir-lhe, ao seu homem, um filho.

Right when [the diner] entered [the protagonist] noticed her sitting at a table with her man, all full of hats and ostentation, blonde like a false coin, all saintly and posh—what a fancy hat she had! —bet she wasn't even married, and flaunting that saintly attitude. And with her fancy hat placed just so. Well let her make the most of that sanctimony! and she'd better not make a mess of that nobility. The most little goody two-shoes were the most depraved. And the waiter, that big dolt, serving her so attentively, the rascal: and the sallow man with her turning a blind eye to it. And that oh-so-holy saint all proud of her hat, all modest with her dainty little waist, bet she couldn't even give him, her man, a son. (Lispector 111)

The free indirect style of narration draws readers into the narrator's internal tirade as co-conspirators who implicitly share her point of view. Her tirade demonstrates the narrator's understanding of female gender as (1) coterminous with the institution of motherhood and (2) temporally attached to heterosexual reproduction. While these two are related experiences, they

are nevertheless distinct. In the first, the institution of motherhood is that which buttresses the performance of female gender, even when a woman is not a mother. The latter concept, on the other hand, introduces a gendered temporality of “natural” reproduction. With heteronormativity as its invisible basis, the “natural” reproduction of bodies results in gendered subjects who are continuously subjected to gender (Butler 1993).

The narrator’s above tirade reflects a robust, if unconscious, understanding of the entangled nature of female gender and motherhood. The diner is accused of being ostentatiously adorned and putting on airs. Her fashionable appearance, flashy jewelry, and stylish hat are interpreted by the narrator as evidence of latent deceit. The legitimacy of her blonde hair is questioned, likened to a false crest whose purpose is primarily decorative and boastful. This appearance presumably functions in service of reproductive heterosexuality insofar as it broadcasts the diner’s favorable sexual advantages to an audience of potential mates. However, the narrator’s scorn implies that something about this otherwise innocuous display of femininity betrays the reproductive values it pretends to uphold. One obvious source of the narrator’s discomfort is the diner’s slim figure. The narrator understands the diner’s slenderness as evidence of her diminished reproductive potential, a physical quality that casts doubts on the diner’s ability to bear children. According to the narrator’s maternal logic, the perception of reduced reproductive potentiality is a fundamental flaw in her otherwise confident performance of femininity. As a mother, the narrator has already fulfilled her reproductive potential and therefore feels morally and socially superior to the younger woman. Indeed, her appropriate marriage and motherhood is a point of pride, as it guarantees that she is “*protegida por uma situação, protegida como toda a gente que atingiu uma posição na vida*” (“protected by a situation, protected like everyone who had attained a position in life” [Lispector 110]). However,

the narrator's scornful tone also reveals a deep sense of envy. On some level, she admires the diner's example of non-reproductive, non-maternal womanhood: here is a woman who has not had and possibly will never have children, someone who has not had to perform the reproductive labor that instantiates a felicitous woman within a heterosexual society. And here is the same woman reaping the benefits of felicitous womanhood. To the narrator, the diner represents an example of womanhood that is discontinuous from what she understands to be true. In so doing, the diner presents an alternative temporality of female gender that threatens the stability of the narrator's temporal gender identity.

Queer time is a necessary interjection here. If the narrator's previous assumptions about the potentiality of motherhood as a fundamental determinant of gender are carried to their logical conclusion, then what becomes of a woman who has already realized her reproductive potential? The loss of reproductive potential, or as in the case of the narrator, the satisfaction of that potential via the subject's shift into motherhood, is tantamount to a living death, an eternal present in which the subject is increasingly alienated from their gender identity. The awareness of her lack of futurity dawns on her as an increasing awareness of the dimensions of her body, which seems to grow throughout the story, dominating the setting. This awareness, which begins in the restaurant, culminates upon her return home, whereupon everything becomes flesh:

E, como entrefechara os olhos toldados, tudo ficou de carne, o pé da cama de carne, a janela de carne, na cadeira o fato de carne que o marido jogara, e tudo quase doía. E ela cada vez maior, vacilante, túmida, gigantesca.

And, since she'd half-closed her bleary eyes, everything became flesh once more, the foot of the bed made of flesh, the window made of flesh, the suit made of flesh her husband

had tossed on the chair, and everything nearly aching. And she, bigger and bigger, reeling, swollen, gigantic. (Lispector 112)

In this transformation into flesh, we see the narrator's awareness of her own objecthood. She is merely another object of flesh in the home, and she has already served her specific fleshy function. In this context, the narrator's earlier comments that the diner was a "beatice", "santa" and "santarrona" take on a new dimension. They demonstrate an unconscious comprehension of the Madonna-whore complex that characterizes the patriarchal division between "good" and "bad" women.

In the classic Freudian presentation of the Madonna-whore complex, the woman who is perceived to be the accumulation of "good" traits is the virginal Madonna, mother of God. The "bad" woman is she who redirects the male child's incestuous desire for the mother by being a less respectable example of womanhood (Hartmann 2009). In Freudian psychoanalysis, the "whore" is a necessary object for the male child's resolution of the Oedipal complex. The binary good and bad positions are internalized by the narrator as reproductive and non-reproductive female sexuality, where she, as mother of male children, is analogous to the Madonna. She juxtaposes herself against the "bad" diner who has not or cannot engage in the maternal function that undergirds her performance of gender. The diner is, in this formulation, the Freudian "whore" to whom disrespect is owed. However, by dismissing the diner's subjectivity as nonreproductive and therefore non-significant, the narrator inadvertently speaks from the subject position she derides. She becomes, in her own unconscious, the Freudian whore. Though she is socially rewarded by her ascension to motherhood, her value and pride as a childbearing woman lies in the success of her own objectification. After all, unlike the diner accused of saintly virginity, the narrator is the one who has been made an object of male sexual pleasure. As such,

she cannot aspire to the divine heights of womanhood that the diner can; she is reduced to the mere capacities of her flesh. The dawning of this realization synchronizes with the increasing dimensions of the narrator's flesh, symbol par excellence of her entrapment in the institution of motherhood.

How does queer time function for a subject so materially invested in heterosexual reproduction? For the narrator of "Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga," queer time inaugurates a recognition of herself as a queer subject: a mother who is maternally obsolete. This is the first time in the progression of the story that the narrator gestures toward a self-aware critique of maternal subjectivity. Up until now, all expressions of discontent were subsumed by the comforting languor of her daydreams. However, this moment impels her to reconcile the flesh of her identity as woman-and-mother with the undefined temporal landscape of post-reproductive womanhood.

Despite being so far beyond the narrator's sense of normative womanhood, the diner nevertheless inspires what can only be deemed admiration. The narrator undoubtedly admires her appearance, as the repeated references to the diner's elegant hat attest. In this admiration readers begin to glean the narrator's implicit desire for the freedom from flesh inherent in the diner's lifestyle. Her own life is a source of mild disgust, the type of good thing that was "quase nauseante" (113) and that lies at the heart of her sadness. In this context, the diner's hat can be thought of as the crowning element of the diner's divine air and saintly body; it is the object that displaces the narrator's true desires and the only thing that the narrator allows herself to covet openly. By professing jealousy for the hat, the narrator avoids naming her own dissatisfaction with domestic life.

1.6 (Pre-)Modern Maternity: The Materiality of Race In “A Menor Mulher Do Mundo”

Up until now, the stories analyzed in this chapter have focused on the subjective experience of time from the perspective of an individual maternal subject. However, maternal time in Clarice’s stories is not solely an individual phenomenon nor does it occur exclusively at the local level. On the contrary, maternal time is both individual and global, and, when approached through a Black feminist perspective, has the potential to interrupt the (neo)colonial narrative of linear time.

Such is the case in “A menor mulher do mundo,” a widely studied story in *Laços de Família*. In it, a French explorer named Marcel Pretre journeys through the depths of the African jungle and “discovers” a tribe of pygmies—that is, a race of preternaturally small human beings who, ironically, point him in the direction of an even smaller race of people in an even more remote part of the jungle. There, “como uma caixa dentro de uma caixa, dentro de uma caixa,” (“like a box within a box, within a box” [Dodson 165]) he discovers the smallest adult woman in the world (Lispector 68). The “discovery” of her 45-centimeter frame is immediately accompanied by another revelation as Pretre realizes to his shock and awe that her body harbors the potential of an even smaller human life: the woman is pregnant. The explorer is stunned by her size, and this unexpected moment of pause in his scientific journey results in an affective vulnerability towards the small woman, who he “timidamente e com uma delicadeza de sentimentos de que sua esposa jamais o julgaria capaz,” (“shyly and with a delicacy of feeling of which his wife would never have judged him capable” [Dodson 167]) names Pequena Flor (Lispector 70). Pretre documents his “discovery” with a photograph of Pequena Flor that is published, in actual size, on the front page of newspapers everywhere. All around the globe, citizens of the modern world react to the uncanny photograph which reproduces the woman’s

body to scale and catalyzes conversations that touch upon themes such as death, propriety, maternal love, and possession.

At this point, the narrative shifts in setting, from the ethnographic scene in the jungles of Africa to a myriad of domestic homes in the developed world. No less than eight other narrative settings are introduced, each with its own set of characters who approach the fact of Pequena Flor's existence in different ways: a woman who refuses to bear witness to Pequena Flor because it is too painful; a woman whose "perversa ternura" and "saudade" ("perverse tenderness" and "longing" [Dodson 167]) for the smallest woman in world are so acute they are reconfigured as darkness; a five-year-old girl who experiences the "primeiro medo do amor tirano" ("first fear of love's tyranny" [Dodson 168]); a young bride-to-be in the "êxtase de piedade" ("ecstasy of compassion" [Dodson 168]) and her disapproving mother; a little boy who explores the potential of Pequena Flor as an object of fear; the boy's mother who recalls an anecdote about a group of girls in an orphanage who hide the death of one of their friends from the caretakers so that they may play with the corpse; a family who measures Pequena Flor's tiny height and feel "o desejo de ter para si aquela coisa miúda e indomável" ("the desire to have that tiny and indomitable thing for himself" [Dodson 169]); a woman who decisively shuts the newspaper and says "Deus sabe o que faz" ("God knows what He's doing"[Dodson 172]). In this fluid shift from Marcel Pretre and Pequena Flor in the jungles of Africa to citizens of the modern world, "la voz enunciativa se transforma en ventrílocuo de una polifonía de discursos que intentan decodificar la imagen" ("the enunciative voice becomes a ventriloquist for the polyphony of discourses that attempt to decode the image") of the smallest woman in the world (Choi & Pistacchio, 39). According to the authors, the polyphony of the global audience is important insofar as it represents a discursive excess of voices that mirrors the perceived excess of Pequena Flor's body.

Her size “se configura como ‘el’ exceso,” (is configured as “the” excess) through “la redundancia de su extrema pequeñez: la exuberancia en sentido negativo o ‘la más de lo menos,’” (the redundancy of her extreme smallness: exuberance in a negative sense or “the greatest of the least”) (40). Pequena Flor is simply *too* small and her excessive smallness disrupts not only Marcel Pretre’s process of ethnographic fact collection and knowledge production, but the global (modern) community’s understanding of space, materiality and time.

Furthermore, the global polyphony of reactions posits “la perspectiva de la ciudad como locus simbólico de lo civilizado” (40). From the privileged perspective of the metropole, representative par excellence of the modern, industrialized world, Pequena Flor’s body—Indigenous, Black, female, tiny, pregnant—“represents a shocking intrusion of a different kind of reality into the fragile symbolic system of convention and superficiality that Pretre and the newspaper readers unquestioningly accept as normal” (Williams 73). Hers is a premodern existence, irreconcilable with the time of modernity. Thus, as the story’s setting changes from the colonial fantasy of an undiscovered land to the modern reality of urban space, the (neo)colonial notions of linear time are revealed to be fantasy, or a kind of death: the materiality of Pequena Flor’s Black, pregnant body signifies “the ether that holds together the world of Man while at the same forming the condition of possibility for this world’s demise” (Weheliye 40).

The importance of race in Pequena Flor’s disruptive effect on the time of modernity cannot be overstated. She is a Black, indigenous woman, both racial categories that historically have been employed to define by negation the identity of the privileged (white, male) subject. In a study on the biopolitics of racial taxonomies, Alexander Weheliye argues that “in the context of the secular human, black subjects, along with indigenous populations, the colonized, the insane, the poor, the disabled, and so on serve as limit cases by which Man can demarcate himself as a

universal human” (Weheliye 24). However, the conditions by which these marginalized and racialized populations come to define the white European man are invisibilized. This results in the unexamined assumption of an organic or naturally occurring “other” that does not ever become more than just a surface upon which the privileged subject can project his own othering assumptions. Toni Morrison, whose study on the discursive construction of whiteness and Blackness in American literature is canonical in the field of Black Studies, prefigures Weheliye’s argument in the following quote: “Among Europeans and the Europeanized, this shared process of exclusion—of assigning designation and value—has led to the popular and academic notions that racism is a ‘natural,’ if irritating, phenomenon” (Morrison 7). The appearance of this supposed natural phenomenon of race and racial categories is due to the fact that “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” and has led to the creation of “another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate” (Morrison 9). Indeed, in “A menor mulher do mundo,” neither Pequena Flor’s Blackness nor her pregnancy are explicitly defined as such. In true Claricean fashion, both aspects of Pequena Flor’s character are deliberately unnamed in such a way that leaves no doubt as to what they are. Thus, as Morrison points out, there exists a process of silence that encodes identity in the text, and through which both Pequena Flor’s Blackness and pregnancy are rendered visible. My intention with this analysis of the story is precisely to uncover and decode the silence surrounding Pequena Flor’s race, particularly as it dovetails with her construction as a maternal subject in time.

In her discussion of *antropofagia* and ecofeminism in Clarice’s work, Luz Horne relates the spatial, temporal, and discursive shift in the narrative from Africa to households across the

world to the shift from the hegemony of national Brazilian modernism to another, more minor modernism:

Hay un hilo que recorre la obra entera de Clarice Lispector en el que se recupera la radicalidad de la antropofagia de los años veinte, pero ya no solo como fuerza anticolonialista y antinacionalista sino también como potencia feminista...No se trata—ni en la literatura de Lispector, ni en la antropofagia bien entendida—de invertir el orden de las cosas, sino de revelar su revés; *de mostrar la imposibilidad de encontrar paisajes completamente vacíos, materialidades completamente pasivas y tiempos que solo vayan hacia delante*. Se trata de abrir la posibilidad de imaginar de otra manera y desdejar una epistemología dualista y evolutiva (Horne 2, italics my own).

There's a thread that winds through Clarice Lispector's entire corpus that recovers the radicality of *antropofagia* of the '20s, not just as a anticolonial and antinationalist force but also as feminist potential...It is not a matter—in either Lispector's literature or in antropofagia properly understood—of inverting the order of things but of revealing its reverse; *of showing the impossibility of finding landscapes that are completely empty, materialities that are completely passive, and times that only go forward*. It is a matter of opening the possibility of imagining in another way and refuting a dualist, evolutionary epistemology.

Space, materiality, and time: these three concepts are inextricable from the colonial fantasy of exploration and temporal organization. It is important here to emphasize what perhaps should be obvious but has been largely taken for granted by the existing scholarship: Pequena Flor is a Black, pregnant, female subject. The intersection of gender, race, size, and physical vulnerability

as connotated by her pregnancy is the reason for her perceived excess; she is not merely *too small*, but *too Black*, *too female*, *too pregnant*. Indeed, Pequena Flor's excessively small size "makes her more, not less formidable because her powers are concentrated, not dwarfed" (Williams 73). The concentrated materiality of Pequena Flor's small, Black, pregnant body constitutes the perceived excess of her material existence, which results in a fracture of linear time. Through that gap, she enters modernist discourse as a pre-modern subject existing simultaneously and alongside the globalized world. Indeed, when her small, Black, female, and pregnant body appears on the powerful symbol of globalization that is the international newspaper, she disrupts the illusion of evolutive modernity. Her appearance definitively contradicts the illusion of linear time, that is, a time that develops organically from, and gradually replaces, the conditions and behaviors that constitute the past. Thus, the transformative potential identified by Horne rests not only in the oxymoron of Pequena Flor's great smallness, but in the intersection of race, gender, and pregnancy. All factors disrupt colonial ideologies. Space, materiality and time intersect with maternity—here understood as pregnancy—to disorient the modern subject's conception of his- or herself as such.

Perhaps the clearest example to illustrate Pequena Flor's effect on the experience of time is found in the following quote, voiced through a mother character who contemplates the "cruel necessidade de amar" ("cruel necessity of loving"):

Então, olhando para o espelho do banheiro, a mãe sorriu intencionalmente fina e polida, colocando, entre aquele seu rosto de linhas abstratas e a cara crua de Pequena Flor, a distância insuperável de milênios. Mas, com anos de prática, sabia que este seria um domingo em que teria de disfarçar de si mesma a ansiedade, o sonho, e milênios perdidos. (Lispector 72)

Then, looking in the bathroom mirror, the mother made a deliberately refined and polite smile, placing, between that face of hers with its abstract lines and Little Flower's crude face, the insurmountable distance of millennia. But, after years of practice, she knew this would be one of those Sundays on which she'd have to conceal from herself the anxiety, the dream, and millennia lost. (Dodson 169).

In the quote above, the mother character must "deliberately" distance herself from the temporal threat that Pequena Flor represents. However, the mother's refined gesture belies a certain self-awareness of its own futility: she can escape the anxiety of Pequena Flor's uncanny temporal simultaneity only by acknowledging that she must. In other words, the mother character can perceive her own image in the mirror as more "refined" than the image of Pequena Flor in the newspaper through a conscious effort that reveals, even as it masks, the *lack* of distance between the two. Therein lies Pequena Flor's uncanny power: by being *too much*, she retroactively characterizes everyone else as *too little*. To paraphrase Williams again, Pequena Flor's size does not augment the relative size or importance of her (white, modern) spectators; instead, she cuts them down to size and "dislocate[s] the signifying system of the story" (Williams 71).

The unequal encounter between Pequena Flor and Marcel Pretre, indeed, between Pequena Flor and all her spectators, is consistent with Lispector's larger body of work, as "her narratives tend to focus on a central dialectics or pair of opposites which either complement and complete each other or act out a struggle for supremacy that leads to the incorporation or destruction of one by the other" (Williams, 8). Regardless of the outcome, each encounter between perceived opposites "generates an intense moment of existential doubt and crisis of identity that drastically modifies a character's perception of her/himself and of her/his

environment” (8). However, “A menor mulher do mundo” can also be read as an allegory of the impossibility of objective knowledge: the story is “la narrativa de una búsqueda, de un deliberado processo de conocimiento, lo cual resulta equivocado (o incluso fracasado)” (the narrative of a search, of a deliberate process of knowledge, which turns out to be wrong (or even unsuccessful)” (Fernandes 89). She also goes on to argue that the encounter between the two results in a strengthening of the epistemological condition of the explorer, not through the acquisition of imperial knowledge, but through a reinforced perception of himself as knowledge-producer via his encounter with a Black, female, pregnant subject. While I do not agree with all aspects of Fernandes’s analysis, I find her larger argument about Pequena Flor’s decentering of objective knowledge compelling and cogent. Like the mother faced with her reflection in the mirror and Pequena Flor’s image in the newspaper, the implicitly white, modern characters that surround the narrative of Pequena Flor are caught in the act of seeing themselves see the other. Instead of “uma caixa dentro de uma caixa, dentro de uma caixa,” the story can be understood as a mirror reflecting a mirror reflecting another mirror: a kaleidoscopic vision that disorients the perceiver’s vision and precludes the possibility of objective knowledge.

Furthermore, it is through Pequena Flor’s status as a Black, pregnant subject, in addition to a small one, that makes the asymmetrical encounter between her and Marcel Pretre even more lopsided—in her favor. Though the male/female, white/Black dialectic holds true in the story (and we acknowledge the constructed nature of these false binaries), a similar binary of pregnant/not-pregnant cannot operate in quite the same way. Pregnancy is a function of biological sex that can be, to a certain extent, aligned with a simplified gender binary of male/female. However, taking Fernandes’s framework into account, we see that Pequena Flor’s physical state does not characterize either sex or gender, but rather suggests the creation of

epistemic knowledge: pregnancy represents an organic gestation of knowledge at odds with Marcel Pretre's denotative, empirical knowledge. Indeed, Pequena Flor's pregnant state, with all its connotations of increased vulnerability and physical impairment, is the catalyst for her understanding of the world around her, an understanding that enables her to perceive and rejoice in the risks of her own existence. As Marcel Pretre examines her belly, Pequena Flor begins to laugh for no reason that the explorer can identify, which causes him "mal-estar":

Estava rindo, quente, quente. Pequena Flor estava gozando a vida. A própria coisa rara estava tendo a inefável sensação de ainda não ter sido comida. Não ter sido comida era algo que, em outras horas, lhe dava o ágil impulso de pular de galho em galho. Mas, neste momento de tranquilidade, entre as espessas folhas do Congo Central, ela não estava aplicando esse impulso numa ação—e o impulso se concentrara todo na própria pequenez da própria coisa rara. E então ela estava rindo. Era um riso como somente quem não fala, ri. *Esse riso, o explorador constrangido não conseguiu classificar.* E ela continuou fruindo o próprio riso macio, ela que não estava sendo devorada. *Não ser devorada é o objetivo secreto de toda uma vida.* Enquanto ela não estava sendo comida, seu riso bestial era tão delicado como é delicada a alegria. O explorador estava atrapalhado.

Em segundo lugar, se a própria coisa rara estava rindo, era porque, *dentro de sua pequenez, grande escuridão pusera-se em movimento.* (Lispector 74, italics my own)

She was laughing, warm, warm. Little Flower was delighting in life. The rare thing herself was having the ineffable sensation of not yet having been eaten. Not having been eaten was something that, at other times, gave her the agile impulse to leap from branch to branch. But, in this moment of tranquility, amidst the dense leaves of the Central

Congo, she wasn't putting an impulse to action—and the impulse had become concentrated entirely in the smallness of the rare thing herself. And so she was laughing. It was a laugh that only one who doesn't speak, laughs. *That laugh, the embarrassed explorer couldn't manage to classify.* And she kept enjoying her own soft laughter, she who wasn't being devoured. Not being devoured is the most perfect of feelings. *Not being devoured is the secret goal of an entire life.* So long as she wasn't being eaten, her bestial laughter was as delicate as joy is delicate. The explorer was confounded.

Second of all, if the rare thing herself was laughing, it was because, *within her smallness, a great darkness had sprung into motion.* (Dodson 170)

In the excerpt above, Pequena Flor's laughter disarms the symbol par excellence of Western canonical knowledge and demonstrates Lispector's aim to "question the motives of the ethnographic gaze" (Williams 46). Her laughter is unintelligible, and thus makes unintelligible, the (white, male) systems of classification that would seek to understand her. Furthermore, it signifies her access to an epistemic knowledge that the explorer does not and cannot possibly claim. This knowledge is material: it is the knowledge of not having been eaten. As such, it is acquired through the continuous materiality of her own body, a body pregnant with the potential of a great, moving darkness that promises to destabilize the white, modern world. Thus, her pregnancy not only emphasizes her material excess but, perhaps more importantly, it presages a futurity unencumbered by the temporal blind spot upon which modernity is built.

Though scholarship of "A menor mulher do mundo," has successfully analyzed the way that Pequena Flor's gender and size function as a negative excess that interacts with and ultimately disrupts the all-encompassing taxonomies of the implicitly white, male, modern world, not enough attention has been paid to the other major characteristics of her bodily

materiality. By focusing on the intersection of race and maternity, in this case presented as Pequena Flor's Black, pregnant body, I hope to have demonstrated how the racialized maternal subject in Lispector's "A menor mulher do mundo" distorts and disrupts the overlapping (neo)colonial narratives of evolutive time and objective knowledge.

1.7 Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to turn to the elderly matriarch in "Feliz Aniversário," a short story that merits more critical attention than I have time for here. Like the other mother characters in *Laços de Família*, the matriarch of "Feliz Aniversário" understands motherhood as a failed future of the self, as an unceasing sacrifice for the benefit of other subjects who, as the passage of time has now proven, were entirely undeserving of her sacrifice. However, what sets this mother apart from Ana and the unnamed mother in "Devaneio" is the firm resoluteness with which she regards her disappointing family. At ninety-three years old, this matriarch is no longer beholden to the oscillating self-doubt that plagues the protagonists of "Amor" and "Devaneio;" her commitment to the truth of her wasted time is symbolized by a clenched fist on the table. Her refusal to celebrate the mediocrity she perceives in her offspring demonstrates a possible avenue of escape from the temporal order of motherhood. Her silent demands for something better dissipate the family structure until she is finally left with the relief of considering her own needs. This story and the others analyzed above present an understanding of the relationality inherent in patriarchal definitions of womanhood and its converse: the potential for a radical freedom in the rejection of motherhood.

Of course, not all forms of motherhood are regrettable, and not all forms of non-motherhood are emancipatory. In Chapter Two, I will analyze a contemporary novel whose

protagonist yearns for biological motherhood as a way to transcend the other biological destiny her body cannot escape. Unlike Pequena Flor, who transcends her place in the literal and proverbial food chain by accepting it, the protagonist of *La perra* is consumed by a brutal nature that degrades her racialized flesh and scorns her aspirations of reproduction.

2 ENGENDERING MONSTROSITY: MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE AND VAMPIRIC MOTHERHOOD IN PILAR QUINTANA'S *LA PERRA*

La cosa, allá afuera, era una figura humana con un vestido blanco.

—¡Mamá!

Pilar Quintana

2.1 Introduction

In Jorge Isaacs's *María*, one of the most canonical Colombian novels of the nineteenth century, the protagonist Efraín muses on the allure of the women of color who work on his estate. Despite his professed love for María, the doomed heroine who tragically passes away before she and Efraín can finalize their nuptials, Efraín is quick to admire the physical beauty of the women in his environment. He is particularly enchanted with Salomé, the daughter of his estate's agricultural overseer and a woman whom he describes as a "mestiza de cierta tez" (Isaacs 261). She is almost transcendent in her beauty, likened to a walking fantasy: "la cara de Salomé con sus lunares, y aquel talle y andar, y aquel seno, parecían cosa más que cierta, imaginada" (262). The novel lovingly lingers on a minute description of her many attractive features: her "voz melodiosa" (259), her "dientes de blancura inverosímil," her "húmedos y amorosos labios," (261), and the other "mil encantos" (270) that make Salomé such a pleasure to behold. By this description, it is clear that Efraín notices and appreciates Salomé's physicality. Ironically, however, readers are meant to believe that her physical attributes have ostensibly no effect on the respectable gentleman, who after voraciously devouring Salomé with his eyes, insists that "a los mil encantos de [Salomé], alma ninguna podía ser más ciega y sorda que la mía" (270).

Why this appreciation? Why this immediate denial? One possible answer lies in the national romance's desired impact on social relations. *María* is emblematic of "a general bourgeois project to hegemonize a culture in formation" that took place in the newly independent republics of Latin America in the mid nineteenth century (Sommer 29). These projects were invested in creating a national culture that would close the gap between historically marginalized populations—Black, indigenous, and mixed-race castes—and the historically privileged population responsible for their subjugation—criollos. These national romances "bridged public and private spheres in a way that made a place for everyone, *as long as everyone knew his or her place*" (29, italics my own). The national romance as genre, and *María* specifically, reveals the anxious hope to naturalize through amorous allegory a racial hierarchy that up until that moment in history had been controlled through chattel slavery and various technologies of unfreedom. In this context, Efraín's response to a racialized woman's overwhelming physical allure reveals the fault line of criollo respectability: the titillating taboo of interracial attraction.

The figure of Salomé and Efraín's paradoxical response exemplifies how the promise of racial integration in the newly independent republic rubbed up against the fear of whiteness's collapse. Despite her beauty, Salomé is ultimately construed as an improper match for Efraín or anyone of his ilk due presumably to her racialized identity, which the novel codifies as a mix of social indecorum and excessive sensuality. A romantic relationship with her must be avoided if criollo men intended to uphold their racialized respectability—that is, their whiteness—in the new national society actively being constructed. The novel demonstrates its racial investments through various "improper" heterosexual relationships, all of which occur with a woman of different ethnic origin. Salomé's romantic foil is Justiniano, an acquaintance of Efraín, who has begun to demonstrate a markedly romantic interest in Salomé that undermines his claim to

criollo respectability. A relationship with someone like Salomé would risk tarnishing criollo whiteness, rather than engaging in the positively coded “whitening” of her race. The problem of Justiniano’s misplaced sexual attention must therefore be rectified and redirected towards a woman of social, if not racial, whiteness. A more subdued racialized femininity is preferable, and Efraín steps in to interfere, acting in his capacity as patriarch of the criollo family.

The figure of Salomé is but a microcosm of the larger racial politics structuring *María*, where racial tensions are subsumed in the myth of racial harmony. María herself becomes an object of inappropriate sexual desire, as her dubious racial origin is insufficient for the project of generative criollo nationalism. Through María and Salomé, this canonical nineteenth century Colombian novel posits women of color as insidious threats: their bodies are agents of racialized reproduction that threaten both criollo whiteness and its aspirations for an idyllic, racially hierarchical society.

Contemporary Colombian fiction is, like *María*, attempting to work through the sexual and social threat ascribed to the racialized female body. Pilar Quintana’s *La perra* (2017) is one such example. The novel narrates the story of Damaris, an Afro-Colombian woman from the Pacific coast of Colombia. Despite her desire to be a mother, she is tragically unable to reproduce naturally. Bereft of the biological children for which she always yearned, Damaris develops a maternal relationship with an abandoned puppy, whom she names after the daughter she hoped to have. The substitution of the desired object (a female baby) for a similar, available object (a female puppy) enacts what Leonardo Loayza has termed “la maternidad protésica,” or prosthetic motherhood (79). This substitution is important because it allows us to read *La perra* on multiple interpretative levels. On the one hand, it is a narrative of a woman’s quest to achieve motherhood by any means. However, the novel’s setting and diegesis also supports a critical

approach that studies the intersectionality of race, gender, and discursive nationhood. Damaris's aging, nonreproductive body subverts the racialized threat that *María* would have readers expect. She is not attractive, nor does she possess the sensuality of her literary predecessor Salomé. However, like the women of color in *María*, Damaris unwittingly threatens the racial order of the nation with her very existence. Her childhood friendship with Nicolasito, the only son of a wealthy white family from Bogotá, results in his untimely death in the heart of the jungle. This moment of trauma becomes the catalyst for the novel's meditation on the discursive reproduction of the Black female body. As Damaris balances mothering duties with unresolved wounds, *La perra* laments the devastating lack of futurity for its protagonist. Unable to move on and incapable of reproducing, Damaris is trapped in a stale, unmoving present where the nation's promised modernity never manifests. The novel uses prosthetic motherhood to reveal the intersecting racial and gender prerogatives that measure her body's utility to the nation. In this way, Quintana reappropriates the nineteenth century notion of republican motherhood and turns it on its head, revealing its flaws and limitations, calling into doubt the very idea of national reproduction.

To thoroughly explore the deployment of non-traditional motherhood *La perra*, I must first analyze how the historical setting and geographical context mutually construct the conditions of (im)possibility of Black motherhood. Then, using the notion of racialized citizenship as a starting point, I will analyze how nineteenth century republican values constructed a national maternity cleaved from Black bodies. Finally, I will analyze how national history, racialized motherhood, and slavery's legacy coalesce to prevent Damaris from achieving the transformative ideals of institutional motherhood.

2.2 *La perra* and the Geography of Race

Colombia's Pacific Coast is divided into four departments. From north to south, these are Choco, Cauca Valley, Cauca, and Nariño. Pilar Quintana hails from Cali, the capital city of the Cauca Valley. After a stint in Bogotá, where she studied communications at the Universidad Javeriana and worked as a copy writer, Quintana returned to Cauca Valley and rented a home of her own near the ocean. There, she dedicated herself full time to rendering her coastal setting into words, working the daily rhythms of the Colombian Pacific and its inhabitants into her most well-known novels. Both *La perra* and *Los abismos* narrate the literal and allegorical scarcity of the region. In *Los abismos*, this scarcity is legible as the oppressive obligation to mother that women often experience; in *La perra*, it is refashioned as the literal poverty that conditions the protagonist's past and present.

La perra is deeply invested in topics of race, gender, and inequality. It takes place in an impoverished fishing village on Colombia's Pacific coast: a predominantly Black region and a place crowded with contradictions. Geographically, it is a dense jungle area just north of the Amazon famous for the diversity of its wildlife. Economically, it is home to a bustling seaport in the coastal city of Buenaventura, the largest in the country, making it a major economic hub of international trade. Historically, it was one of the first regions to be colonized by the Spaniards, who set an administrative precedent of neglect that lingers to this day.

Despite its dynamic biodiversity, economy, and history, which lure in wealthy tourists both domestically and internationally, the region is also famously impoverished. It is home to a predominantly Afro-Colombian and Indigenous population who have faced the extractive brutality and institutional neglect of the state in its various configurations. The colonial, revolutionary, and republican eras saw Black and Indigenous people undergo a dramatic

transformation in which many individuals passed from captive to soldier to freeman to citizen in the national discourse of the changing times. However, the systemic inequality that plagued the colonial administration did not disappear with independence, despite the criollo government's persistent discourse of racial harmony. Colombia's Black Pacific continues to embody the historical paradox of race-blind citizenship. It is a place in constant contention with itself, attempting to reconcile a violent past with an optimistic future, yet intervened by a brutally neocolonial logic that reifies long-standing systems of inequality and injustice.

This geographic paradox is rooted in the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade during the early Spanish colonization of Colombia. Spanish exploration of New Granada, the region corresponding to what is now Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panamá, started in the mid-1530s. By 1544, Spanish settlements were well-established along the Northern Pacific coast of South America. These settlements were concentrated in mineral rich areas: the Colombian Pacific was home to the "most significant gold deposits" of the upper Andean region. Thus, unlike the sprawling agricultural plantations established elsewhere in the Americas, Colombian slavery was built on securing mining interests and maximizing resource extraction. Despite the rapid boom-and-bust cycle of individual mines, the consistent source of gold prompted a large influx of slave ships bringing African captives to the Caribbean shore in the region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From the Caribbean port of Cartagena, African captives were trafficked south and south west to the mines along the Pacific coast, where they were to tap into the steady, though ever decreasing, flow of gold in this region. Spanish colonizers thus established a significant Black population in western coast.

As mining interests grew, so too did the number of wealthy white European and criollo slaveowners. "Small scale as opposed to large scale slaveholding became the universal norm" by

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Barragan 75), unlike elsewhere in the Americas, where the sprawling plantation system dominated. Furthermore, though early mining efforts were very profitable for Spanish colonizers, many mines were forced to close before depletion. As a result, “large scale exploitation in the Chocó region only started in the late seventeenth century,” and the gold mines along the Pacific coast of New Granada “only saw their systematic development in the eighteenth century” (Acemoglu et. al 539). The unpredictability and fleeting nature of resource extraction, coupled with the political instability of colonial and revolutionary governments, impacted the management of enslaved people, who increasingly began to experience “a new regime of unfreedom” (Barragan 110).

The revolutionary fervor for independence in the early nineteenth century capitalized upon the ambiguous incorporation of Black captives and freemen, as both Latin American criollos and imperial Spaniards fought for the support of the popular classes. In a monograph titled *Myths of Harmony*, Marixa Lasso argues that a core part of revolutionary discourse in the colony of New Granada was the fundamental anxiety about how—or if—to incorporate mixed-race populations to the civic sphere. Spaniards sought to preserve imperial control and pacify Black and mulatto subjects by crafting increasingly flexible definitions of race, offering the opportunity to gain legal whiteness through various means in order to strengthen loyalty to the crown in the far-off colonies. Their attempts were met with criollo outrage. Criollos believed the peninsula’s tactics to curry Black and mulatto favor threatened their own racial supremacy in the colonial cities. Moreover, they were deeply offended by the implication that American-born whites could be legally and functionally indistinguishable from their Black and mulatto countrymen. As a result, they found themselves on an ideological tightrope, balancing their own

attempts to defy racial equality and reify the local racial hierarchies, with their desire to recruit Black and mulatto Americans for popular and military support.

The solution to this discursive dissonance was simple: elaborate a race blind notion of citizenship that could consolidate a unified Colombian identity. Latin American criollo discourse thus “linked racial harmony to insurgent nationalism” for the first time, creating an enduring myth of fraternal equality that was often wielded as a tool of submission, preventing the acknowledgement of racial inequality (Lasso 13). “Explicit expression of racial grievances became the mark of unpatriotic divisiveness” that could derail the nation-building project and justify continued imperial control (13). The myth of racial harmony allowed for “technologies of gradual emancipation” to flourish, elongating the practices of forced labor, institutionalized bondage, and racial inequality into the new republican era until the definitive end of chattel slavery in Colombia in 1852 (Barragan 161). Over time, this strategy of idealized race-blindness resulted in the allocation of fewer provisions and public goods in historically Black regions of the Colombian Pacific. Contemporary census data shows that predominantly Black regions today correspond to former gold-mining regions in the colonial era, which in turn correlate with “increased poverty, lower public good provision and higher land inequality” in the contemporary national landscape (Acemoglu et. al 559).

The Colombian Pacific is the living backdrop of *La Perra*, and understanding its legacy is crucial to understanding the social structures that condition the characters’ actions. Scholars largely agree that the rural setting, dense rainforest, and roaring ocean collaboratively construct the jungle as a space of national violence and terror, one that has remained steady in the Colombian national imagination since colonial times. Because the novel was published in 2017, however, some scholars argue that the jungle setting evokes the violence of the right-wing

paramilitary groups that ravaged Colombia's rural areas in the mid-aughts (Carosi 2021; Hunt 2023; Leonardo-Loayza 2022; Register 2024). Drug trafficking and organized crime constitute a more recent specter of jungle violence for a nation living in the post-peace period. This is a compelling argument in which the nation's political context informs the prevailing interpretation: the deployment of paramilitary violence as literary stroke "reveals how the sociopolitical bifurcation between urban and rural areas allows for the most vulnerable to continue to be condemned for violence that is really being inflicted upon them" (Hunt 76).

Perhaps a novel better suited for this type of analysis is Lorena Salazar Masso's *Esta herida llena de peces* (2021), which follows a white mother's resigned journey from Quibdó to Bellavista down the rivers of Chocó to return her adopted Black son to the biological mother who now wants him back. As the plot edges closer and closer to the tense confrontation between the two mothers, so does the ambiguous threat of violence increasingly materialize all around them. The novel ends with the explosion of a local church where the mothers take the child after agreeing to negotiate shared custody. Caught in the ambush of paramilitary violence, both son and biological mother lose their lives, leaving the white mother to literally pick up the pieces of her adopted son's body and lay them down to rest with the remains of her claim to motherhood. *Esta herida llena de peces* explicitly places race, motherhood, and organized violence at the center of a national dialogue on to whom the body belongs. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the body does not, in fact, belong to us—it is forever at the mercy of extralegal violence.

However, unlike *Esta herida llena de peces*, which uses paramilitary activity as both backdrop and catalyst of the plot, *La perra* does not engage with even the rumor of it. The absence of either direct reference or oblique allusion to paramilitary violence makes it difficult to sustain a credible interpretation of *La perra* that attends solely to the political events of the early

twenty-first century. The violence inherent to *La perra* is not organized, political, or even human. It is the raw brutality of an indifferent landscape. In this way, it is more similar to a “novela de la selva” than to a creative reimagining of contemporary politics. My analysis thus aligns more closely with Hunt’s argument that “*La perra* is not a novel written in direct response to the country’s internal armed conflict” (81). We must look further, to a more distant, yet never dispelled, original violence.

The violence that pervades *La perra* must be placed in its proper historical context. The jungle as a site of violence conjures the brutality of conquest and colonization. The history of interhemispheric contact is particularly long in the Pacific region of Colombia, and its enduring legacy is manifest in the centuries-old administrative neglect that continues to plague the region. Colonial racial hierarchies are compounded and generate a bubble of atemporality in an otherwise realist narrative. This atemporality defines the plot: though the novel’s present is set in the early twenty-first century, Damaris often recurs to the past, overcome by the memories of her childhood in the late twentieth century. Both temporalities are only tenuously anchored in a recognizable epoch, relying instead on subjective events to mark the passage of time—the death of her mother, her marriage to Rogelio, her employment at the Reyes house. This cyclical recollecting becomes a significant entry into the adult Damaris’s psyche and an important factor governing not only her behavior, but the entire community’s relation to progress. The result is an elastic homogenization of time: the characters age and details shift, but the overarching structure of their interactions with each other and their own selves never changes. Damaris articulates this temporality in flux after Nicolasito’s death: “le pareció que el tiempo se estiraba y que ella estaría ahí hasta hacerse adulta y luego vieja” (31).

In order to orient herself in a vast sea of time, Damaris often organizes her memories in relation to institutional anchors. This term refers to the moment when a major resource or technological innovation finally takes on a physical presence in the town. For example, when Rogelio ambushes Damaris and confronts her for secretly harvesting herbs, Damaris is forced to reveal her desire for a child and her fears of infertility. As she articulates her body's lack—the pathological absence of pregnancy and child—she notices that she is “en un lugar muy feo donde habían cortado los árboles para que pasaran los cables de luz. Los troncos podridos que todavía quedaban en pie parecían las lápidas descuidadas de un cementerio” (Quintana 20). Damaris links the moment she must confess her body's perceived failure to both national progress and mandated death, seeing the tree trunks as a fallen monument to the state's desired modernity. The guillotined tree trunks function as a pathetic fallacy of her own truncated desires for motherhood. Her womb lacks the spark that was promised, a cemetery littered with the tombstones of a future cut short.

Modernity is physical in *La perra*. It is something that can be pointed to, in part because it stands out from the sempiternal jungle. For example, when a now grown Damaris has to call the Reyes with news regarding their vacation property, she must do so in the town's singular Telecom office, home of the only telephone for miles, because “en esa época no habían llegado los celulares a la zona” (36). The wording of this excerpt is significant for two reasons. First, it implies that modern technology, represented by the cellphone, exists as a tidal force that has not yet reached the shores of the Colombian Pacific. The coastal region is likened to a remote island far from the modernity of the mainland, heightening its social and temporal isolation. Secondly, the use of the word “llegado” implies that cellphones are a reality of which the town's inhabitants are aware, but only as an abstract reality removed from their own. Thus, the locals must

consciously navigate an anachronism that the rest of the country has long since overcome, while simultaneously oblivious to the severity of their lack. These minor details, repeated often throughout the novel, create a Schrodinger's dilemma: progress and advancement simultaneously exist and do not.

The materiality of the Telecom office itself—its brick walls and heavy construction unfit for the heat and humidity of the region—demonstrates the failure of bureaucratic standardization: “Tenía una sola ventana y cuando hacía calor hacía más calor adentro, y si el día estaba fresco se sentía más fresco adentro” (36). Rather than providing relief from the environment that surrounds it, the municipal building only heightens the discomfort. Its ill-suited architecture conjures a faceless bureaucracy that has never experienced firsthand the region’s specific landscape or climate. This institutional ignorance is all the more obvious when contrasted with the local architecture, which the local inhabitants have adapted to better account for their environmental conditions. In a dense, humid jungle where muggy conditions and fickle tides reign supreme, the most comfortable abode must be a breathable house elevated off the ground by wooden stilts. These constructions must be carried out with the endemic poverty of the region in mind. Inhabitants must procure affordable, durable materials that they can pay to replace if necessary, foregoing the small luxuries of modern amenities. The resulting “iconic, flood-resistant structures” that characterize the region respond to the logistical challenges of “one of the world’s rainiest regions,” borrowing from enduring indigenous architectural traditions (Barragan 50). The state’s presence in the form of a woefully outfitted, lone Telecom office demonstrates an astonishing ignorance of the region’s empirical reality.

In this untamed landscape, houses are prized for their amenability, not their amenities. Even the Reyes, relative newcomers to the Colombian Pacific, use their considerable wealth to make a practical, long-lasting home, not a beautiful one:

“La casa grande había sido hecha para resistir las condiciones más duras. Las láminas de aluminio eran inoxidable, el piso era de trapichero, una madera finísima a la que no le entraban el comezón ni el gorgojo, y para los cimientos y la base elevada habían usado una mezcla de concreto especial, más fuerte. No era una casa bonita sino práctica, con espacios amplios y muebles de materiales sintéticos” (40).

Despite the considerable wealth at their disposal, the Reyes do not attempt to impose their own idea of appropriate architecture to the region. Their assimilation to the jungle environment highlights the futility of standardization, a bureaucratic ideal to which the state and its institutions erroneously conform. Similarly, in her own home, Damaris continues to cook over a log fire outside while an expensive new oven lies untouched in her kitchen (39). This minor detail reflects an embodied knowledge of both the town’s historic poverty and its jungle climate, which Quintana herself experienced during her residence in the Cauca Valley. Taken together, these details suggest that the construction of a brick building is simply unthinkable to anybody who has ever spent time in the Colombian Pacific. The material imposition of the state limits rather than extends the state’s reach. More importantly, it exacerbates physical discomfort and aesthetic incompatibility, thereby creating the conditions for local rejection. The novel’s setting thus reflects the failure of the Colombian national project to materialize in its most colonially exploited regions.

Beyond the state’s reach and outside the progress of time, the town’s jungle environment becomes a presence in itself, an insidious companion and ubiquitous victimizer. This is not an

exclusive feature of *La perra*. On the contrary, Michael Taussig reminds us that this is a strategy used in other well-known Colombian novels. Perhaps the most famous novel depicting the Colombian rainforest is José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine*, wherein

“The monstrous fears and uncanniness evoked by the jungle are as nothing compared to the reality of Arana's rubber camps. Yet it is always the colonial view of the jungle that provides the means for representing and trying to make sense of the colonial situation. Emptiness and absence become assailing presences. The nebulous becomes corporeal and tangible. And in this dreadful object-making, as shadows of things acquire substance, a veil of lifelessness, if not death, is drawn apart to reveal the forest not merely as animated but as human” (77)

The colonial object-making of the jungle is what interests me most. As the jungle's presence grows, the materiality of the state is undone, slowly bleached from existence and drained of any enduring life. Its growing presence manifests as the insidious childhood friend that led Damaris and Nicolasito to his death; it was the deceptively innocuous motif that Nicolasito's mother chose to decorate his bedroom; and it stalks Damaris with an uncanny consciousness and steals her very breath: “[Damaris] empezó a sentir que la respiración que escuchaba no era suya sino de la selva y que era ella—y no Nicolasito—la que se estaba ahogando en un mar verde repleto de hormigas y plantas” (31). Supplanted by the jungle who breathes through her, Damaris “turns away from nature as a symbol of reproduction, looking instead to the image of chaos and despair that nature offers as a counterbalance” (Hunt 79). Ultimately, Damaris strangles Chirli to death, inflicting upon the animal body the same asphyxiation the jungle had inflicted on her.

The jungle reflects Damaris's inner turbulence, which becomes more destabilizing and consequently more threatening when she is forced to recall the past trauma of Nicolasito's death. The first time Chirli gets lost in the jungle, Damaris is forced to watch her disappear into the darkening jungle, helpless. "Frente a ella solo quedó la selva, tranquila como una bestia que acabara de tragarse a su presa" (50). The inversion of Chirli as natural predator to defenseless prey immediately conjures up the image of Nicolasito, whose fantasized conquest of the jungle saw him swallowed whole by the same. Indeed, when Damaris sets out after her dog, she lists a litany of things that would normally frighten her away: "la oscuridad, las equis, las fieras, los muertos, *el finado Nicolasito*, el finado Josué y el finado señor Gene, los espantos de los que había oído hablar cuando era niña..." (50, emphasis my own). This rundown of anxieties makes clear that it is the abundance of death that Damaris fears most from the jungle's darkness. In this way, *La perra* is an example of what Juliana Martínez has termed spectral realism. Unlike the well-established tradition of magical realism in Colombia, spectral realism "is a mode of storytelling that takes the ghost seriously but not literally. It formally assumes the disruptive potential of the specter, shifting the focus from what the ghost *is* to what it *does*" (Martínez). Damaris continuously conjures the specter of Nicolasito in her memory, populating the jungle with the ghost of a bygone futurity. Similarly, she grieves over a lost motherhood, inaccessible to her through biological reproduction, and mourns her own mother, who was victim of a stray bullet when Damaris was not yet fifteen. These specters represent everything that could have been, and everything that Damaris lost.

The memory of things long lost makes the jungle's abundance additionally unsettling in ways unrelated to the physical threats it contains. Its spectrality "asks destabilizing questions about the erasures underlying dominant ways of producing goods, knowledge, affect, history, and

time” that unsettle the dream of safety (Martínez). When Damaris is unable to rescue Chirli from the jungle that first night, Damaris returns home, weeping and defeated, to an elusive sleep:

“Soñaba con ruidos y sombras, que estaba despierta en su cama, que no podía moverse, que algo la atacaba, que era la selva que se había metido en la cabaña y la estaba envolviendo, que la cubría de lama y le llenaba los oídos con el ruido insoportable de los bichos hasta que ella se convertía en selva, en tronco, en musgo, en barro, todo al mismo tiempo, y ahí se encontraba con la perra, que le lamía la cara para saludarla.” (51)

Suffocating, silent, and invasive, the jungle penetrates all aspects of Damaris’s life and psyche, imbuing her with a deep-seated repulsion of all things wild. Her increasingly hostile relationship to her dog-daughter reflects the fear of being engulfed by the teeming specters of death that surround her, of the jungle’s preternatural ability to swallow all that with which it comes into contact.

Damaris’s ever-present fear of the natural world that surrounds her evinces *La perra*’s investment in what Roberto González Echevarría called “el libro de la selva.” These jungle books, as it were, can be broadly understood as a spectrum between two poles bookended, on the one hand, by Rómulo Gallegos’s *Canaima* (1935) and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1845), on the other. Gonzalez Echevarría argues that *Canaima* “pertenece a una tradición universal y moderna” that considers the eternal dilemma of “cómo incorporar la selva, lo bárbaro, lo autóctono, a lo nacional” (24-25). *Canaima* appropriates the natural world as discursive identity:

La selva es el oscuro origen literario del texto mismo, contra el cual la lucha es tan imprescindible como inútil, superando todas las contradicciones, y culminando o

cumpliendo toda dialéctica. La selva es el antro de la poesía, fuente de lo literario, de lo bello, sin dejar de ser satánica en ningún momento. (24-25).

The dialectical opposition of civilization and barbarism, of citizenry and savagery, is resolved in the life-giving space of the natural world. No longer opposites, they exist in generative tension, where one begets the other in fruitful succession. Thus, in *Canaima*, the jungle is part of the nation, constitutive of its people and customs.

Facundo, on the other hand, presents the jungle as the other, “inasimilable y digno solamente de ser sometido a la civilización” (25). It is “un ámbito a la vez sagrado y maligno” where “lo bello, lo autóctono, lo interesante, es lo malvado” (24). Echevarría argues that this type of jungle book reaffirms the fear and anxiety of the colonial gaze. An extractive view of the jungle necessarily assumes the wilderness and all it contains is not proper—it is not one’s own—and therefore any relationship to it must be of domination and control, *not* of assimilation into one’s quotidian reality. Taussig offers a similar characterization of the jungle in his analysis of *La vorágine*, where “the savagery of the forest is contagious” and “neither offered a future nor held a past” (Taussig 76, 88). “The image of stark opposition and of otherness in the primeval jungle comes forth as the colonially intensified metaphor for the great space of terror and cruelty” (Taussig 77).

That *La vorágine* (1924) and *Canaima* (1935) are roughly contemporaneous, suggests that Echevarría’s notion of the “libro de la selva” accounts for a spectrum of jungle books that transcends chronological succession. Instead, it offers a thematic panorama wherein different epochs and national contexts nevertheless work together to respond to the sustained omnipresence of an untamed—and perhaps untamable—life. What all three of the novels share is

also a defining characteristic of the genre: an ideological attachment to the myth of white manhood. Gonzalez Echevarría reminds us that

La selva representa un origen vigente y actual, un principio todavía viviente al que es posible viajar, adquiriendo así un conocimiento privilegiado, definitivo y definidor del mundo en que se vive, por lo que regresar armado de ese saber constituye un triunfo que transforma en adultos, en hombres hechos y derechos, a los personajes, que vacilan entre convertirse a la naturaleza o someterse a las leyes de su propia sociedad. (26)

The jungle is the setting of a bildungsroman of manhood, where boys become men once exposed to the truth and knowledge of the vast wilderness. *La perra* reappropriates the narrative of gendered success and subverts its racialized expectations by making the elimination of a potential white male protagonist the starting point of a narrative about a Black woman's motherhood in the face of an indifferent jungle.

In *La perra*, the jungle's dual nature as generative and destructive can be mitigated via strategic coexistence and ancestral epistemologies. These strategies include indigenous healing rituals to counterbalance the lack of access to clinical settings; community credit in the absence of solvent funds; and close-knit alliances on which to rely for goods and services both innocuous and extreme. Damaris lives in poverty, yes—but her family's history is not exclusively one of scarcity. Strategic investments led Damaris's uncle, Eliécer, to a short-lived economic prosperity that afforded his family some economic mobility that they enjoyed with Gatsbyesque gusto. When those investments begin to fail, the family is able to pivot once again to another business model: renting out their few properties to generate additional income. Though significantly more modest than the wealth that preceded it, this humble source of revenue provides sufficient

economic stability with which to provide for Damaris, her cousin Luzmila, and Eliécer's other children further south until adulthood.

These economic possibilities, among others, are strong evidence against an interpretation of the jungle as a limiting factor of the novel's social setting. Despite Damaris's anxieties, the abundant natural life that surrounds her and her family provides them with access to an equally lush tourist economy. The Reyes, for example, join the rest of the nation's elite and summer in the natural paradise they consider to be their own backyard. Their vacation home, built on a plot of land that Eliécer sold to them, is a magnificent testament to both the capital's acquisitive power and the town's control of strategic assets. The house is also, importantly, a shrine to Nicolasito, their only son, who plays out a colonial childhood fantasy of fearlessly exploring the jungle.

Of the tellingly named Reyes family, Nicolasito is the only one who embraces the natural world with intrepid glee. His enthusiasm is reflected in his room, decorated with hand-painted toys and images from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. This affinity for this classic tale is encouraged and motivated by his mother, who chooses *The Jungle Book* as the decorative theme of his bedroom, hand paints his toys, and encourages him to play outside. In so doing, she unconsciously engages in a consolidation of gender, class, and geography with the hope of securing her son's continued economic and social prestige. Damaris, as an adult, understands the weight of this effort as evidence of maternal devotion. Tasked with caring for Nicolasito's room, Damaris frets:

La perra no debía acostumbrarse a estar en la casa grande con ella dentro de la cabaña o la casa grande, donde pasaba gran parte del tiempo limpiando y encerando. Podría

destrozar algo: la caracola del finado Nicolasito, uno de sus juguetes, sus tenis, o, Dios no lo quisiera los muebles que le había pintado su madre. (41)

Nicolasito's mother and her painstaking faith in her son's jungle enrichment presents maternity as the unlikely source of the white colonial gaze. In his mother's eyes, Nicolasito is the heroic male conqueror of an unexplored world. This assumption draws from the canon of male criollo heroes in Latin American fiction. Nicolasito evokes figures such as Santos Luzardo in *Doña Bárbara*, Efraín in *María*, and even, to a certain degree, Aureliano Buendía in *Cien años de soledad*. These are all literary protagonists who have confronted the savagery at the margins of their respective countries and come out the other side a hero. They are the archetype: the male protagonist of a "libro de la selva" whose encounter with the natural world augments or affirms his gendered dominion over it all. Masculinity is reconfigured as a tool of colonialism, such that men are proven so through their quest to conquer and domesticate the wilderness. Doing so successfully requires rejecting the dangerous allure of the jungle: "una de las pruebas más arduas a que se someten los exploradores es la de resistir al hechizo de la selva, la tentación de hacerse unos con la naturaleza y no regresar al mundo moderno del que parten" (Gonzalez Echevarría 26). Under this configuration, the jungle is inevitably rendered a seductive female, bewitching and deadly, playing into yet another trope of the exotic femme fatale.

La perra reappropriates colonial myths of the civilizing force of the white criollo to gesture at the failure of that mission to manifest. When Nicolasito dies, dragged away by the furious waves of a swiftly rising tide, the myth of colonial masculinity dies with him, demonstrating the failure of male criollo discourse to achieve its goals of domestication. Damaris's survival is telling: her embodied awareness of the jungle's vicious indifference keeps her alive, even while it slowly suffocates her. Furthermore, her survival marks the materialization

of a clearly racially gendered hierarchy in which the life of a wealthy white boy is far superior to that of a poor Black girl. The trauma of witnessing his death is interpreted by her caregivers and all the adults around her as a failure of her intrinsic duty as a Black woman—to care for the white family. Nicolás's death is more than the tragedy of a lost youth; it is the tragedy of a lost criollo future. Nicolás thus represents a white futurity lost to the reality of the inexorable jungle and all the racialized wildness therein.

The parallels to slavery's past are clear. Shunned by her employers and whipped by her family members as punishment, Damaris is forced to learn at an excruciatingly young age the brutal insignificance of her own life. She lives in a world where her personhood, her body, must be rendered useful in a racialized hierarchy that perpetuates colonial systems. Nicolás's death makes clear that she was no friend, as she had previously assumed. Instead, it reveals that she had unknowingly been part of the colonial economy of race. Her testimony was not mere witness, but admission of guilt and neglect. Her perceived lapse in responsibility led not only to the death of the young white boy, but to the departure of the Reyes from the region. They take with them their money and employment opportunities, and all economic prosperity that had entailed. Though the family is briefly able to diversify their income, their economic prosperity is short-lived: the investment fails, the assets must be sold off, and Damaris's mother dies, leaving Damaris all alone in a town that blames her for their bad luck. The series of tragedies culminates in childlessness, leaving Damaris no avenue through which to redeem herself or make herself anew.

2.3 Republican Motherhood

With its emphasis on exploring the intersection of racialized gender, motherhood, and national identity, *La perra* alludes to the nineteenth century literary tradition of national romances. As Doris Sommer has famously argued, the simultaneous union of public and private, erotics and politics, man and woman, is a defining feature of nineteenth century national romances. These romances co-opted the allegory of successful reproductive partnership as a strategy to legitimize criollo leadership following the wars of independence. Instead of looking to the past to justify their right to govern the land, criollo men looked towards the future, focusing on the promise of successive generations of citizens that would grow and mature with the nascent body politic. To quote Sommer:

Without a proper genealogy to root them in the Land, the creoles had at least to establish conjugal and then paternity rights, making a *generative* rather than a *genealogical* claim. They had to win America's heart and body so that the fathers could found her and reproduce themselves as cultivated men. To be legitimate, their love had to be mutual; even if the fathers set the tone, the mothers had to reciprocate. (Sommer 15)

As Sommer shows, the foundational fiction of a father was incomplete without the figure of the mother, who legitimized the project of self-government. Furthermore, as Thomas Genova argues in his monograph, *Imperial Educación: Race and Republican Motherhood in the Americas*, the earliest iteration of independent Latin American identity included the figure of the wife-and-mother whose principal duty to the nation was to birth and raise its future citizens. To fulfill this end, republican motherhood in the nineteenth century centered around the practice of *educación*. In Spanish and historically throughout the Americas, the word *educación* has “been recognized as a form of institutionalized child-rearing, a technology for manufacturing national citizens out

of colonial subjects” (2). Genova deploys the term in its full polysemic capacity, referring to “both normal instruction (the Platonic leading of the mind out of darkness through the bringing out of hidden truth) and the raising of children (the leading of youth into maturity)” (2). Both literary mothers who teach and historical teachers who mother, republican teacher-mothers were responsible for more than mere instruction in appropriate subject matters; they were also invested in nurturing their students’ and children’s characters such that the youths could, under their tutelage, emerge as mature and responsible citizens equal to the task of leading their respective nations into a modernizing future.

With the relationship between citizen and country secured as the marriage between man and wife, the rights to the mother/land were discursively established, and national consolidation shifted to a reproduction of the nascent body politic via the metaphor of childrearing. This inevitably prompted a discussion of whether and how to incorporate Black, indigenous, and mixed-race subjects into the new political order. If, like children, all citizens could be taught to perform their civic duty, then how could the *criollo* elite justify their continued power? Genova provides a possible answer: by promoting the reproduction of white *criollo* values. He argues that the republican teacher-mother was racially constructed as white and deployed as a bastion of bourgeois-republican values. It was a republican mother’s whiteness—and her racial claim to European enlightenment—that imbued her with the civic, moral, and spiritual authority to mold each nation’s future citizens with an affinity to *criollo* identity. Thus, the work of mothering was conceived as a social investment in the gradual whitening of the new nation.

As I discussed in the opening to this chapter, one of Colombia’s most famous contributions to the genre of national romance and republican motherhood is *María* by Jorge Isaacs. Both novel and author are from Quibdó, the nineteenth century capital of the Colombian

Black Pacific and the center of Choco's booming slave trade. Isaacs's mother, Manuela Ferrer Scarpetta, was the widow of a prominent slave merchant and his father, George Henry Isaacs, was a prominent English merchant from Jamaica whose family wealth was "built on slave trading" (Barragan 87). A professional at evaluating the worth of the Black men and women whose bodies he traded or sold into slavery, George Henry seemed to have passed down his discriminating eye to his son. Jorge Isaac's own racial discrimination appears reconfigured as sexual discernment in his 1826 novel. In *María*, the wealthy criollo protagonist, Efraín, is to marry the titular character María, the orphaned cousin he has loved since childhood. Though the two are raised in the same home and therefore with the same experience of class and wealth, they are not the same in prestige. María's family is Jewish and upon being orphaned, she was raised by the Black nurses on her uncle's plantation. Her proximity to people and customs outside of white Catholic culture casts her own racial identity into doubt, thus making her ultimately unsuitable as a republican mother in the national allegory proffered by the novel's denouement. Efraín's desire to marry her is thus pulled into tension with the erotics of politics that oblige him to find a suitable partner with which to procreate and propagate appropriate republican values to the future generation. The novel's resolution wherein María tragically dies before she and Efraín can formalize their love is, as Doris Sommer points out, "inexplicably sad, as sad and reluctant to say why as Latin America's elite readership must have been when it preferred *María*'s lament for lost privilege over the romances that so eagerly embraced and entitled subalterns" (Sommer 173). Sommer argues that these lost privileges are subsumed in the originally Jewish identity of the main characters, whose "Jewishness is a figure for both sides of the unspeakable racial difference in the plantation society, the difference between black and white." María and her

dubiously off-white ilk are tantamount to “a racially different disturbance among the whites” (173).

Like this iconic nineteenth century novel, *La perra* uses racialized tragedy to subvert the republican wife-and-mother. Damaris disappears into the jungle at the end of the novel, recalling María’s own death and abrupt disappearance from the narrative. In both cases, the would-be mother is nullified in the novel’s projection of the nation. The juxtaposition between Damaris’s profound emotional investment in motherhood and her racialized body’s inability to reproduce reflects the nation’s continued investment in a neocolonial psychology that prescribes what bodies and what values are appropriate for reproduction. As a racialized woman in Colombia’s Pacific coast haunted by the specter of colonial extraction, Damaris cannot be a republican mother oriented towards a prosperous national future. Instead, she is a childless woman mired in the legacy of her nation’s anti-Black history. *La perra* is sad, but its sadness is not inexplicable: it is the tragedy of the nation’s failed promise.

La perra emphatically *does not* reaffirm longstanding biases about the inherent value of the Black body in Colombia. On the contrary, Quintana subtly but powerfully appropriates the Black female body to demonstrate the failure of Colombia as an institution to reproduce itself for its most marginalized citizens. The novel’s basic conflict borrows from *María* in that it links the failure to reproduce with the anxieties of racial (dis)organization. While *María* implicitly assumes that racialized women are biologically available for easy breeding, *La perra* immediately calls into question the validity of this assumption. Instead, *La perra* questions reproduction’s ostensible ease from the very beginning. The novel refuses to explicitly diagnose Damaris with medical infertility, keeping open the possibility that it may be Rogelio, her husband, who experiences fertility issues. Santos, an Afro-Indigenous woman who is one of the

novel's only representations of medical knowledge, declares that "el problema debía ser de su marido" (20). However, Damaris nevertheless experiences her childlessness as a proof of her body as a reproductive obstacle, not her husband's. She is the one who wants children, and it is *her* body that is not pregnant. The novel leaves no room for doubt. Despite Santos's declarations, Damaris insists that "el problema era que ella no quedaba embarazada" (20). Thus, despite no clear medical evidence pointing towards it, Damaris concludes that she must be the source of their infertility, a problem that she internalizes as a personal failing.

The difficulty of reproduction is emphasized when Damaris begins to experiment with extra-medical procedures meant to encourage fertility. She forages for medicinal herbs, drinks homeopathic remedies, undergoes cleansing rituals, and convinces Rogelio to spend a year's savings on a healing experience with a respected *jaibaná*, an indigenous doctor and spiritual leader whose health and medical knowledge are intended to protect the integrity of the family unit. Though she initially keeps these endeavors hidden from Rogelio, he agrees to support her when he realizes just what motherhood would mean to his wife.

Llorando, le contó la historia de la mujer de treinta y ocho, de las veces que había llorado en silencio, de lo horrible que era que todo el mundo pudiera tener hijos y ella no, de las cuchilladas que sentía en el alma cada vez que veía una mujer preñada, un recién nacido o una pareja con un niño, del suplicio que era vivir ansiando un ser pequeñito para acunarlo en su pecho y que todos los meses le llegara la regla. (23)

Following her tearful confession, the two commit to a schedule of sex that resembles a weekly chore rather than mutual pleasure. Finally, when not even the routine cleansing rituals and expensive spiritual surgery are enough to halt her monthly periods, Damaris accepts her body's presumed culpability: "Se sintió liberada, pero al mismo tiempo derrotada e inútil, una vergüenza

como mujer, una piltrafa de la naturaleza” (24). Leonardo-Loayza argues that her initial relief responds to the release from the responsibility of sexual relations with a man she does not love: For Damaris, “el sexo no es considerado importante, si es que no lleva a la reproducción” (77) Damaris ultimately experiences frustration due to her own body’s perceived lack—lack of pregnancy, lack of child, lack of flesh—as well as its disappointing excesses—too much blood, too much age, too many tears.

Damaris, like everyone else in her town, is led by a fundamental belief that all women *do* have children, which is metonymically the same as the expectation that all women *must* have children. As Leonardo-Loayza puts it, “La mujer es concebida como una metonimia de la naturaleza, pues ella, esta, puede y debe dar vida” (78). When female reproduction is likened to natural life, women’s bodies are shifted down in the hierarchy of intelligent life and made to resemble the unthinking, un-agential reproduction of nature. Because she can give life, she should. The shift from descriptive maternity to prescriptive motherhood prevents the distinction between personal preference and biological inability, leaving only the impression that woman does not, and cannot, choose.

Motherhood writes itself onto the female body like a palimpsest, rendering unintelligible any other identification. Neither Damaris nor her community experience her lack of biological children as liberatory. Instead, they experience it as a manifestation of her inherent inferiority as a woman, an irremediable and unredeemable deficiency, “como si los hijos fueran una extensión de su cuerpo, un pedazo de su identidad, el modo de perfeccionar ese ser informe y deficitario que sería la mujer” (Meruane 24). In this context, maternal non-compliance is a gendered flaw and personal failing. Meruane summarizes this perfectly: “aunque no se tengan en la vida, los hijos se tienen para siempre en la cabeza propia y la ajena” (97).

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the figure of Luzmila, Damaris's cousin and lifelong rival. Unlike Damaris, Luzmila is presented as the standard of female excellence in the text. She is younger, prettier, lighter-skinned; she has achieved a modestly successful marriage that has resulted in an upward social mobility; and, most importantly, she is a mother of two daughters, both of whom she carried and delivered with nary a hint of complication. Indeed, at not yet 40 years of age, she is already a grandmother, something Damaris interprets as the culmination of all her accomplishments. The success of Luzmila's reproductive femininity is almost biblical in nature: she begets children who beget more children, who will beget more. These achievements of reproduction reveal the interlocked nature of race, class, and gender. Luzmila is seemingly aware of her cousin's envy; indeed, she seems to revel in stoking the flames of her jealousy. Her condescending demeanor towards Damaris is the behavioral manifestation of her perceived superiority, which is supported by the biological tangibility of her reproductive success. Though Luzmila does not ever appear with her children in the text, their presence elsewhere in the immediate setting grants her a modest—but deeply significant—social mobility that is denied to Damaris on the basis of her body's perceived shortcomings.

2.4 Vampiric Mothers and Slavery's Ghosts: Motherhood as Colonial Extraction

A key element of the novel is the emotional and physical violence that pervades it. Damaris's extreme and conflicting emotions towards her canine daughter is not by any means unique, nor inherently a negative aspect of her mothering. Violence is not incompatible with motherhood. In fact, multiple maternal scholars maintain that frustration, anger, and an impulse to violence are integral, if not quotidian, elements that characterize a mother's relationship to her child.

So at what point does motherhood become monstrous? *La perra* offers one possible answer in the form of Damaris, whose yearned-for motherhood ends in her chosen daughter's asphyxiation and death. While an impulse to violence is not incompatible with mothering, the work of a mother is, in large part, dependent on her restraint. Given this intense and contradictory affective landscape, the work of a mother is, according to Adrienne Rich, a process of "painful self-discipline and self-cauterization." The anthropocentric logic inherent in the novel, which posits Damaris as the superior being, blurs the line between maternal violence and maternal restraint. As an animal born of the wild jungle and cruel tides, Chirli is inherently incongruent with a restraint-based maternal discipline. Damaris is granted an enormous freedom in the exercise of her maternal authority, which facilitates a meditation on the violent potentialities latent therein.

What Damaris's violent turn reveals is a kind of maternal inversion: a mother that demands care from her child at their expense. Chirli's name recalls Damaris's childhood idol, Shirley Saenz, the winner of Miss Colombia in 1977 and Damaris's only female role model. As a beauty pageant winner, Shirley represents "the gold standard for femininity in Colombia, both in behavior and physical appearance" (Register 129). For Damaris, this makes her name evocative of exemplary female success rooted in the physical body. She activates Damaris's belief that feminine success is successful femininity. As such, Shirley functions as the catalyst of Damaris's lifelong dream of motherhood. Like beauty, pregnancy and childbirth are exclusive metrics for successful femininity.

Damaris's lifelong admiration of Shirley "gestures toward enduring colonial vestiges in the Colombian imaginary. As...the temperate Andean highlands became associated with European culture, creole society and whiteness," the "lowland tropics, situated as a counterpart,

continued to be shaped by the legacy of enslaved peoples. In this bifurcation, the name Shirley evokes an image of success, progress and opportunity for Damaris who sees the beauty queen as everything she is not” (Hunt 77). By assigning that name to her canine daughter, Damaris projects onto the other’s body that which she had hoped to assimilate into herself. Doing so allows her to briefly return to a fabled childhood innocence before the dream of successful femininity was dashed and before Nicolasito died. Chirli becomes a participation trophy for Damaris’s performance of female gender, and a consolation prize for her failure, something from which Damaris can extract hope and futurity.

The kind of extractive mothering visible in *La perra* may be considered vampiric in nature. Almond reminds us that

Sometimes a parent’s hungers are so compelling that the child’s most basic needs and autonomous strivings are ignored, neglected or subsumed. In these instances, the child is not allowed to have a mind of its own, and mothering can then be considered vampiric [*sic*], a form of possession in which the mother needs to colonize the child’s body and soul for her survival. (Almond 20)

Almond identifies two versions of the vampiric mother. The first type feeds *from* the child, gaining narcissistic gratification from the child’s attachment to the mother herself such that “love of the child is always somewhat conditional on the mother receiving this kind of feeding” (Almond 165). The second type feeds “*into* the child—food in the form of ideas, behaviors, allegiances, and beliefs...to a degree that may totally co-opt the child’s autonomy” (165). In both cases, the mother’s “need to *literally survive* psychologically through the child” supersedes the child’s needs, wants, and own survival. Both, however, are wrapped up in a colonial logic of psychic extraction.

Vampiric mothering characterizes Damaris's relationship to Chirli. She feeds *from* the canine daughter with "infantile ruthlessness, where desperate need leads to possession" (Almond 173). Through her name, Chirli is humanized sufficiently enough to provide Damaris with the validation of possessing a child, drawing from it the social and psychic life force to sustain her past her trauma. She also *feeds into* Chirli by depositing onto her the burden and expectation of physical female excellence. According to Register, this projection is necessary "in order for the dog to fully transform into a surrogate daughter" because "she must conform to human notions of womanhood in the same way a human daughter would have" (129). Chirli is thus reduced to a strictly delineated role—that of daughter—that ultimately ignores the reality of her animal body. If "maternal practice begins in a response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world," then Damaris has failed to take on the definitive act of motherhood: interpretation of the child other (Ruddick 17). By using Chirli to suspend recognition of physical failure, Damaris visibilizes the interpretative failure to mother.

However, Chirli is not the only victim of vampiric consumption. Damaris, who has been functionally orphaned at a young age and raised while working alongside her aunt, can also be understood as a victim of extraction. Haunted by Nicolasito's death and beset by the parasite of racial hierarchies, Damaris is plagued by the specters of colonial violence. Understanding Damaris as a victim of vampiric motherhood entails returning to her past as the site of the "double wound": Nicolasito's death, reanimated through Chirli. The novel never clarifies if the original trauma is, as some scholars suggest, the horror of being responsible for Nicolasito's death, or, as I suggest above, the horror of *being held responsible*. This is not merely a semantic difference. The former, the trauma of being responsible, implies a primary and an uncritical investment in the neocolonial racial hierarchy that structures her family's interaction with the

Reyes. Under this framework, Damaris's guilt is organic, flourishing independently due to an always-already understanding of the Reyes's inherent superiority, her utility to them, and the role she is expected to perform within the neocolonial economy of the Colombian Pacific. This assumes that colonial hierarchies are innate and passively maintained. However, *La perra* argues exactly the opposite, exposing the meticulous construction of the very same. Damaris's initial reaction to witnessing Nicolasito's death is blank shock and horror at the suddenness of his disappearance. "La imagen quedó grabada en la memoria de Damaris así: un niño blanco y alto frente al mar, a continuación el chorro blanco de la ola y luego nada, las peñas vacías sobre un mar que a lo lejos parecía tranquilo" (31). This description eschews affect, focusing on the bare bones of his death. It is not until after the image has been subjected to the revisionist lens of time that Damaris adds an additional detail: "Y ella ahí, junto a las arrieras, sin poder hacer nada" (31).

Nicolasito's death is processed in a specific sequence. The emphasis on visual stimulus suggests that the scene is removed from Damaris entirely, like an art patron studying a painting through protective glass. Damaris is at a literal and metaphorical distance from the events of his death, physically removed from the area where it occurs and incapable of reaching him or convincing him to come back. After this static image of sudden disappearance, Damaris begins to feel the weight of her inability and survivor's guilt begins to set in. This natural response to trauma is co-opted by her uncle, who emphasizes her culpability through corporeal punishment.

El tío Eliécer estaba ayudando en la búsqueda, y por las tardes, cuando llegaba con las malas noticias, se sentaba en un tronco que tenían en la entrada de la cabaña. Damaris sabía que esa era la señal para que se acercara. Lo hacía sin demora, pues no quería que él se enojara más de lo que ya lo estaba. Entonces el tío agarraba una rama de guayabo dura

y elástica y la azotaba. La tía Gilma le había dicho que no se tensara, que entre más flojos tuviera los muslos, que era donde el tío le pegaba, menos le dolería. Ella lo intentaba, pero el susto y el estallido del primer latigazo hacían que apretara todos los músculos, y cada nuevo latigazo la lastimaba más que el anterior. Sus muslos parecían la espalda de Cristo. (32)

Eliécer's use of whipping as correctional behavior illustrates the forceful application of colonial technologies of racialized subjugation. Damaris's whipped flesh recalls both biblical and literary predecessors who have famously fallen victim to such brutality. Her guilt is an external imposition lashed into her by her uncle, normalized by her aunt, and reaffirmed by every interaction with the Reyes. Damaris is a Black girl, two intersecting identities that are considered less valuable than that of the white boy, Nicolasito. She is not guilty of his death; she is blamed for not protecting the colonial hierarchy of gender and race that considers her inferior. To paraphrase Sommer again, Damaris did not know her place. The trauma of Nicolasito's death, then, is the trauma of discovering her own relative (un)worth.

The difference between being guilty and being blamed is significant because the latter reconfigures the trauma as an uncanny revelation of Damaris's own sub-life in the face of Nicolasito's death. Her life was not her own, as she had previously assumed: it only existed for another's benefit. If, to quote Hunt, the jungle "becomes home to beings who are not alive, yet undead," then Damaris is yet another undead thing living within it (81). Her inferior life is worthwhile only inasmuch as it props up the existence of another. Almond reminds us that "The undead don't age, don't die, and don't really live. It is a state of endless dependence and possession by another, a state that has to do not just with passivity and surrender but also, more specifically, with the inability to choose, change, individuate, and relate" (Almond 174). Damaris

exemplifies these traits, living in an elastic temporality, unable to move beyond her childhood trauma, incapable of producing life. She is both vampire and victim, thrust into a state of undeath, doomed to repeat the cycle of colonial violence with her canine daughter.

This repetition is, as Kimberly Juanita Brown has argued, inseparable from a gendered understanding of slavery's racial brutality. "In slavery's heightened visible register, gender delineates the force and future repetition of the usable corpus" (Brown 15). This sentiment is mirrored in Jacqueline Rose's argument that "the male colonisation [*sic*] of mothers' bodies starts inside the womb" (54). The bodies of captive Black women were used to reproduce a colonial system that required human replenishing, and the tropes of both of the hypersexualized Black body—the Salomés of transatlantic literature whose beauty and sensuality "tempt" white men—and the desexed figure of the Black nursemaid, or "mammy," are discursive technologies that justified or minimized the brutality of white control. In fact, Brown argues that the trope of the nursemaid in particular is the site of a white apologist rhetoric wherein "the cultural possession of the nursemaid's body and reproductive capacities is inextricable from the guilt/blame paradigm slave nations have been unable to address nationally" (73). By removing the trace of subversive sexuality from her body but preserving her reproductive function, the trope of the nursemaid glazes over the sexual and reproductive violence that white colonial patriarchy imposed in order to reproduce their own dominion. In other words, it allows white-coded national reproduction to continue with the racial blessing of Black women.

The colonial co-opting of Black women's bodies is a racially updated Madonna/whore binary that Damaris critically subverts. Her nonbiological maternity situates her closer to the nursemaid-and-Madonna category, but unlike the archetype, Damaris emphasizes the impossibility of subsuming colonial violence into racial catharsis. With her clumsy body and

nonexistent sexuality, Damaris's desperate desire for motherhood is a strategic internalization of the mammy figure intended to reinforce, rather than transcend, both guilt and blame. She longs for motherhood because it is a method of elevating her inherent worth in a community still rippling with the aftereffects of chattel slavery and other technologies of unfreedom. It is important to note that Damaris herself is an unsalaried domestic worker who lives and works in the Reyes property after they have returned to Bogotá for good. She works for no pay at a white family's jungle estate; their absence does not erase the perpetuation of colonial regimes of racialized power. Indeed, Register argues that "under contemporary models of power stemming from Latin America's colonial past, the physical presence of the master is no longer even necessary insofar as modern social relations and structures are founded upon the idea of race" (131). Damaris's dream of mothering plays out the fantasy of the nursemaid who nurtures the futurity of both the white collective, embodied by Nicolasito, and the Black, embodied by Chirli. By the end of the novel, both collectives are doomed: Chirli has destroyed Nicolasito's precious curtains decorated with images from *The Jungle Book*, which presages her murder. Damaris's involvement in the death of both white and Black futurity evinces the spectacular failure of colonial reconciliation through maternity.

The visual resonance of slavery in *La perra* speaks to the lingering presence of racial hierarchies in contemporary Colombia, coterminous with the jungle's savagery. As the colonial setting par excellence of some of humanity's most brutal history, the jungle, and by extension, nature itself, "becomes a living cemetery" that "swallows not to kill, but to allow ghosts to live undead in memory; an ecological site in which decay itself becomes productive, even fertile" (Hunt 87). In *La perra*, Western civilization's myth of mother/nature takes on literal dimensions, foregrounding the role of the female body as a site of unsettling contradiction.

2.5 Conclusion

An anthropocentric hierarchy of life in which a human's feelings are valued more highly than the safety of her canine daughter represents, by way of analogy, the violent logic that coheres maternal domination over the child, human or otherwise.

As Chirli grows out of the maternal-infant relationship Damaris had projected onto her, she starts to become yet another manifestation of the jungle's grip on Damaris's life. Instead of transcending the jungle through motherhood, Damaris is interpellated even further by the jungle's barbarizing effect. The savage death she inflicts upon the dog confirms the depth of savagery within herself, what Register identifies as "the human's privilege to enact privatized violence" (133). Taussig argues that an anthropomorphized jungle can "better reflect back to the colonists vast and baroque projections of *human* wildness" that enables "the torturer to become the savage" (83). Mothering becomes yet another failed colonial fantasy.

Furthermore, the Chirli's violent death at the hands of her human mother meditates on the colonial thrust of institutional motherhood in postcolonial settings. Does Damaris's action border on murder because she has humanized her dog? Or does it border on murder because the dog is pregnant? Paradoxically, in a society where female adults are neglected to death and female infants are perceived as burdens, the value of a female body, be it human or canine, is elevated by its successful reproduction. Because she is pregnant, Chirli is temporarily imbued with the value granted to a reproductive body. This inverts the hierarchy of human-nonhuman relations: a dog becomes more valuable than a human because of her higher potential for new life.

Leonardo-Loayza reminds us that we can interpret Damaris's animosity towards Chirli in two ways. Damaris could be responding as a mother who is disappointed in her daughter's actions and fearful of her growing independence. She could also be responding as a barren

woman who has longed for the very reality that another woman ostensibly does not value the same (79). This latter interpretation is particularly compelling as it argues that envy was the motivating factor behind Damaris's act. In other words, is Chirli's death a result of infanticide or homicide? Damaris perceives in her relationship to Chirli a cutthroat competition in which both females are vying for reproductive power and Damaris has lost. This loss deepens the shame she feels about her body's perceived lack of social value. Ultimately, this negative affect precludes the possibility of mutual familial care and cross-species solidarity, thus negating Leonardo-Loayza's alternative interpretation that Damaris is motivated "por la conducta rebelde de Chirli hacia su madre protésica" (80). On the contrary, Damaris is a woman unable to comply with her society's and her own demand for reproductive femininity, which leads her to view the dog's pregnancy with deadly envy. Thus, Damaris does not merely kill her canine child: she eliminates a rival threatening her access to the seat of power.

These facts beg the question: what is the nature of motherhood? In chapter one, I argued that girls are gendered as female by the institutional recognition of their reproductive abilities; that is, they are recognized first as mothers, and that creates the condition through which they are labeled as girls. Thus motherhood, in its real, potential, or symbolic application, is the gender into which women are socialized. Damaris, as I have argued above, exists in a neocolonial structure that has conditioned the possibilities of her existence as an Afro-Colombian woman, including her exercise of motherhood. Her maternal claim over Chirli is an extension of this structuring principle that extracts social and material value from natural resources for the purpose of enriching the colonizing agent. Though her relationship with Chirli, her canine daughter, is initially fulfilling and reciprocal, Damaris experiences her dog's growth and desire for freedom as a direct attack on her suitability as a mother. Chirli's frequent escapes and long

absences aggravate Damaris's latent inferiority and abandonment issues, which results in a hostile attitude towards Chirli upon the dog's return. Weaponized neglect, verbal abuse, and various physical punishments rain down on Chirli, increasing in frequency and intensity until Damaris, in a fit of rage and envy, strangles her canine daughter to death upon learning that she is pregnant with a litter of her own. The violent course of events in the novel reveals the master-slave dynamic inherent in Damaris's exercise of motherhood. Her fantasized mothering cannot escape from the reality of Chirli's biological use-value: a dog, an animal, a beast of burden, a natural resource that Damaris longs to extract from the jungle's living body.

In the novel's maternal politics, motherhood functions as an institution of immense real and symbolic authority grounded in colonial precedence. In *La perra* and the other novels discussed here, motherhood has the power to civilize barbarity and tame savages, yet it is itself inextricable from institutional violence and cruelty. By placing motherhood at the center of the jungle, *La perra* borrows from both national romances and *novelas de la selva* to articulate a confrontation of woman vs. nature. Instead of a male patriarch who tames the savagery of the wild, we have a woman who attempts to domesticate her own body. Reproduction is the wild stallion to be reined; motherhood is the ultimate form of female control. And Damaris has failed. There is no redemption or triumph for her, there is only defeat and the slow, creeping brutality of a femininity that consumes.

The imbrication of institutional motherhood, racialized abjection, and the modern state will also be the subject of Chapter Three. In it, I explore how motherhood's promise of redemption may bridge the false gap between transgression and innocence, represented by a travesti mother and her adopted son, respectively.

3 TRAVESTI MOTHERHOOD AND QUEER KINSHIP IN CAMILA SOSA VILLADA'S *LAS MALAS*

Una sola travesti es suficiente para iluminar, engrandecer, o incluso revelar lo criminal de un Estado. Tan solo con una travesti se resuelve la orfandad de un niño.

Camila Sosa Villada

3.1 Introduction

On January 23, 2025, Argentine President Javier Milei issued a fiery speech at the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Switzerland in which he denounced “wokeism” for threatening the liberal values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of property. Milei’s argument, delivered to a roomful of world leaders, argued that leftist ideologies have traded in the concept of *liberty* for the concept of *liberation*. This slippage amounts to an ideological volta that eschews the individual at the heart of the concept of liberty in favor of the collective inherent to the concept of liberation. The political subject par excellence is thus shifted from individual to identity, with all of its connotations of community solidarity. In Milei’s estimation, the collective political subject coheres around a group of disgruntled individuals that band together because they perceive themselves to be victimized by the State’s lack of protective measures. Their unifying rally is to demand recognition and reparation of institutional neglect or harm. In an attempt to recenter the liberty of the individual political subject, Milei denounces a wide array of collective action groups that advocate for the liberation of marginalized identities: “Feminism, diversity, inclusion, equity, immigration, abortion, environmentalism, gender ideology, among others. These are various heads of the same beast aimed at justifying the state’s expansion

through the appropriation and distortion of noble causes.”¹ Milei systematically attacks each political collective using rhetoric that places protection of another, presumably more important marginalized group at its center: children.

Children, or some imagined, idealized version of them, justify the political attacks that Milei levies against the above collectives. Children, real or imagined, are the first victims of the political goals that collective action groups strive for, the most threatening of which is “gender ideology.” Milei’s discourse left absolutely clear that “gender ideology is outright child abuse” and that homosexual parents “are pedophiles.” By using the specter of child abuse to justify his attack against gender ideology and homosexuality, Milei enacts a rigid binary between children and queerness at large. This binary is a trap: no rhetorical defense is possible when the terms of debate require one to argue against a child’s wellbeing. To borrow from Lee Edelman, “the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought” (Edelman, 2). Ironically, this Child—a fantasy constructed upon moral notions of purity, innocence, and above all, vulnerability—is all of these things due in large part to its systemic *exclusion* from political participation. Milei’s homophobic fear-mongering belies a system of values that holds queerness and children as irreconcilable and incompatible: an unstoppable force, an immovable object. Queerness, as Milei posits, is that contaminated collective whose transgressive sexuality perverts anything it touches. Queerness thus necessarily entails its equal and opposite force: a collective free from transgression that must remain pure at all costs. The concept of children is thus the structuring principle of all political discourse: it limits political discourse by “rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal

¹ The English translation of President Milei’s speech is provided by the World Economic Forum website, where a transcript of the original script in Spanish is also available.

relations” (Edelman, 2). To paraphrase in other words, the Child is the value given to the variable in a sociopolitical equation intent on zeroing out queerness.

But what if queerness and children could be reconciled? What if queerness did not have to sanitize its transgressive edge to be considered acceptable for child-rearing? Camila Sosa Villada explores these questions in *Las malas*, a fictional microcosm of contemporary queer Argentina where sex work, travesti identity, and queer motherhood coalesce. The novel follows a group of travesti sex workers as they discover and rescue a newborn child from the park where he has been abandoned. The oldest of them, La Tía Encarna, takes him in and raises him as her own son in a communal pink house where all the travestis in her group found shelter and succor as young, queer children abandoned by their respective biological families. The novel alternates between the overarching narrative of the travesti mother and her cisgender son and the individual travestis that make up their community. One by one, their individual stories are narrated by Camila, the fictitious narrator whose name, voice, and own story mirrors that of the novel’s author. The resulting narrative is a fractured, multifaceted ode to the queer, travesti underbelly of Argentine culture, as well as a searing criticism of the heteropatriarchal violence that inheres Argentina’s body politic.

This chapter traces the travesti mothers’ entangled labors: how their sex work, care work, and domestic labor weave in and out of the State and its various tentacles. Far from defending the false binary between queerness and children, I argue that bringing these two figures together in their Symbolic force reveals more fully the ideological investments of the State: patriarchy, heterosexuality, the invisibilization and neglect of politically vulnerable populations. Furthermore, I argue that the abject conditions of the mothering environment allow a creative, collective consciousness to flourish, one imbued with a shared commitment to the protection and

preservation of the individual, in direct contradiction to President Milei's rhetorical stance.

Though the novel's primary mother-child dyad is short-lived, the queer maternal collective lives on in vivid colors, refusing the State's attempts to silence or humiliate them. This, I argue, is more than defiance: it is radical survival in the most treacherous of environments. Maternity under patriarchal Argentine culture becomes the dangerous space queer bodies inhabit, and yet care work amongst themselves, rendered intelligible as mothering, is inherent to the protection and existence of collective travesti culture.

To better understand the myriad socio-political conditions of travesti motherhood, I will first analyze cultural discourses on travesti identity in Argentina. Then, I will explore how travesti becoming is embodied in the novel's formal elements, before moving on to critique of the state's interdiction on queer mothering. Finally, I will analyze the role of othermothers in the novel's representation of travesti community to meditate on the possibility of a democratic motherhood.

3.2 A Historical Approach to Queerness in Argentina

Before entering into a discussion of the different nuances of the terms travesti, transexual, and transgender, we must first establish a common definition sex and gender. Broadly speaking, sex refers to the physical body. It is the collection of anatomical parts and physiological processes that are commonly recognized as markers of distinct biological sex. A binary system of sex insists on the existence of two, mutually exclusive sexes: woman and man. While there exist many chromosomal, endocrinological, and physiological possibilities that problematize a simple classification of sex, a binary system ignores these to focus instead on the immediately visible external sexual organs recognized at birth. The appearance of external genitalia is the ultimate

arbiter of sex in a binary system, regardless of the body's internal biological nuances. The sexed body is rendered socially intelligible through gender, which describes the collection of rituals, habits, expectations, and roles that are typically linked to a body's sex. While these two are now commonly understood to describe separate entities, a binary understanding tends to associate sex and gender in cause-and-effect form: one's sex "naturally" dictates one's gender. In other words, one's social behavior and self-presentation is presumed to organically arise from the biological fact of one's sex. Thus, the two sexes in a binary system (woman, man) are paired with their corresponding gender (feminine, masculine).

However, contemporary understandings of sex and gender extricate the two from this ostensibly organic relationship and allows us to question the assumptions of a binary system. A deconstructive approach to gender questions the validity of the very category. Travestis and other gender nonconforming people, under this critical lens, not only challenge the binary, they destabilize the ostensible natural relationship between gender, body, and sexuality. Instead, gender becomes a performance, carefully prepped and meticulously executed through various repetitions of signifiers and actions. By performing gender—rather than *expressing* it—travestis and other nonconforming subjects demonstrate the extent to which all subjects engage in this type of performance.

With Butler's notion of performance, we can draw up preliminary understandings of various queer and gender-nonconforming identities. The focus of this chapter is travesti identity, which arises from the verb *travestir*, to cross-dress. In its most reductive form, a travesti is someone who dons the appearance and affectations of the opposite gender. The official definition of the verb *travestir* in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* is "*vestir a alguien con la ropa del sexo contrario*," or "to dress someone in the clothes of the opposite sex." Likewise, they

define *travesti* as “*perona, generalmente hombre, que se viste y se caracteriza como alguien del sexo contrario*” or “a person, generally a man, who dresses and characterizes themselves as someone from the opposite sex.” This simple, brutally truncated definition of both verb and identity is already rife with tension in two important ways. First, the academy deploys sex, instead of gender, in both definitions. This deceptively simple choice belies a binary understanding of sex and gender wherein the latter is an ontological fact that resides in, or emerges from, anatomy. Secondly, the definition of *travesti* as is a paradox: it describes a deliberate, visible social and behavioral transformation (a person who dresses and characterizes themselves as someone from the opposite sex) that is always already impossible under the linguistic parameters of the text (generally a man). As a tool of the academy, the reigning authority of speech and linguistic culture in Spanish speaking countries, the dictionary does not describe meaning, but rather adjudicates meaning according to its own ideological investments. We must, then, find other definitions.

One such definition comes from Victoria Barreda, an Argentine anthropologist who studies travesti culture in Buenos Aires. Using a descriptive, not prescriptive, approach, Barreda defines *travestismo* as a form of gender construction characterized by a “*complejo proceso en el plano simbólico y físico de adquisición de atributos interpretados como femeninos*” (“complex process of acquiring attributes interpreted as feminine on the symbolic and physical level”). This process involves acquiring external signifiers of femininity, such as traditionally feminine garments and make-up, as well as modifying the body through surgical and cosmetic intervention, such as injecting silicone to mold breasts and curves. Barreda reminds us that a desire for femininity is not, however, a desire for femaleness. Travestis, she argues, not only don’t want to be women, they also don’t want to possess female bodies, despite that being their

principal reference of the feminine: “las travestis no solo no quieren ser mujeres, sino que tampoco quieren poseer cuerpos de mujeres, a pesar de que éste sea su principal referente de lo femenino” (8). Instead, travestis’ gender construction allows for the co-existence of feminine and masculine traits, regardless of the individual’s assigned sex at birth.

Similarly, travesti activist, artist, and scholar Malú Machuca Rose describes *travesti* as a complex, multifaceted construction that does not seek to mimic or possess femaleness. However, Rose’s definition includes an emphatic awareness of the intersectional reality of gender that Barreda’s did not account for. In her own words:

Travesti is not woman and is not trans. Travesti is classed and raced: it means you do not present femininely all of the time because you cannot afford to. It means the use of body technologies to transform one’s body does not come from a doctor’s office but from resourcefulness in the face of *precarización*, the act by which the matrix of domination makes our bodies and our lives precarious. ¿*Más clarito*? It means you get creative, you use pens for eyeliner, get your hormones and silicones from your friends underground, or use *tinta* instead of *testosterona* to transform your body... Travesti is the refusal to be trans, the refusal to be woman, the refusal to be intelligible. (Rose 243)

Rose’s definition introduces several important aspects of *travesti* identity that cannot be understated. Among these, the artistic impulse towards self (re)creation, even in the face of social unintelligibility, and the embrace of queer community, both of which will play pivotal roles in Sosa Villada’s novel. However, perhaps the most important element gleaned from Rose’s definition is the clear acknowledgment of the institutional precarity under which *travestis* carry out their self-construction. Cole Rizki, in his introduction to the 2019 special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, extends Rose’s understanding of the matrix of domination that

conditions *travesti* possibilities. *Travesti*, he claims, is “an always already racialized and classed geopolitical identification that gestures toward the inseparability of indigeneity, blackness, material precarity, sex work, HIV status, and uneven relationships to diverse state formations” (149). These multiple institutional entanglements indicate that *travesti* describes an experience unique to each Latin American country’s specific regional context, and thus cannot be fully comprehended without local detail. Furthermore, the specificity of the term means that *travesti* is not synonymous with the English word trans. It is nevertheless important to note that “in English, transgender often needs to be modified in order to respond to local hierarchies of race, class, ability, and other forms of difference,” whereas in Spanish, *travesti* is always already intersectional, and thus in constant tension with the State (Rizki 148).

In Argentina, the emergence of *travesti* identity is inseparable from the growth of both the medical and juridico-political institutions. In her excellent book, *Cuerpos desobedientes: travestismo e identidad de género*, Josefina Fernández combines archival research, sociological fieldwork, and insightful theoretical context to offer an initial introduction to the study of *travestismo* in both the West, broadly, and Argentina, specifically, beginning with the “médicos criminólogos,” or medical criminologists, of the late nineteenth century. According to these early medical professionals, an individual’s “deviations” from heterosexuality’s norms, including sexual activities, preferences, or self-presentation, were perceived as manifestations of latent criminal behavior (Fernández 23). In an attempt to explain the “aberrant” phenomena of homosexuality, the medical sciences established a definition of normative gender that relied on both anatomical, physiological, and social factors. If we accept Foucault’s notion that “sex is to be deciphered on the basis of its relation to the law,” then it becomes clear that in Argentina, as in

many other places in the world, the growing interest in defining human sexuality and its criminal deviations was a tool of the state (Foucault 83).

The nineteenth century's anxieties regarding deviant (that is, non-heteronormative) behavior is also reflective of the nascent republican democracy's political aims. The era's political discourse heavily concerned national reproduction and civic education. As a result, the heterosexual family unit emerged as a microcosm of the state, wherein national values and traditions could be nurtured and developed. Any manifestation of homosexuality "socavaba la existencia misma de la Nación, al fomentar uniones sexuales estériles en una era obsesionada por la reproducción nacional y la supervivencia internacional" (Fernández 25). This fear extended beyond the nuclear family to encompass other spaces of civic formation, such as schools and the military (Fernández 25). In this context, homosexuality was reconfigured as a direct threat to the family, the nation, and the future.

With the increased prominence of the nuclear family as a tool of national civic education, women also enjoyed a growing importance in the newly formed republican democracy, as future mothers and educators of the children who would become citizens, subjects, and leaders of the Argentine state. However, as Thomas Genova points out, national motherhood was not without its limitations. Criollo anxieties regarding the colonial legacy of racial and cultural mestizaje in Latin America led newly elected criollo presidents to revalorize the reproductive role of white, European-descended women. "Motherhood ceased to be regarded as a natural condition equally available to all women and came to be understood as a function of bourgeois-republican society" (Genova 30) Homosexuality and racialized femininity were considered co-contaminants as early criollo leaders attempted to triangulate heterosexual activity, national futurity, and institutional motherhood. This chasm between heterosexuality, whiteness, and national interests, on the one

hand, and homosexuality, racialized communities, and criminalization, on the other, articulates the symbolic division between queerness and child-rearing present in both President Milei's January 2025 speech and Camila Sosa Villada's novel.

3.3 Formal Elements & Literary Taxonomies

Born in 1982 in Córdoba Province, Camila Sosa Villada is a well-known figure in Argentina's contemporary literary scene. The first years of her life were spent with her family in various small towns of Córdoba Province, including La Falda and Mina Clavero, before eventually settling in Córdoba proper. There, she began studying communications and theater in the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba and worked as a sex worker by night to sustain her student lifestyle by day. Her many works are heavily influenced by her life experience and explore themes of travesti identity, queer desire, and marginalization. An accomplished playwright and actress, Sosa Villada wrote and starred in *Carnes tolendas: Retrato escénico de una travesti* (2009), a biodrama that narrates a fictionalized version of the playwright's life and experience as a travesti. The success of this first play propelled Sosa Villada to the national spotlight and paved the way for a career in film, theater and television in Buenos Aires. In 2015, after starring in a film and television series, she published *La novia de Sandro*, a book of poetry that includes, among many standout fragments, an ode to her "fealdad"—a cipher for her body's palimpsestic masculine traits. Likewise, *El viaje inútil*, her subsequent publication in 2018, is a collection of essays that meditates on her life and identity. In 2019, Sosa Villada published both *Las malas* and *Tesis sobre una domesticación*. The former, an expanded novelization of Sosa Villada's 2017 play *El cabaret de la Difunta Correa*, dramatizes the story of La Tía Encarna, her adopted child, and their travesti community. It received the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in 2020. In

contrast to both *Las malas* and *El cabaret*, *Tesis sobre una domesticación* deemphasizes radical queer solidarity to explore the fissures and failures of an ostensibly successful queer family. The novel centers a queer nuclear family composed of a successful travesti actress, her handsome gay husband, and their HIV-positive adopted son. Though each novel is a stand-alone narrative, the shared themes of travesti motherhood, queer desire, and artistic ambition situate the two in a similar fictional realm. This similarity is also characteristic of *Soy una tonta por quererte*, a collection of short stories published in 2022 that contain many details of the author's own life.

Given these many examples, it would be fair to characterize Sosa Villada's work as autofiction that incorporates autobiographical details into its worldbuilding. None of the texts, however, are strictly autobiographies, even when their formal elements give that impression. In *Las malas*, the narrator, Camila, shares her name with the author, and many other traits besides. Both narrator and author are travestis with a history of sex work in Córdoba and a deep love of literature. They both come from a conservative family that rejected their lifestyle and forced them out of the house as teenagers and into the streets, where they resorted to sex work to carve out a living and a community for themselves. The similarities expand beyond author and narrator to encompass many of the other travesti characters, as I will discuss below. The structural similarities between author and characters suggest that the novel, though a work of fiction, is nevertheless invested in a reality that Sosa Villada recreates for readers. By highlighting the gaze, experience, and sensibility of travestis, Sosa Villada offers her book as a reliable object of travesti epistemology.

The novel's setting offers an initial entry point to the travesti experience. The novel takes place in the city of Córdoba, but the constellation of characters is largely composed of individuals who are not from the city. Camila, the narrator, has come to Córdoba after migrating

from Mina Clavero in Córdoba Province in order to secure a different future for herself than what her traditional, conservative town could offer. This reflects Sosa Villada's own personal trajectory: a small town travesti in the province of Córdoba who sought better education, better opportunities, and artistic freedom in an urban capital, Buenos Aires, far from her rural origin. Likewise, La Tía Encarna is originally from elsewhere: Spanish by birth, though settled in Córdoba for many decades. The intentional and deliberate displacement of travesti characters reflects the reality of travesti, transgender, and otherwise queer individuals in Argentina who are often forced to leave their places of origin due to the abundance of violence, discrimination, and limitations they face upon assuming their preferred gender identity or sexual orientation (Berkins, 2015).

Voluntary displacement within and occasionally between countries also conditions individuals' relationship to their biological families. For many travestis in Sosa Villada's novel and Berkins' report, the negative impact in biological kinship ties is, at least initially, an important catalyst in the move. Camila, for example, recalls that her parents began manifesting anti-travesti vitriol when she began expressing gender nonconforming behaviors. Her mother's shame, disappointment, and loathing of her travesti son is the backdrop of Camila's upbringing. Likewise, her father's verbal and physical abuse of both Camila and her mother, as well as his repeated insistence that they would find Camila dying of venereal diseases abandoned in a ditch generates a fear in young Camila that nothing else can match: "No hubo ni policía ni clientes ni crueldades que me hicieran temer del modo en que temía a mi papá" (60). Prioritized higher on the rung of institutional injustices and sources of violence is her father, from whom escape is nearly impossible while living at home. Thus, though both parents punish Camila in their own

way for being travesti, it is ultimately her father's violence that catalyzes Camila's decision to leave home while still a teenager.

In this way, the fictional world of *Las malas* is a microcosm of travesti experience in Argentine society. Berkins reminds us that childhood is not protected for travestis; indeed, the two spaces that define childhood—the family home and school—are more often than not hubs of homo- and transphobic intolerance. This daily, inescapable violence propels young queer and gender nonconforming kids to emancipate themselves from those sources of violence in favor of the streets, where at least the hardships they may experience do not originate from the very people that are supposed to care for them. As Berkins put it:

En ese período vital en que todas y todos necesitamos contención y protección para crecer, nosotras nos enfrentamos a la incompreensión o la agresión de nuestras familias, la hostilidad cotidiana en los lugares en donde nos criamos y la indiferencia o los ataques de maestras, maestros, compañeras y compañeros en la escuela. Por eso decimos que nuestra es una infancia interrumpida ya que estas circunstancias nos llevan a vivir en un mundo de adultos y adultas, con quienes debemos negociar los términos de nuestra subsistencia de diversas maneras. (Berkins 75)

For a significant portion of travestis in Buenos Aires, these strategies of subsistence include geographical distance from the biological family. To quote from the novel, “Irse de todos los lugares. Eso es ser travesti” (Sosa Villada 162).

However, the loss of the nuclear family carries other consequences as well: financial insecurity, educational disadvantages, and housing instability. These are the obstacles that travestis must navigate in both the diegetic and external setting Sosa Villada presents in her novel. In both fictional and real-world settings, interdependence with a strong travesti

community provides emotional, material, and social support, eases the hurdles in one's path, and allows for some level of stability such that individuals can reasonably strive for normative markers of success: a job, a home, a social life.

The similarities between travestis in the macro and micro levels point to, on the one hand, the novel's function as a mirror to the "real" travesti underbelly of Argentine society and, on the other, the narrator's slipperiness within the world she narrates. Like Dante Alighieri, under whose statue the travestis gather throughout the night, Camila positions herself as a sort of guide through a travesti hellscape teeming with infernal truths. She, like the other travestis in her community, is from elsewhere; she, like others, has a vexed and unsatisfying relationship with her biological family; she, like others, depends on sex work for a steady income. However, unlike the rest, Camila is a reader, writer, and scholar. She attends university by day in order to pursue a creative career that she knows will provide opportunities for personal and professional growth. Thus, Camila is just as much an observer of the travesti abjection she narrates as interpellated character within it. Her ostensibly biographical interjections expand the travesti tapestry she weaves, while simultaneously revealing her unique investments in experiences and opportunities that are beyond reach of her community.

In an effort to articulate the accuracy of Sosa Villada's fictional representation, many scholars have debated the novel's genre. Some scholars argue that *Las malas* has many elements that may position it closer to the genre of magical realism than that of biographical representation. Sánchez Osoreo argues that the mix of magical realist elements in an autofictional novel represents Sosa Villada's strategic construction of a "real maravilloso queerizado" (137) or "queer marvelous real," thus situating *Las malas*, a novel about marginalized identities, in direct conversation with Alejo Carpentier and the entire lineage of modern Latin American

fiction. Furthermore, Sánchez Osoreo reads *Las malas* as an example of a “novela de fracaso” or “novel of failure” that makes trans individuals the authors of their own (un)intelligibility. This genre of novel is

[e]l tipo de ficción política fundada en una diégesis que narra vidas fracasadas, es decir, la de aquellas subjetividades minoritarias como las *queer*...Este tipo de relatos al rechazar determinadas gramáticas sociales degeneran proyectos rectores de la nación como la maternidad, la reproducción, la familia normativa, la blanquitud, la productividad, el éxito en el trabajo, la estabilidad en pareja. En definitiva, estas narraciones develan que los deseos personales no son sino imperativos sociales o fantasías colectivas que responden a retóricas exitistas y triunfalistas; de ahí que las subjetividades fracasadas optan por generar proyectos alternativos y deconstructivos. (Sánchez Osoreo 134)

[t]he type of political fiction based on a diegesis that narrates failed lives, that is, the lives of minoritized subjectivities such as queer ones...By rejecting certain social grammars, these types of stories degenerate projects that govern the nation, such as maternity, reproduction, the normative family, whiteness, productivity, professional success, [and] stable partnerships. Ultimately, these narratives reveal that personal desires are nothing more than social imperatives or collective fantasies that respond to success-ist and triumphalist rhetorics; hence, failed subjectivities choose to generate alternative and deconstructive projects.

Part of this deconstructive bent is an attempt to reclaim the constitutional infelicity of queer and trans bodies. By infelicity, I invoke the polysemantic possibilities of the word “felicity,” defined

by Merriam Webster as “the quality or state of being happy,” “something that causes happiness,” and “an apt expression.” In performance theory, speech acts can be either felicitous, if they “produce the effects or initiate a set of consequences,” or infelicitous “if [the speaker is] not in a position to have [their] words considered binding” (Butler 16).² In the case of *Las malas*, travesti identity is inherently an infelicitous performance of female identity insofar as it does *not* produce the effects of being a cisgendered woman in society. Furthermore, as Sánchez Osoreo reminds us, queer individuals are considered essentially “infelices” (infelicitous) by heteronormative society, which conjures a host of punishments for travesti subjects for existing outside heterosexual binaries. These punishments include social rejection, violence, diminished access to biological kinship ties, reduced access to state institutions, loss of home, and reduced educational opportunities, according to the *Informe nacional sobre la situación de las travestis, transexuales y transgéneros* of 2015. The rejection faced by travestis at the societal level creates a hostile environment in which travestis are neither happy nor cause happiness.

This constitutional and polysemous infelicity at the diegetic level is mirrored in the novel’s genre. The same rejection that marginalizes travestis also grants them the possibility of strategically appropriating the stigma of nonconformity to configure other speaking positions and other affective politics (Sánchez Osoreo 141). In this way, Sosa Villada “situates her aesthetic artefact in the margins, in a fiction-reality that destabilizes the traditional classification of literary genres. By passing her auto fictional speech as a novel, she questions and problematizes the category of transgenderism in literature” (Sánchez Osoreo 135).

While Sánchez Osoreo has focused more heavily on the novel as a “novel of failure,” following J. Halberstam’s notion of queer failure, others have posited the novel as a “novela

² See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 1997.

pesimista” (Leonardo-Loayza 71). Engaging José Esteban Muñoz’s thoughts on queer disidentification and Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, Leonardo-Loayza argues that the travesti subject embodies abjection, as her paradoxical power to simultaneously attract and repulse lures others in by the power of intrigue and disgust. As such, the travesti body becomes a site of contention where all meaning is lost. Ironically, it is precisely this tension that allows for travesti representation to exist at all: the sexualization of travesti subjects and their social denigration by heteronormative society allows them to secure their place of enunciation. In this way, Leonardo-Loayza and Sánchez Osos coincide: taken together, their readings suggest that the novel itself is *transgénero*, in that it subverts traditional literary genres.

Let’s return briefly to the disidentification mentioned above. As Muñoz reminds us, “disidentification” refers to a variety of survival strategies that minority queer subjects employ “in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 4). When queerness is represented in order to be ridiculed or shamed by heterosexual society, queer individuals must find strategies to balance the joy of identifying *with* the queer other and the fear of being identified *as* the queer other. These strategies provide queer subjects a powerful opportunity for self-formation, and they are evident in the novel’s various characters: La Tía Encarna’s theatrical mothering of both her travesti community and her adopted son (Sosa Villada 29, 33, 47, 84); her fascination with La Difunta Correa, a popular Argentine saint whose miraculous feat of maternal nourishment beyond death becomes an inspiration for La Tía Encarna’s own mothering (111); and Camila’s affirmation that “todas queríamos ser madres” despite everyone’s rejection by their biological families (64). Throughout the novel, travesti self-formation is rooted in the quest for maternal agency. Travesti and mother are not antonyms; on

the contrary, the logic of the novel suggests that the two are closely related processes of gender-affirming becoming.

The novel's consistent interest in travesti, maternal self-formation first appears in the epigraph. The quote, "Todas íbamos a ser reinas," is taken from Gabriela Mistral's poem of the same name. The poem depicts the overwhelming disillusionment of four women as their childhood dreams become crushed by the harsh reality of the world. The poem features four female characters, all of whom dream of finding a loving husband and settling into domestic bliss in a comfortable home by the sea. Of the four women, one falls in love with a sailor who later perishes at sea, one is forced to dedicate her life to raising seven younger brothers and never has children of her own, one abandons her country and her dreams for the sake of love, and one is driven mad by fruitless longing. As such, the poem depicts the cruelty of yearning beyond one's opportunities and the failure to secure a felicitous future. The grammar of the epigraph evinces this cruel optimism: Mistral combines the imperfect tense with a future construction to describe a moment of enunciation in which the speaker reflects on what was long held to be true and never came to be. "Íbamos a ser reinas" points to a longed-for future, dreamed up in an unsatisfying past, that remains unfulfilled in the present moment of speech. In its dissatisfaction with the present possibilities and its nostalgic attachment to a better future, even if such has been proven to not exist, the poem anticipates Jose Esteban Muñoz's definition of queerness as "a structuring and educated mode of desiring" that "lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (Muñoz 1). Sosa Villada's deliberate use of Mistral's quote alludes to the queer futurity at the core of the novel: travestis who live in a harsh present who dream of a travesti utopia, despite knowing the conditions for this utopia do not presently exist. For some, this utopia includes "un niño, un esposo, una casa, un patio, flores en las macetas, una biblioteca,

recibir a los amigos el fin de semana, dejar la prostitucion, reconciliarme con mis padres” (Sosa Villada 31), while for others it means enrolling “en un secundario para adultos, porque no se quería morir sin llevarle a la madre el diploma” (35). In any case, their desire for something beyond the margins of heteronormative existence—what Muñoz terms utopian longing—is catalyzed by their relationship to motherhood: “La llegada del Brillo de los Ojos había convertido nuestro resentimiento en ansia de mejorar” (Sosa Villada 35). With a baby by their side, the various travestis in the novel begin to project themselves as mothers and construct a utopian vision of the future.

In addition to instantiating a queer futurity, the epigraph also functions as a canonical reference point for queer Latin American motherhood. Gabriela Mistral, a canonical poet and national icon, was the first Latin American and Chilean person to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature. Her prolific writing, teaching, and diplomatic career was long plagued by rumors of lesbianism, and recent scholarship argues persuasively in favor of a queer reinterpretation of her persona.³ Mistral’s poems “propose a specifically female sensory experience of infinite sweetness that the poet associates with a creativity antithetical to the patriarchal family, marriage and heterosexuality” (Foster 227). Her poetry’s emphasis on a uniquely maternal, revelatory sensory experience undoes the traditional understanding of Mistral and her oeuvre as displaying a “pattern of desire-longing-frustration-renunciation-transcendence,” a conservative interpretation that served to enforce a rigid division of sex roles in her poetry and life (Foster 227). Despite such scholarship’s attempts to “successfully writ[e] her lesbianism out of existence,” (Molloy 116) Mistral’s own queerness—and possible transgenderism, as evidenced

³ For Mistral’s recent reception in the Chilean national context, see Fiol-Matta, *A queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral* (2002) and *A Queer Mother for the Nation Redux: Gabriela Mistral in the Twenty-First Century* (2014).

by personal correspondence in which she refers to herself in the masculine and signs as “Gabriel”—is felicitously reappropriated by Sosa Villada in *Las malas*. Sosa Villada’s vision of travesti maternity, embodied by La Tía Encarna, places a strong emphasis on nurturing the rejected, injured, abject body, thereby mirroring Mistral’s “ongoing preoccupation with femininity as a visceral experience of blood and breast, entrails, flesh, bone and milk” (Foster 227). Furthermore, La Tía Encarna explicitly links her desire for maternity to Mistral’s figure: her childhood dream was to follow in Mistral’s footsteps and “ser maestra rural” (Sosa Villada 29). Though she does not achieve this dream, La Tía Encarna becomes a mother in her own right, caring for the other travestis and her adopted son, all of whom were rejected and abandoned by their biological families. By invoking the most well-known maternal poet and queer mother of the twentieth century, Sosa Villada justifies her book’s project of weaving together queer poetics, gender nonconformity, and maternal care, thereby redefining what maternity can be.

It is fitting, then, that the transfigurative power of the travesti mother is harnessed in Sosa Villada’s language. Sosa Villada applies the violence of her past to her novel and lays bare the disease at the heart of the binary. The binary line slicing through the sexes manifests as a sadistic urge to peel back language from the heteropatriarchy’s ontological investments. She writes:

El lenguaje es mío. Es mi derecho, me corresponde una parte de él. Vino a mí, yo no lo busqué, por lo tanto, es mío. Me lo heredó mi madre, lo despilfarró mi padre. Voy a destruirlo, a enfermarlo, a confundirlo, a incomodarlo, voy a despedazarlo y a hacerlo renacer tantas veces como sean necesarias, un renacimiento por cada cosa bien hecha en este mundo. (Sosa Villada 172)

The novel’s language is the ultimate act of travesti self-making. The seamless mix of fact and fiction, the instability of genre and gender, and the rich intertextuality with Latin American

canonical texts and other icons of global literature, evinces a fugitive travesti epistemology that refuses to be tamed.

3.4 The Role of the State: Queer Maternity as a New Nation

The first appearance of the Child in Sosa Villada's novel is replete with political and queer signification. Tía Encarna, the self-proclaimed mother of the travestis, finds a newborn abandoned in a city park, soiled in his own blood, tears, and excrement. She reaches into the thicket to save him, pricking herself with thorns and brambles to pull him out. By rescuing him from the life-threatening neglect to which he has been subjected, she inadvertently throws into relief her own vulnerability: she is a sex-worker and a travesti and she holds a bloodied child in her arms. This narrative image functions like an inverted version of art history's Madonna and Child. Instead of representing virginal guardianship of a divine child, the image is inverted, representing instead the threat of whorish corruption. In contrast to the Child's symbolic innocence, Tía Encarna's perceived moral depravity is on full display in this tableau. The visual politics at work here create the expectation of fear for the Child's sake, whose symbolic innocence is reconfigured as imminently exploitable vulnerability. The other travestis who accompany La Tía Encarna are aware of their perception as social and sexual degenerates, and thus cannot bring themselves to rescue the boy—they fear being interpellated as the assailants responsible for the boy's condition, not as his rescuers.

Their fear is warranted. It manifests society's structuring rules which insist against, indeed, render criminal, the vulnerability of children in the face of queerness. Lee Edelman identifies queerness as that which exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality. This reality is one invested in the protection of a Symbolic Child. This Child

is imbued with all the structuring logics of society; for its sake, a communal vision of the future exists. Thus, the Child is a central figure around which politics is formed, and for which the future is assured. For Edelman, queerness stands in opposition to the longevity of the Child's imagined future. Queerness is the crux wherein "narrative realization and derealization overlap" (7), that which bars "every realization of futurity" and functions as "the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form" (4). Edelman understands queerness as that which blocks generational advancement, represented in the form of the Symbolic Child, and dressed in undefined and vague notions of innocence, security, and protection that heteronormative society projects onto it to secure its continued dominance. Children and travestis are incompatible—there are no possible politics in which a gender-transgressive person is not inherently a threat to the physical and emotional wellbeing of a child.

Ironically however, it is not the vulnerability of the child on display in the opening scene of Sosa Villada's novel, but rather the institutional vulnerability of the travesti mother who seeks to care for him. Neither virgin nor mother, Tía Encarna's adoptive maternity is already a tenuous endeavor, and her identity as travesti destabilizes her claim even further. Despite being the agent of rescue and safety, La Tía Encarna, along with all of the travestis in the park, fears she will be perceived as a victimizer. This fear is compounded by the method of extraction she employs to smuggle the injured child out of the park: "Hay que ser travesti y llevar a un recién nacido ensangrentado adentro de una cartera para saber lo que es el miedo" (Sosa Villada 23). The travestis' collective fear response reveals the threat of institutional violence under which they all live. The intersection of sex work, gender transgression, poverty, and racialization generates marginalized subjects. A genocidal State conditions every aspect of travesti existence: they are allowed to exist as pawns in a necropolitical economy but they live in the most abject conditions

possible: beaten, humiliated, subject to sexual assault and state neglect. This violence is, quite literally, mapped onto Tía Encarna's body:

Si alguien quisiera hacer una lectura de nuestra patria, de esta patria por la que hemos jurado morir en cada himno cantado en los patios de la escuela, esta patria que se ha llevado vidas de jóvenes en sus guerras, esta patria que ha enterrado gente en campos de concentración, si alguien quisiera hacer un registro exacto de esa mierda, entonces debería ver el cuerpo de La Tía Encarna. Eso somos como país también, el daño sin tregua al cuerpo de las travestis. La huella dejada en determinados cuerpos, de manera injusta, azarosa y evitable, esa huella de odio. (Sosa Villada 27-28)

La Tía Encarna is named thus because she physically embodies the necropolitics of the State for all vulnerable populations, not just the travesti network within which she exists. Police brutality is etched onto her skin via the long lasting bumps and bruises from past beatings; the carceral system makes itself known in the scars from wounds she gave herself because “siempre es mejor estar en enfermería que en el corazón de la violencia” (28); the necropolitics of Argentine society manifests in the bruises from underground fillers and illegal silicones that have, in the absence of medical supervision, migrated and mottled her skin. Even her advanced age of 178 evinces state neglect, as she is the extraordinary living exception in a country where the average life expectancy of a travesti is 37 years old. She is the exception that proves the rule.

However, La Tia Encarna's body is equally historical monument and personal canvas: a testament to the violence of the State and its institutions, as well as a product of her own creative agency to transform her body to her will. Her body's duality characterizes her mothering practice: she adapts her body to conform to her baby's needs, even when those needs require her to erase her *travestismo*. Disguised in convincing male drag and armed with legal documents

evinced her biologically male identity, La Tía Encarna begins to interact with the public world in an identity she has long rejected in order to legally adopt her son. Doing so affords her the opportunity to justify her claim to a child that is not biologically hers and overcome the legal risk, social death, and moral panic generated by a travesti illegally harboring a foundling. Furthermore, La Tía Encarna's performance of patriarchal fatherhood by legally and socially claiming a son and branding him with her last name demonstrates both the State's investment in binary systems, as well as her own subversive manipulation of them. Patriarchal fatherhood means the child is unquestionably hers: "Está en el sistema, ya nadie puede sacármelo" (185). In addition to the personal and familial security that this adoption entails, La Tía Encarna also secures unfettered access to all of the privileges associated with legal guardianship, namely, access to basic educational services for her child. Thus, protected by the specter of patriarchal normativity, La Tía Encarna can maintain her queer mothering practice in the privacy of her own home and protect her child from the slings and arrows of a binary world.

An immigrant, long cut off from her biological family, and surrounded by the death of her chosen sisters, daughters, and friends, La Tía Encarna demonstrates an unwillingness to allow her kinship bond with her adopted child to exist in dubious legal standing. As such, her desire for state-recognized parenthood is greater than her aversion to the state-sponsored violence of being misgendered. The aversion remains, however, as does the humiliation misgendering entails. Berkins sums this up as: "para evitar ser aisladas por nuestras familias, a menudo soportamos la falta de reconocimiento de nuestra identidad. En estos casos, el costo de permanecer en contacto es soportar la violencia de ser tratadas como varones" (Berkins 72). La Tía Encarna's travesti mothering offers an opportunity to subvert the violence and embrace the ambiguity of a gender constantly in flux. Impossibly, spectacularly, she raises a child that appreciates the significance

of her body's duality: "Ella es mi mamá y mi papá. No todos los niños del mundo tienen esa suerte" (186). In this way, she is able to cultivate a domestic and familial landscape that challenges the impositions and expectations of the State.

The mother's body embodies the nation, and La Tía Encarna negotiates it through her connection to mothering. She wields maternal identity in contradictory and often unintelligible ways, such as cruelly rejecting her supportive and kind partner (Sosa Villada 46), generously allowing her travesti kinfolk to name the child she rescued via democratic vote (30), and, most impactful of all, ultimately choosing to depart from the intolerance of the world by allowing herself and her child to asphyxiate in the presence of carbon monoxide gas (218). These contradictory decisions demonstrate an engagement with various modalities of power across familial, institutional, and biopolitical lines. Mothering practice, which the novel esteems as the maximum expression of travesti empowerment, becomes the vehicle through which La Tía Encarna can access authority and exercise control; it is the speaking position from which she can organize and influence the people around her. In this way, La Tía Encarna's queer motherhood is an exercise in nation-building for all displaced and rejected individuals, constructed through a strategic reappropriation of classical myths, Argentine legends, and travesti spirituality. Sosa Villada weaves together the myth of Remus, Romulus and Luperca in the founding of Rome with the popular Argentine saint, La Difunta Correa, to create a tapestry of unlikely mothers whose transcendent bodies become the condition of possibility for a new form of national identity.

Throughout the the novel, the group of travestis is referred to in various bestial and animalistic ways. As a group, they move in a pack, hunting their prey (Sosa Villada 17) or being hunted like "las de nuestra especie, las zorras, las lobas, las pájaras, las brujas" (153). Individually, one of them might possess "una lucidez animal" (107) or the sensuality of "una

perra caliente” (157). One of the travestis in the novel is even a “lobizona,” a werewolf-travesti hybrid who transforms into a she-wolf every month (103). In his essay titled, “Modelar el cuerpo: devenir mujer/travesti/animal,” Manuel Gatto argues that the animal comparisons that permeate the novel are a response to normative society’s rejection of sexual dissidence. The use of animal metaphors reflects “la naturaleza que percibe al disidente sexual como una otredad, diferente, inferior, deshumanizada; en otras palabras, animalizada, monstruosa” (Gatto 423). Thus, reclaiming the beast by metamorphosing oneself into one is a form of disidentification in which the travesti as sexual other defies normative expectations of what a human should be. In redefining the body, “el sujeto permanece inmerso en un movimiento perpetuo: irracional, impredecible, monstruoso” (Gatto 423). In this way, Sosa Villada reclaims and redefines the devalorized travesti body by turning it into that of a powerful beast.

One of the most common animal figures employed to redefine the travesti body is the figure of the she-wolf. Beyond the usual associations of community, loyalty, and ferocity, the she-wolf also offers an additional opportunity for disidentification through an allusion to Luperca, the she-wolf who rescued and nourished Romulus and Remus, the abandoned boy twins who would later go on to found Rome. The narrator aligns La Tía Encarna’s mothering practice with that of the unlikely wolf mother in the classical myth after witnessing La Tía Encarna offer her breast to El Brillo to suckle. Though the text makes clear that the child “no podrá extraer...ni una sola gota de leche” from her “pecho ensiliconado” (Sosa Villada 25), La Tía Encarna insists on the power of the gesture. Her body’s ostensible inability to produce milk is of no consequence to her. What matters is the faithfulness of her instinct: “el gesto de una hembra que obedece su cuerpo, y así el niño queda unido a esa mujer, como Rómulo y Remo a Luperca” (25). The phrasing in this sentence implies that mothering in any form, including in its queer, travesti, or

nonnormative manifestations, is inherently a bestial act insofar as its guiding principle that of natural instinct. The bond between mother and child is secured when both individuals' instincts are followed faithfully: the mother's instinct to offer her body, the child's instinct to latch onto it. Under this proposed explanation, mothering requires only that one's body be a fount of nourishment for another's, however symbolic that nourishment may be. It is thus a bidirectional transaction wherein physical sustenance is exchanged for emotional nourishment.

With this inclusive definition of mothering, the heteronormative, cisgendered idea of a nuclear family is stripped of its primary position in the social hierarchy to make room for higher order of mothering. Though La Tía Encarna's maternal breast has been sculpted through illicit injections of "aceite de avión" (25), its association to the foundational myth of Luperca transcends any critique. A travesti's manufactured breasts may be dismissed as an obscene or inappropriate source of nourishment for children, just as a wolf's teat is likely to be dismissed as unnatural and unsuitable. In both cases however, and despite however queer and animalistic it may be, the unlikely union of a young child and an ostensibly feral creature transcends provincial notions of appropriateness to become instead a paradigmatic symbol of divine mothering. Like Luperca, who was sent by the gods to save Remus and Romulus, La Tía Encarna is the solution sent by the oft-invoked "cielo de las travestis" to save the abandoned baby boy.

Furthermore, through this classical allusion to the founding of Rome, La Tía Encarna's maternity takes on the dimensions of a nation-building project grounded in the spirit of the divine. The simple gesture of offering her body to the child catalyzes a miraculous transformation in which her symbolic maternal breast becomes real. When Camila comes to her for solace after a meeting with a john left her feeling particularly humiliated, La Tía Encarna shows Camila that she has begun to lactate. This response to Camila's self-pity constitutes a

rejection of the “*miseria con que se miran*” (134). Instead of wallowing, La Tía Encarna demonstrates through her realized maternal breast the power of her own self-making. This episode in the text marks an important achievement in La Tía Encarna’s disidentification as she-wolf/mother, and provides the spiritual groundwork for her travesti nation. Indeed, after gazing upon this miracle, Camila offers up a prayer of gratitude:

Oh, nodriza Encarna. Oh, milagro de tus pechos. Oh, Difunta Correa de tetas de aceite de avión, santa patrona de todas nosotras, que logramos encontrarte en la búsqueda sin descanso de una madre, de procurarnos una madre para esas noches de remordimiento, una madre que nos enseñara a no sufrir. (Sosa Villada 134)

It is this last invocation that displays La Tía Encarna’s true power. Through her transformation into a mother with real, lactating breasts, Camila can witness the divine potential of living unburdened by shame.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her miraculous maternal breast, La Tía Encarna’s maternity plays with various strains of queer motherhood. In her essay on realism, myth, and spiritual mestizaje, Alexandra Rodriguez Sabogal argues that Sosa Villada “deploys a transformative religious agency that recreates nonbinary mythology and religiosity that opens previously proscribed physical and cultural spaces for these agents” (614). In the example above, the physical space that La Tía Encarna occupies as a lactating travesti is biological, which permits entry to the cultural space of motherhood to her adopted son. However, even upon achieving this biological transformation, La Tía Encarna remains queer for reasons that go beyond her gender experience. As Shelley M. Parks reminds us, adoptive mothers must “pass” successfully as mothers:

It is incumbent upon us...to know the script for good mothering well and to audition for the role convincingly. Whereas biological mothers may not—and frequently do not—experience themselves as role-playing, adoptive mothers (as well as step-mothers and other Othered mothers) do. (Park 24)

Park focuses on the subjective experience of the adoptive mother versus the biological mother and uses the implicit assumption of originality residing in the biological. Biological mothers do not experience themselves as role-playing because they are presumably engaging in a more natural process: the child they care for was gestated and born of their own body. Park's framework makes clear that La Tía Encarna's motherhood is queer because she assumes the responsibility for a non-biological child. In other words, the fact of her travesti body with its miraculously lactating breast does not function as a proxy of normative, biological mothering; rather, La Tía Encarna performs maternal care using socially sanctioned scripts that condition her behavior: "adoptive mothers know that their status as mothers depends on mastery of the social script for good mothering" (Park 69).

It is important here to clarify exactly what script La Tía Encarna uses. She pulls from classical myths, as explained above, as well as local myths and legends. It is no coincidence that Camila references La Difunta Correa in her prayer of gratitude. La Difunta Correa is an Argentine myth of a recently deceased mother whose body was nonetheless able to provide sustenance to her nursing baby. Though the popular legend of Deolinda Correa is oral in nature and as such subject to change depending on each subsequent iteration, the basic components are the same. After her husband is forcibly conscripted into the army of Facundo Quiroga, Deolinda and her young child leave their home in San Juan Province in Argentina and begin their journey to La Rioja to reunite with her husband. However, she becomes disoriented and eventually

perishes due to relentless thirst in the desert's inhospitable heat. Sometime later—the various oral traditions don't specify exactly how long—a few muleteers stumble upon her body and discover, to their astonishment, that her child is still alive, suckling from her dead breast. Carina Zuballiga's reading of Roque Jacinto Pichetto, whose monograph *Brochazos mendocinos: relatos históricos, tradiciones cuyanas, cuadros de Mendoza, anécdotas mendocinas* presents the first written account of the legend, states that the mother's dying wish was for the heavens to bless her dehydrated breasts with the necessary milk to continue providing nourishment to her son. While this level of detail cannot be verified, it is nevertheless true that La Difunta Correa's reception in Argentina and later in Chile has been one of popular saint. Her fabled resting place in El Vallecito is a popular pilgrimage for believers who wish to pay their respects and honor the Difunta's life and motherhood with gifts of water.

In the case of La Tía Encarna, a devout believer in La Difunta Correa, the popular legend catalyzes her own construction of a mythic origin story for her child. He is not simply her adopted son, he is “el hijo de la Difunta” (Sosa Villada 111), a child of a woman who was able to sustain life beyond death. This is the script La Tía Encarna uses: not of a biological normative mother, but of a saintly figure whose devotion to her child persists beyond the grave. The miracle of her breast and its reference to the popular saint La Difunta Correa “authorizes the travesti motherhood that she has been denied on biological grounds” (Rodriguez Sabogal 618).

Furthermore, it allows La Tía Encarna the ability to wield death as a legitimate tool of maternal care and foreshadows the death of both her son and herself at the end of the novel. Despite her best efforts to protect her son in public, El Brillo begins coming home from school increasingly bruised and bloodied, bullied by the other children for being the son of a travesti. The violence he faces at school follows him home and increases to intolerable levels:

people throw feces against the door of his mother's house, neighbors hurl trash into their backyard, and plain clothes policemen begin surveilling the home full time. When La Tía Encarna realizes the cost of her motherhood on her beloved son, she makes the decision to spare them both from further violence and degradation by subjecting them to a gentle, mutual death: she turns on the gas, seals the cracks and crevices in their home, and allows them both to die, laying side by side on her bed, gazing into each other's eyes.

Far from being exceptional, the lethal violence that El Brillo and La Tía Encarna face at the institutional and social levels is, as Marlene Wayar argues, at the core of the normative Argentine state. An Argentinian travesti herself, Wayar's essay, "La visibilidad de lo invisible", describes death's indelible impact on the travesti/trans community and argues that death is a tool the state levies against all aspects of travesti life, love, and happiness. Organized as a series of vignettes depicting her encounters with death, the vast majority of Wayar's anecdotes include travesti friends who have been murdered, disappeared, or neglected to death. Two accounts stand out. The first is that of Leona, alias "La Tucumana," who intentionally infects herself with HIV using an infected friend's borrowed blood. During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, being HIV-positive meant segregation and forced separation from the general population—in this case, male—in the carceral spaces travesti sex workers were regularly forced to frequent. Leona "La Tucumana" preferred to contract HIV to spare herself the sexual violence and degradation she'd face in an all-male jail cell. By contrast, another example in Wayar's account touches upon the criminal neglect of the State before the urgent necessity of queer-informed health services. "La Tero," another travesti friend with HIV was continuously mistreated and ultimately discharged—against her will—from a hospital where she had sought care for her symptoms. Wayar describes going to

visit her and finding her in the courtyard outside the hospital with a few pesos in her hand and the directions to a homeless shelter in her pocket: the hospital's parting gift.

These two accounts of Wayar's own friends and loved ones provide robust and damning evidence of Argentina's necropolitical management of queer, travesti, and trans individuals. "Nos toca morir en la calle" Wayar writes (51). Systemic denial of humane, life-saving care in the State's institutions, whether carceral, medical, or educational, means that travesti and trans people must resort to their own judgment for survival. In the fictional realm, this meant trusting that the state in which La Tía Encarna had founded her home and family was working exactly as it was designed to: by systematically punishing her and her child to death for her perceived gender transgression. The abject conditions that structure an existence unaccepted by a heteropatriarchal state are already untenable, unlivable. In this context, La Tía Encarna's decision to choose the terms of her own death demonstrates a slippery sort of defiance in the war of attrition the state has levied against her and her family. Thus, one possible interpretation for the deaths of the mother-child dyad in *Las malas* is resistance—fighting back against the attempts of the state and its institutions to dictate the terms of queer life and queer death.

While this decision affirms the normative world's bias against travesti mothers, the community itself recognizes this act as an act of maternal sacrifice borne out of love. Camila invokes la Difunta Correa in her description of the event: she carries a statue of the patron saint when she goes to the pink house to render homage and remembers La Tía Encarna as "aquella diosa de pies de barro y manos de boxeador" (Sosa Villada 220). Furthermore, she describes their joint death as a decision made "sabiamente, para no tener que soportar más humillaciones" (219), and celebrates their ascension to "el cielo de las travestis" (220).

Some scholars have analyzed the deaths at the end of the novel as a failure of the travesti mother to achieve good-enough status as a mother within a heteronormative and patriarchal culture. Alejandra Márquez, for example, argues that “aunque en un principio las mujeres logran construir una familia y una maternidad que les ofrece la posibilidad de ser felices, al momento de integrar a un niño a sus redes afectivas, la sociedad se encarga de sancionar estos lazos” (Márquez 391). Likewise, Sanchez Osoreo admits that the culminating deaths could be read “como una reiteración de las políticas de violencia, exclusión y marginación” of travesti identity. However, this reading of the text could also be affirming for the travesti author who, to quote Sánchez Osoreo again, “reivindic[a] [su] derecho a escribir novelas fracasadas” (Sánchez Osoreo 148). Both authors concede that it is an undeniable tragedy to be denied the freedom to love and protect one’s child in a cruel and violent world, and they see La Tía Encarna’s death as an admission of defeat. However, this argumentative thread does not take into account the rhetorical success their deaths herald. To paraphrase from Wayar again, choosing death means facing it head on, laughing at the fear it generates in others, thereby proving it to be a “ficción hegemónica” that dominates so many people’s lives (Wayar 54). In so doing, the travesti who chooses death reveals the ostensible normative subject as the true travesti par excellence: “Se han travestido/a de sujetos/as, mientras son estereotipos fieles dominados/as, teatralización mediante, por el miedo” (Wayar 54).

The relentless desire for personal redemption and social revenge as depicted in the travesti community in *Las malas* is paired with another persistent, unquenchable urge: the desire for beauty, despite all obstacles. A deceptive desire, the quest for beauty is inseparable from travesti mortality, and no less violent than any other aspect of their lives. Amidst so much death, Sosa Villada writes that “las [travestis] que aquí quedamos bordamos con lentejuelas nuestras

mortajas de lienzo” (191). Likewise, Wayar describes her own relationship to death as characterized by glamour and humor: “Nunca le tuve miedo a la muerte, la he maquillado. Sería un horror vernos mal en el cajón” (Wayar 53). The glamour of sequins and makeup belie, on the one hand, an understanding of their own threatened mortality, and a reaffirmation of the artistic transformation of the self that characterizes travesti lifestyle, on the other. Camila, the narrator, elevates this synthesis of incongruencies to heavenly proportions:

El cielo de las travestis debe ser hermoso como los paisajes deslumbrantes del recuerdo, un lugar donde pasar la eternidad sin aburrirse. Las lobas travestis que mueren en invierno son acogidas con especial pompa y alegría, y en aquel mundo paralelo reciben toda la bondad que se les mezquinó en este mundo. (Sosa Villada 191)

The travesti spirituality present in the above extract is one that valorizes beauty, humor, and generosity; it is a spirituality that believes the passage from life to death is one of ascension from a meager existence defined by survival to a full (after)life as beautiful as memory itself. This vision of the afterlife is so rich that mourning does not take on the affective dimensions of loss, but of celebration. Their death shrouds are embroidered with sequins, radiant with beauty, in preparation for the glory that awaits. Given this enduring belief in the world to come, the deaths of La Tía Encarna and El Brillo should not be considered a failure. Instead, these deaths should be understood as the culmination of La Tía Encarna’s commitment to El Brillo’s protection, the impulse that characterizes her mothering practice and led her to search for that abandoned boy in the park “con desesperación porque sabe que en algún lugar hay un niño que sufre” (Sosa Villada 20). Their joint death is thus a triumph of the cielo de las travestis insofar as it constitutes a liberation from the violence of their earthly existence under their own terms. In this way, La Tía Encarna and El Brillo actualize the potential of their pink house-turned-nation: “en esa casa

travesti, la dulzura puede hacer todavía que la muerte se amedrente. En esta casa, hasta la muerte puede ser bella” (Sosa Villada 27).

3.5 Travesti Othermothers

This chapter has focused primarily on the primary mothering dyad formed by the familial bond between La Tía Encarna and her adopted son, but it is not the only example of travesti maternity. In fact, the bond between the two would be unthinkable if not for the affective ties between La Tía Encarna and all of her travesti mentees who flock to her for stability, comfort, and security. The affective ties coalesce as an example of what Alarcón terms the “maravilla trans,” or trans marvel: a strategy of community care rooted in “la solidaridad de la nueva familia de inclusión, la de la red que abraza en reemplazo de esas familias primarias expulsoras” (Alarcón 15). The trans marvel describes the transformative healing that occurs when a person who has been cast out of the blood family finds refuge in nonbiological networks of care, support, and solidarity. These networks take on the social and affective dimensions of familial bonds, often articulated through mother-daughter-sister relationships, such as the kind at the heart of *Las malas*. The various travesti youngsters in La Tía Encarna’s orbit relate to each other through affective ties that link them all to the same origin: “éramos hijas de una misma madre, una misma bestia nos había parido, todas habíamos bebido de la misma leche: la de nuestra madre, que paría zorras y prostitutas, que paría cerdas” (Sosa Villada 90). As a queer travesti mother with a cisgendered baby boy, La Tía Encarna represents an inversion of the patriarchal structure of motherhood that upholds heterosexual, cisgendered women as the maternal subject par excellence. Her success as an adoptive mother to both El Brillo and the countless travestis featured in the novel is contrasted with what the novel posits as the failure of “esas familias

primarias expulsoras,” where the biological mothers refuse or are unable to protect their own queer children. Indeed, the narrative thrust of the novel takes the failure of biological motherhood as a foregone conclusion; the informal adoption of El Brillo is only possible because he has been abandoned by his birth parents. His character is not unique in that sense, as he shares this experience with the travestis who protagonize the book, including the narrator Camila and María La Muda, both of whom have been abandoned, beaten, or otherwise neglected by their biological families. By placing queer mothering at the center of the travestis’ affective network, Sosa Villada critiques heteronormative motherhood as a patriarchal institution marked by relentless violence.

Sosa Villada emphasizes the role of patriarchy in creating a hostile family environment in which both men and women—biological fathers and mothers—contribute to a cycle of abuse against queer and nonconforming children. When describing her home, Camila claims, “el miedo era el padre” (Sosa Villada 60). This statement refers both to her own father, a violent alcoholic who often beat Camila and her mother, and her maternal grandfather, who Camila holds responsible for the death of her grandmother. Indeed, the patriarchal violence Camila faces via the figure of her father becomes an important factor in her *travestismo* and the source of her rejection of male identity: “era demasiado horrible todo para querer ser un hombre. Yo no podía ser un hombre en ese mundo” (62). However, her biological mother is not exempt from this critique, nor is she a helpless victim of the patriarchy. Instead, the mother is held partially responsible for the cycle of abuse perpetrated against the nuclear family:

El niño ha escuchado a su madre llorar. El horror de un matrimonio como aquel, basado en la fuga de la madre de su propia familia, la enorme responsabilidad que tiene el padre

con una mujer como esa, una mujer que no sabe tomar decisiones, que no toma decisiones, o toma una única decisión: que el esposo decida por ella. (62)

As the above passage makes clear, the decision to cede unto the husband is the mother's responsibility and the mother's downfall. This vision of the biological mother condemns the quiet, submissive presence that doesn't fight back or defend against patriarchal violence. In this case, the biological mother is its tacit accomplice. Alarmingly, she is also the one who teaches what it means to be a woman: the ritual of dressing and perfuming oneself for a man who may or may not deserve the labor; the quiet and desperate attachment to the source of one's pain.

In this vacuum of maternal power—a vacuum consciously and willingly created by the biological mother—the travesti mother steps in. La Tía Encarna represents a structural solution for abandoned queer children, a mother figure who not only takes in the rejected and neglected, but who also repudiates male control over herself and her kin. Her romantic relationship to her longtime partner, El Hombre Sin Cabeza, is the first example of her rejection of patriarchal motherhood; she refuses to let him carry the child because “ningún hijo suyo iba a ser alzado por un decapitado” (Sosa Villada 45). The decision to deny her adopted son a father, regardless of how kind and nurturing that man may have proven himself to be, is theatrical to be sure; the text leaves no doubt that “La Tía Encarna había encontrado su personaje” (45). To paraphrase Leonardo Loayza again, if the travesti body is an abject simulacrum of the cisgendered female body, then it is a copy with no original. Likewise, the theatricality of La Tía Encarna's maternal performance with her travesti kin and her adopted son, is tantamount to a copy of a copy. Nevertheless, her performance of mothering belies a system of values in which masculinity, and not queerness, is incompatible with children and so it must be rejected for the child's sake.

In this way, the travesti mother is a transformative synthesis of the failings of the biological parents. She takes their teachings and transfigures them into something welcoming and workable for travesti children seeking support. Her pink house is a source of comfort: “siempre había algo para comer y, como en ese entonces pasábamos hambre seguido, ella nos recibía con los brazos abiertos y el pan sobre la mesa” (36). She offers what the biological parents cannot or will not: the material foundations from which to build a stable future.

However, despite the harsh critique of institutional motherhood present in the novel, Sosa Villada also offers an alternative mode of biological mothering that does not summarily dismiss biological kinship. Laura, a pregnant sex worker beloved by the travestis, gives birth to twins shortly after La Tía Encarna’s discovery of El Brillo. Wrapped in the embrace of travesti solidarity, Laura gives birth in La Tía Encarna’s pink house, assisted by Nadina, a respectable nurse by day, a fellow travesti streetwalker by night. An unexpected romance between Nadina and Laura begins to develop after the birth of the twins, one predicated on the shared values of creation and cultivation of family. Nadina, who cares for both mother and children in her capacity as a nurse, soon leaves behind her history of sex work and dedicates herself full time to the profession of nursing—conducted, for personal safety and acceptability, in male drag. The image of family proffered in this alternative biological family is inclusive of gender fluidity, grounded, as in La Tía Encarna’s case, in the reality of a binary society. Thus, Nadina can continue to be herself at home, becoming a co-mother and co-parent to Laura’s biological children.

Titillating, novel, and grotesque, Laura’s pregnancy and subsequent labor unsettle La Tía Encarna’s claim to maternity. On the one hand, Laura’s biological maternity is posterior to Tía Encarna’s motherhood: it borrows and benefits from the lifestyle that Tía Encarna models. On

the other hand, biological maternity is presented as a destabilizing variable that threatens to undo travesti identity: first, by forcing Tía Encarna to confront the limits of her practice of motherhood, and second, by enamoring a fellow travesti, Nadina, who is by day a nurse and by night a streetwalker in heels. Laura, then, embodies the transfigurative power of normativity that threatens to undermine the queer existence the other women have chosen. Laura and Nadina's union, though inherently queer, nevertheless invisibilizes Nadina's travesti identity and puts an end to Laura's night time profession. The couple recedes to the country, where Nadina can work by day as a nurse to provide for her family while Laura dedicates herself to childrearing full time. In the novel's travesti logic, they must disappear from the travesti community, for they have achieved the outward appearance of heteronormative motherhood. In their absence, La Tía Encarna remains the only embodied synthesis of travesti identity and motherhood.

3.6 Conclusion

The Pink House is an exercise in nation-building: bright, vivid, open to all, and full of windows that promote transparency and engagement. Because hers is the power and promise of transformative imagination—she imagines beyond the imposition of death—she accepts all bodies into her home, including those with physical ailments or disabilities, such as María La Muda and Natalí La Lobizona. Like Tía Encarna's own body, these individuals are mutable, subject to the labor of change, though they maintain, like a palimpsest, indelible traces of traits that formerly or currently shape their perception. Thus, the pink house is a home that promotes life and wards off death, yet the biopolitics of the home-nation does not approach longevity as a fear response. On the contrary, the biopolitics of the home-nation recognizes both the

inexorability and the beauty of death, and makes it yet another striving for utopia, or indeed the arrival of it. In death, this mutually chosen path out of their shared hardships, mother and son can subvert the dawning violence and terror of their queer lives. Their pink house remains standing and hope lives on, defiant against the whitewashed walls of their homophobic neighborhood. So many of the stories Camila narrates in this novel take death as a starting point from which to compassionately reimagine a life lived outside of the margins of straight society. The future marches onward for the community, now reimagined outside the maternal embrace of Tía Encarna's home.

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 Overarching Themes and Central Arguments

The idea for this dissertation emerged from a series of initially informal observations about the type of texts written by women that kept coming up in my preliminary research on Latin American literature. Motherhood, mothers, and an existential interest in what it means to be a woman are the defining characteristics of the literature published in the last fifteen years. This observation served as a point of departure for my research questions, which are as follows:

1. How is motherhood represented in contemporary literature written by women in Latin America?
2. How does the principal mother figure understand her own identity as a mother?
3. What role does the institution of motherhood play in the act of mothering? What processes does it catalyze or inhibit?

These questions culminated in this dissertation, which attempts to map the mother-land of contemporary Latin American literature written by women. What this process has uncovered is an unflinching, critical examination of maternal identity as a structuring force in women's lives. In my research, this trend often manifested as a daughter's meditation on the mothering she received and its influence on her own psyche. Other times, it emerged as a non-mother's explicit and deliberate rejection of the maternal mandate, regardless of its social origin. Though these texts choose distinct speakers through which to articulate an intervention in the discourse of maternal inevitability, the difference between the two is not one of perspective, but one of scale. The daughter analyzes motherhood from the relational microcosm of her own family, whereas the non-mother reflects from a social macrocosm that allows her to fix a comparative lens across communities, cultures, and eras.

However, this dissertation has elected to study narratives where mothers speak for themselves. What they say often reinforces the primary position of the body-on-body contact that forges maternal subjectivity wherein the thinking subject reflects on the child-other that is not entirely separate from oneself. Intersubjectivity characterizes the emergence of both of these speaking positions—mother and child—such that it is impossible to speak of one without the other. While many novels feature a mother’s preoccupation for her child’s body and physical wellbeing, my research is narrowly focused on texts where the mother protagonist reflects on the emergence of her own, distinctly maternal subjectivity rather than on that of her child. In many cases, such as in *La perra* and *Las malas*, this inward examination reveals the significance of the body in mothers’ understanding of themselves. Curiously in these examples, the reproductive body is a defective product, unable to participate in the discourse of natural inevitability that dominates discussions of women’s futures. The anxiety this generates is often turned inward, channeled into self-destructive thoughts and actions.

All three of the texts studied in this dissertation—*Laços de Família*, *La perra*, and *Las malas*—share in this maternal anxiety of the defective maternal self. They are characterized by a deep meditation on the sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical death of the myth of motherhood. As an appeal to a transcendent reality, removed from the mire of everyday contradictions, frustrations, and upsets, the institution of motherhood gestures towards a sweeping, unifying silence that women are responsible for upholding at their own expense. The three primary texts I have chosen, though distinct in national origins, historical context, and linguistic specificity, are united by the growing wave of critically engaged maternal literature currently dominating the Latin American literary market. Its reach is global, as evinced by the

increasingly international platforms these narratives have been given, especially in regards to international literary competitions, translations into multiple languages, and, in some cases, film adaptations. Beyond the material conditions of these novels' international reception, however, they are also linked via a uniquely maternal consciousness. In Clarice's stories, Quintana's novel, and Sosa Villada's autofiction, a pattern of an uncertain motherhood emerges: a long-heralded experience that, at the most crucial moments, fails to deliver on its promise of biological fulfillment.

In Chapter One, I analyzed how the subjectivity of the mother is constructed upon concealed fissures and gaps, which, when revealed, shock the mother out of her unexamined life. "Women," Orna Donath reminds us, "are given a progressive image of a female figure that is unavoidably adapted for motherhood, as if it is only a matter of time" (xxvi). This assumption makes motherhood a self-fulfilling prophecy; it is women's biological destiny. However, like Ana of Clarice's "Amor," motherhood reveals inevitability as a farce. Unable to bear the weight of its mythic ideal, maternal subjectivity collapses with the knowledge that patriarchal societies have deliberately and insidiously encouraged, manipulated or coerced women into an institution of sacrificial motherhood under the guise of biological destiny.

In Chapter Two, I studied how the myth of motherhood as biological destiny fails to manifest when the female body is already interpellated in other, competing ways. Damaris of *La perra* demonstrates an awareness of the myth of motherhood. In fact, what she longs for is precisely that: the promise of social prestige that might lift her out of the subjugation caused by a neocolonial system that has historically extracted material and civic value from her flesh. In this understanding of institutional motherhood, childrearing and mothering are simply avenues through which a racialized woman might reinscribe her body with recognizable social value.

While ultimately doomed, Damaris's motherhood opens the possibility of motherhood as redemptive exercise, that which can retroactively elevate the mothering individual beyond the abject conditions of her life.

In Chapter Three, I discussed how abjection, motherhood, and redemption are intertwined in *Las malas*. The politically constructed binary between transgressive queerness and innocent children disavows the possibility of care between the two. La Tía Encarna demonstrates the fallacy at the heart of this false dichotomy by mothering a newborn child, a paragon of innocence in its maximum splendor. Unlike the travesti mother embodied in La Tía Encarna, the biological mothers of *Las malas* more often than not fail to protect or care for their children, perhaps because they too are overcome by the uncanny revelation of a life not chosen. But still La Tía Encarna persists, mothering her adopted child despite the personal risks it entails for herself, her son, and her community. In so doing, she demonstrates how a queer approach towards maternal (non-)futures might empower women to actively, willfully, and unrelentingly choose a life for themselves.

This dissertation has aimed to critique an institution that often goes unnoticed, despite its omnipresence in women's lives. Specifically, what I have critiqued throughout this text is the discourse of natural inevitability, as if biological reproduction were the maximum achievement of the female gender. I locate the fundamental problem of institutional motherhood in the lack of choice, not mothering itself. In all three texts, institutional motherhood is revealed as a tool of control, imposed by an internalized biopolitics of gender that demands obedience and submission to another's needs. This results in a living death: the Claricean walking slumber from which mothers awaken, terrified; a vampiric motherhood rooted in extractive logics of social death; a celebration of a dead mother's mythic breast.

4.2 Future Investigations

My project is an initial step towards a bridging of motherhood studies and contemporary Latin American literature, but there are many stones still left unturned. In the broader Hispanic literary world, authors such as Eva Baltasar Sardà and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara are re-writing motherhood from a queer female perspective. While this dissertation has at times used heterosexual microcosms to analyze institutional motherhood from a queer framework, Baltasar and Cabezón Cámara place lesbian desire at the core of their respective narratives on mothers, almost-mothers, and co-mothers. Any project exploring motherhood in contemporary Hispanic literature would be enriched by a careful analysis of female homosexuality and its intersections with maternal subjectivity. By foregrounding the female body and its biological processes, including desire and reproduction, motherhood can be a powerful framework through which to analyze women's affective becoming.

5 CODA

When women's significance is reduced to the biological, we are robbed of alternative, non-reproductive futures that might provide personal fulfillment, create social impact, promote political agency, and innovate the world. In her essay, "The Laugh of Medusa," Cixous likens the lifelong maternal socialization of women to fearmongering and propaganda:

As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark. (Cixous, 878)

We have been kept in the dark about our own value, taught to distrust opportunities beyond the predictability of our biological functions. In this darkness, institutional motherhood seems aglow in a warm wash of light. For many women, it is not until their eyes settle that the dimness of that glow is revealed.

When we understand the true darkness of sacrificing our futures as individuals, only then can we catalyze a distinctly female consciousness of our own bodies' values. While it may be accompanied by regret, terror, or rage, the acquisition of this subversive knowledge might begin to dismantle the ubiquity of external messaging that shapes women's choices. Women writers—mothers and non-mothers alike—are now advocating for that critical consciousness before potential futures become bygone chances, because the unconscious, to paraphrase Cixous, is impregnable.

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