

**Silver Screen Sovereignty: Mexican Film And The Intersections Of Reproductive  
Labor And Biopolitics**

by

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Susan and John Herbert, with gratitude and love.

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines representations of femininity and political economy in Mexican sound film. I contend that the Mexican film industry's longstanding fascination with the nuclear family and sex work is an extended biopolitical commentary about capitalist development's reliance on a gendered division of labor. My understanding of biopolitics departs from Michel Foucault's work on the topic as an expression of sovereignty that emerged alongside capitalism. My analysis of this gendered division of labor derives from Marxist feminist accounts of social reproduction in which gender norms are used to assign women responsibility for reproductive labor, or the work necessary to replenish and sustain the workforce and social sphere. This project is a departure from past scholarship on Mexican film that has emphasized femininity's connections to maternity and sexual desire and undertheorized its relationship to economic development and state power.

Chapter 1 explores the *cabaretera*, a subgenre of melodrama from the 1940s and 1950s. Close readings of *Aventurera* (Dir. Alberto Gout, 1950) and *Víctimas del pecado* (Dir. Emilio Fernández, 1951) suggest that these films advocated for a gendered form of labor similar to the one described by Silvia Federici and other Marxist feminist scholars in their work on primitive accumulation. It argues that this is emblematic of the emerging biopolitical state under the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* and shows how state power and economic development were being rhetorically linked to gender during this period.

Chapter 2 examines representations of sex work and land reform in *Las Poquiánchis* (Dir. Felipe Cazals, 1976), *Tívoli* (Dir. Alberto Isaac, 1975), and *El lugar sin límites* (Dir. Arturo Ripstein, 1977), and *Bellas de noche* (Dir. Miguel M. Delgado, 1975). It suggests that films made during the Echeverría presidency (1970-1976) rework tropes and narratives from earlier periods to suggest that the state and economic elites were excluding segments of the population for their own political and financial gains. It draws on Giorgio Agamben's concept of *bare life*, David Harvey's *accumulation by dispossession* and Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar and Huáscar Salazar Lohman's *community weaving* to suggest that these films highlight the failures of the Mexican state and call to think of new, non-state-based ways to organize the social sphere.

Chapter 3 examines films made in the neoliberal present about violence in Mexico. I argue that *Sin dejar huella* (Dir. María Novaro, 2000), *Traspatio* (Dir. Carlos Carrera, 2009), *Miss Bala* (Dir. Gerardo Naranjo, 2011), and *Las elegidas* (Dir. David Pablos, 2016) represent a contemporary version of Achille Mbembe's *necropolitics* that is a new, neoliberal form of sovereignty that is not limited to the state. I read these films' refusal to prescribe a clear solution to the political violence they document as a demand to reprioritize social reproduction in public life in a way that is neither state-based nor organized around gender.

My analysis revolves around close readings of each film read in conversation with theoretical concepts. Each reading is heavily contextualized politically, economically, and industrially in order to connect the content of each film to its historical context. Read together, these films suggest that representations of gender in Mexican cinema invite a broader conversation about how reproductive labor is organized and imagined in relationship to state power and economic development.

## **Introduction**

### **Reading Gender as Biopolitical in Mexican Cinema**

#### **The Rise of Mexican Cinema and its Fixation on Femininity**

This dissertation theorizes the relationship between state-sponsored ideals of gender and economic development in Mexican film. The advent of sound film in Mexico in the 1930s coincided with the rise of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) or the party that ruled the country for 70 years. Recognizing film as a powerful ideological tool, the emerging state invested heavily in cinema at the start of its tenure and controlled much of the infrastructure necessary to produce, distribute, and exhibit films. This also coincided with broader economic changes related to increased participation in the capitalist economy. While Mexico had had a relatively minimal filmmaking industry during the silent era, Mexican sound film prospered domestically and abroad through the 1940s in what is now known as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema.

One of the distinguishing features of early Mexican sound film was that it frequently had women protagonists and emphasized gender roles. Sex workers, mothers, housewives, and young women coming of age were all frequent protagonists in Golden Age films.<sup>1</sup> As Elissa Rashkin

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout the dissertation I use the umbrella term sex work to refer to jobs in the sex industry such as prostitution, partnered dancing at bars for money (*fichar*), and exotic dancing. In many films, characters perform more than one of these jobs and subsequently the collective term is more descriptive of their actual labor. Additionally sex work is a relatively neutral term that neither condemns nor celebrates this industry, emphasizing it as a form of labor rather than a choice rooted in morality or sexual desire. I want to emphasize the importance of falling into what Patty Kelly, drawing on the work of Laurie Shrage, has called the “false dichotomy of exploitation/liberation” (27) when discussing the power dynamics of sex work. As Kelly points out, sex work at times includes violent gender-based oppression and also at times financial and sexual freedom. Often it is neither one extreme nor the other. As such representations of sex work require highly contextualized analyses rather than a blanket condemnation of sex work as abusive and oppressive or its celebration of it as empowering and positive.

has argued, these earlier depictions are overwhelmingly conservative ones, which tend to “displace women as historical subjects and replace them with symbolic figures whose repetitive trajectories were depicted as essential to the reproduction of the social order within the context of a clearly patriarchal nation-state” (2). In short, while women held a central place in imagining the new, PRIista state, their role was grounded in caring for men and children and upholding a state prescribed social norms and morality.

These gendered tropes and attendant narratives resurfaced in modified versions during different moments in Mexican cinematic history. Just after WWII, Hollywood, no longer preoccupied with the war effort, began to make a play for Latin American screens and the PRI decreased its support for the film industry. Mexican filmmaking increasingly focused on cheaper B movies. Its domestic and international profitability and prestige rapidly declined. The industry enjoyed a brief revival during Luis Echeverría’s presidency (1970-1976) when filmmakers enjoyed new sources of funding and institutional support as well as decreased censorship as part of a broader overture to the middle class and intelligentsia in the aftermath of Tlatelolco massacre in 1968. While not particularly successful commercially, Mexico produced a series of critically successful art house films during this brief window that, unlike their predecessors, are extremely critical of the Mexican state. Notably, as I document in Chapter 2, many of the Golden Age tropes and narratives associated with gender roles were present in these films, but refashioned to be critiques of the state-sponsored morality and gendered order that they had once been used to support. Abuse of sex workers in particular became a means by which to criticize the PRIista state and its deployment of morality.

Following this period the industry was again largely defunded and remained so until its partial privatization in the 1980s and 1990s under a set of neoliberal reforms. Mexico’s film

industry has consistently grown since and begun, once again, to produce films that are both commercially and critically successful. Among the central themes found in contemporary Mexican film is an exploration of violence against women and the ways in which family structures are changing under neoliberalism. Like their 1970s predecessors, these films offer a searing critique of the state and its economic development strategies through their depiction of women.

This dissertation argues that these depictions of women should be read as a part of (and at times reaction to) a biopolitical intervention in which the PRIista state used and advocated for certain gender norms in order to create a docile and healthy workforce to be integrated into emergent forms of capitalism. Biopolitics, as will be elaborated shortly, is a term coined by Michel Foucault used to describe the ways in which sovereignty is articulated not as the threat of violence, but the “the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life” (*History* 136). I read Golden Age representations of women, as the quote from Rashkin implies, as part of a post-revolutionary attempt to make women responsible for reproductive labor or “the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labor are daily reconstituted” (Federici *Revolution* 5). Reproductive labor includes tasks like domestic work, elder and childcare, emotional care, and sex work, all of which are key to a biopolitical form of sovereignty. In many capitalist societies, including Mexico, this work historically has been highly gendered and often has been framed as a series of unpaid tasks that women owe others, particularly their families. The later films from the Echeverría presidency and from after the implementation of neoliberal reforms map out a series of critiques related both to this gendered division of labor and to the failures of the state to adequately provide resources and protection from violence to its population. When these films are read together, they offer an extended commentary on how

gender, state power, and economic development have been discursively constructed and connected in Mexican film. They also, I will argue, suggest the importance of rethinking these connections in attempts to respond to the legacy of the PRI and neoliberalism outside of cinema.

### **Mexicanidad and the Malinche: Reading Gender in Mexican Film**

Reading gender in Mexican cinema as a biopolitical construct tied to economic development is a notable departure from existing scholarship. Past work on depictions of women in Mexican film have tended to rely on two related frameworks that emphasize national cohesion and sexual self-expression. The first maintains that the content of Mexican film largely focuses on the production of a shared, official national identity, usually referred to as *Mexicanidad*, in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution.<sup>2</sup> Sergio de la Mora, writing about the dawn of a state-sponsored cinema in Mexico in *Cinemachismo*, summarily explains, “The discourse of *Mexicanidad* that circulated through popular culture was instrumental in consolidating the post-revolutionary Mexican state, its institutions, and the ruling classes. Since the late 1930s, cinema helped to forge a hegemonic political system. As a pedagogical and socializing technology, cinema assists in engendering subjectivities and various forms of identification” (de la Mora *Cinemachismo* 6). In short, the state invested in film because it was a powerful ideological tool where new subjectivities and relationships to the emerging political system could be modeled and promoted. Their popularization and valorization were part of the new government’s attempts to legitimize itself as working on behalf of the populace in a meaningful and appropriate way.

Prior criticism argues that changes seen in tropes, narrative patterns and representation of institutions and subjectivities are proof of changing understandings of the relationship between

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<sup>2</sup> *Mexicanidad* sometimes is used just to connote “mexicanness” in a vary vague, malleable sense that is not necessarily tied to the state. In other contexts, such as what de la Mora and Ramírez Berg are describing, *Mexicanidad* is the idea of national identity promoted by the state and cultural elites such as Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz. In the context of this dissertation, it should be understood as the latter and not the former.

nation and state as well as responses to the perceived deficiencies of the ideas promoted by *Mexicanidad*. For example, in *Cinema of Solitude*, Charles Ramírez Berg's groundbreaking study of the films made between 1967 and 1983, the author suggests films from this period by and large were wrestling with a seemingly outdated national identity that was too exclusive in terms of gender and race and increasingly a source of tension rather than unity (3-5). Similarly, analyses of film made following Mexico's neoliberal transition, which included the privatization of much of Mexico's film industry beginning in the late 1980s, scholars have argued that filmmakers are responding to the deficiencies of past ideals. In his 2014 *Screening Neoliberalism*, Ignacio Sánchez Prado suggests that films made during and after Mexico's neoliberal transition are still heavily marked by the legacy of *Mexicanidad*. Sánchez Prado argues that even as Mexican filmmakers attempt to move beyond its legacy in an industry that is increasingly privatized and geared towards international and middle class audiences "...engagements with identity should be read in relation to the role that *Mexicanidad* at the time and as part of the larger ideologies of political power in the transitional processes lived by Mexico in the past twenty years" (*Screening* 13). In short, Mexico's national film industry, in its nascency, was heavily invested in the production of a shared national identity and the discourses that emerged from that work have consistently shaped and been in conversation with Mexican cinema since then. While the films and critics alike have an evolving and increasingly critical relationship with these discourses, they remain a central theme in Mexican cinema and subsequent film criticism.

With particular regards to the representation of women, these studies have tended to frame their analysis around a virgin-whore paradigm that contrasts the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is the apparition of the Virgin Mary who appeared to the indigenous peasant Juan Diego in 1531,

and Hernán Cortés's indigenous interpreter, the Malinche (also known as Malintzín, Malinalli, and Doña Marina) (de la Mora *Cinemachismo* 27-31). The Virgin of Guadalupe is held up as the chaste, maternal, Europeanized ideal of femininity, while the Malinche is her hypersexual, eroticized, Indigenous foil. In studies of Mexican film this has meant identifying the contrasting cinematic representations of women as belonging to one of these two extremes or disrupting their binary by combining them into a single character. For example, Ana López's canonical "Tears and Desire" suggests that early melodramas tended to focus on either chaste, self-abnegating mothers modeled on the virgin or lustful sex workers reduced to Malinches. In *Cinemachismo*, Sergio de la Mora argues that the binary was disrupted in Golden Age film when sex worker characters were also mothers (*Cinemachismo* 30). Both readings suggest that womanhood is being articulated primarily in terms of sexual behavior and maternity.

In this project I examine two sets of questions related to these two dominant tendencies and argue that their responses warrant some key modifications to prior conclusions. First, I ask why these were the norms that were put into place and what they meant during the Golden Age. If the state needed a cohesive national identity for citizens, as scholars such as de la Mora and Ramírez Berg suggest, why were these particular norms desirable? In particular, does the patriarchal order found in Golden Age films have some kind of deeper structural use beyond a longstanding and unexplained misogyny? Scholars have tended to stop short of explaining or contextualizing the origins of any sort of gender-based oppression. For example, Sergio de la Mora, writing about early representations of sex work in Mexican film, notes "From an economic perspective, prostitutes as wage laborers pose a threat to men's control of women" (*Cinemachismo* 33), but never answers why men seek this control in the first place or why the state would choose to endorse it. I am interested in thinking about what is gained from such a



system of control and how the values onscreen relate to ongoing historical events like the Revolution of 1910.

Second, in keeping with the work of Ramírez Berg and Sánchez Prado's theorizations of *Mexicanidad*, if later films, from the Echeverría presidency and during and after Mexico's neoliberal period, critique norms embodied in tropes and narratives from the Golden Age, what are the criteria used to critique them? Are these films critiquing the individual norms or the idea of a norm itself? Do these films offer any ideas about other forms of social organization in the social imaginary? What implications do these films have for forms of social organization that are less restrictive? Do they always premise freedom on individual self-expression and desire?

In answering these queries it became necessary to look to theorizations beyond those found in Mexican film studies and for this purpose I turned to two bodies of work. The first, biopolitics, offers a theory of sovereign power that allows for questions of state power and economic development to be read in connection with the seemingly intimate worlds of sexuality and gender expression. The second, the theorizations of social reproduction by Marxist feminist scholars, offers extended analyses of the ways in which capitalism depends on systems of gender in order to account for the reproduction of a population. It also explores how this system of gender is maintained. In what follows I briefly trace out some of the theoretical work that will be central to my own and then discuss some of how methodologically such frameworks need to be adapted or understood within film criticism.

### **Biopolitics and the Power to Make Live**

Foucault argues that biopolitics is a result of how sovereignty fundamentally changed following the birth of capitalism and the emergence of the liberal nation state. Before this moment, sovereignty, while technically the power over life and death, was exercised primarily as

“the right to *take* life or *let* live” (*History* 136, emphasis in the original). However, alongside the advent of capitalism and the liberal nation-state it became “the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life” (*History* 136). This was first done through disciplinary apparatuses that sought to instill individual behaviors meant to help insert people into economic and political systems, turning them into docile, industrious workers and citizens. This was later complemented through what Foucault calls biopolitics, or the attempt to regularize a population as a species, monitoring things like “propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary” (*History* 139). These two modalities of sovereign power are both present in what Foucault terms the norm, which is a measure/ standard of some sort of health and wellbeing used to both discipline the individual body and, through its mass implementation, aids in controlling a broader population (*History* 145-146; *Society* 252-253). In post-revolutionary Mexico, when the state was very much concerned with how to integrate the population into emergent forms of capitalist labor, the modeling of norms onscreen meant that movie theaters, as a space where norms were taught and celebrated, become a site of disciplinary power.

In the *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault develops these arguments through a conceptual genealogy of sexuality, which serves as a springboard for my own understanding of gender. Sexuality conceptually groups together an assortment of discourses about bodies, pleasures, desires, behaviors, health, and more. Sexuality’s meaning, contents, administration, and supposed connections to health vary over time and culture and cannot be presumed to be a stable construct with a single, transhistorical meaning. While sexuality is often framed in public discourse as a highly personal expression of the self, or a reflection of one’s individual, innate desires, Foucault’s work suggests that sexuality is deeply tied to biopolitical concerns and

discourses related to attempts to control health and productivity. Similarly, I contend that the gender norms celebrated in early Mexican cinema, rather than an expression or representation of nature or innate tendencies, are connected to the ways in which gender is an essential construct for deploying biopower.

Films from the 1970s depict a considerable amount of state violence directed internally, but outside of disciplinary and legal apparatuses, which Foucault's formulation does not elaborate in an applicable way. Subsequently, while looking at these films, I turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben on the state of exception and biopolitics in *Homo Sacer*, which reveals how the manipulation of a norm can be used to legitimize such violence. Agamben's work on biopolitics departs from Carl Schmitt's articulation of the sovereign in *Political Theology* as "...he who decides the exception" (5). Agamben argues that historically juridical orders attempt to regularize the population and cultivate an elevated and protected form of life, or *bios*. Beyond this order, life is unqualified or bare life, also known as *zoē*, and not protected or understood within this juridical order, but rather as existing in a state of exception. As such, it is subjectable to violence not organized by the juridical order (i.e. violence against it is not regulated or punished). The sovereign is the one who draws the distinction between *bios* and *zoē* and has the capacity to declare a state of exception/ suspend the juridical order. Agamben argues that today, regardless of whether a state is totalitarian or liberal, the difference between inside and outside is highly unstable and "the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life— which is originally situated at the margins of the political order— gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (*Homo* 9). Read in conversation with Foucault's work on biopolitics, Agamben's scholarship raises the question of whether and how people are excluded

from the legal order and what happens to them when they are. Are there people in the biopolitical states who remain outside of the norms and disciplinary institutions trying to instill those norms? As will be seen later, in film from 1970s Mexico, gender roles and sexual morality represent limit concepts in the texts that are used to exclude swaths of a state's population and legitimize violence against them. These films raise the question of who is included in the PRIista state's idea of national development and who is excluded and what that exclusion means. Films made during this period, which often highlight state violence following accusations of gendered and/or sexual deviance, serve as an attempt to expose these states of exception and the ways in which juridical norms and their suspension engender violence.

Films made following Mexico's neoliberal transition, which depict a variety of institutions exercising violence with impunity including organized crime and transnational corporations, raise the question of whether or not the state is the only institution with access to sovereign violence and if so, how this relates to biopolitics. In "Necropolitics," Achille Mbembe contends that biopolitics, while a useful concept, is not universally applicable to all of the forms of sovereignty found in modernity. He contends that late modern political criticism has overprivileged an idea of sovereignty as "society's capacity for self-creation through recourse to institutions inspired by specific social and imaginary significations" (13). His work explores sovereign formations that seek "*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (14, emphasis in the original). Mbembe offers both slavery and colonialism as examples of such a form of sovereignty. Slavery is a sovereign order in which people are juridically stripped of their humanity/identity as more than bare life in order to instrumentalize their capacity to work. European colonialism imposed a new order over colonized peoples in which "Sovereignty meant occupation and occupation meant

relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood” (26). Rights, access to resources, and subjectability to legalized violence varied between the colonizers and different groups of colonized peoples. Such deployments of sovereignty, Mbembe argues, are not biopolitics, but rather necropolitics, or “the subjugation of life to the power of death” (39). Such sovereign formations assert themselves not through the organization and perpetuation of life, but the threat of violence, terror, and death.

States are not the only potential sovereign powers in modernity. Writing about postcolonial Africa, Mbembe argues that “...the collapse of political institutions under the strain of violence tends to lead to the formation of militia economies” (34) in which organized crime, local powers, and transnational businesses also potentially have access to sovereign power and violence. This form of necropolitics has introduced new subjectivities including, “rebels, child soldiers, victims or refugees, or civilians incapacitated by mutilation or simply massacred on the model of ancient sacrifices” (34). In some places, these subjectivities have replaced the notion of citizen as the primary form of subject in relationship to sovereignty. Films about violence in contemporary Mexico, like *Heli* (Dir. Amat Escalante, 2013), *Miss Bala* (Dir. Gerardo Naranjo, 2011), and *Salvando al Soldado Pérez* (Dir. Beto Gómez, 2011), highlight how not just the Mexican state, but also organized crime, transnational businesses, and the United States have access to sovereign power in contemporary Mexico. Notably these institutions are represented as sometimes collaborating together, sometimes competing for power, and sometimes just coexisting.

As these summaries suggest, the role of the Mexican state in the films is read in parallel with the theoretical discussion around biopolitics. In noting this, it is important to also recognize that none of these ideas are relevant to Mexico (or films about Mexico) without being modified.

For example, in much of the Foucauldian scholarship drawn on by this dissertation, Foucault is writing about liberal states in Western Europe during in the 18th and 19th century. The 20th century corporatist PRIista state, because of the way in which it centralized power in a clear, state-based hierarchy outside of Western Europe, requires that Foucault's ideas be adjusted in order to be applied. Similarly, the chronologies offered by these theorists (who themselves dispute each other's timelines), are not directly applicable to Mexico. Subsequently, each chapter includes considerable historical context for the films at hand and the extent to which these ideas are applicable to Mexico and under what circumstances.

Like the formations of sexuality that Foucault documents in Western Europe in the *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, gender in post-revolutionary Mexican film is a conceptual bundle of behaviors, beliefs, norms, bodily acts and functions, etc. that served as a key tool for disseminating biopolitical norms. Gender, like sexuality, I will argue, cannot be presumed to be an expression of an innate truth, but rather a complicated and dynamic assemblage of discourses that varies from one place to the next as well as from one historical period to another. The theorists of biopolitics included here, while providing an incredibly useful framework for thinking through the relationship between the state, capitalist development, and the management of both populations and individual people and their bodies, offer no detailed analyses of the role of gender in biopolitics (only Foucault's work briefly considers it in a discussion of how women's bodies became framed as hysterical in a medical sense and this in turn was used to inscribe them into new forms of social control (*History* 104, 121, 146-147)). As such, I turn to the work of Marxist feminists who have explored the relationship between capitalist development and systems of gender and outline how I tie this thinking to biopolitics.

### **Women and Social Reproduction**

Similar to the medicalization of sexuality documented by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* as an essential project to capitalism's implementation and continuation in Western Europe, Marxist feminists have explored how systems of gender relate to capitalist development and the consolidation of state power. In her 2004 *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici expands upon Marx's reading of primitive accumulation in *Capital, Volume 1* by proposing to look at how it impacted women, whose experiences Marx does not consider. She contends that primitive accumulation inaugurated a new sexual division of labor in which women became responsible for social reproduction on the basis of their gender and remained unpaid for much of their work despite the introduction of the wage. Federici documents the ways in which primitive accumulation in Western Europe was marked by the loss of common land and the deliberate exclusion of women from many types of waged work resulting in an increased dependence on men in order to access the money needed to purchase food and/or shelter. Additionally, Federici documents how women's bodies came to be understood as the tool by which to reproduce the workforce and governments increasingly legislated pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing. As Chapter 1 elaborates, the emergence of sound film in Mexico coincided with a period of economic growth in which more and more people were participating in the capitalist economy. This period included new restrictions for women regarding work and programs meant to educate them about their roles within the home. These norms were also legislated. Notably, until 1975 federal law required men to provide their wives with a home and women to live in the home provided by their husbands and do housework there (Varley 242-243).

Such norms, be they legal and/or social, benefit not only individual men, but also the state and businesses. In such a division of labor states have less of a need to provide social services and business owners can pay their workers less based on the perception that their

workers have access to this free labor. Women can be paid less because they are presumed to be concerned primarily with the domestic space whether this is true or not. Importantly, these gender norms often intersect with other structural mechanisms such as race and class and result in certain groups of women becoming responsible for the domestic work of elites (i.e. all women do not do this work in equal measures nor under equally exploitative conditions).

Subsequently, gendered emancipation for Marxist feminists is tied not only to sexual self-expression and a greater acceptance of gender variance, but the construction of communal forms of life in which social reproduction is not assigned to women under the guise of a natural expression of their gender. Additionally gendered emancipation is not simply a question of women gaining access to power or finding some kind of improved social standing in already existing social hierarchies because neither of these would solve the problem of how communal care is provided and shared. Indeed, it would likely mean other women in more vulnerable positions doing domestic work on behalf of the occasional woman who did enjoy this power. Subsequently, in Marxist feminism gendered liberation is part of a broader critical Marxist idea of revolution in which, the goal becomes, as Raquel Gutiérrez writes, "...self-governance and social coexistence beyond the modern state and capital" (xxii). The goal is not for women to simply occupy existing power structures, but to recognize that such power structures engender and rely upon these social divisions in order to persist. Ending gendered oppression is intimately connected to ending state violence, capitalist exploitation, and the other kinds of exploitation used to structure unequal social relationships.

### **A Few Notes on Methodology**

The analysis of films in this dissertation consists primarily of close readings of both commercial and art films in conversation with critical theory concepts and heavily contextualized



by historical and economic research. As already stated, I draw on several bodies of theoretical work, none of which is exclusive to Mexican film and all of which require being adapted to questions of film as stylized representation, not objective, unmediated documentation of a known reality.

My emphasis on close readings, use of critical theory to structure my arguments about the political significance of these texts, and inclusion of art cinema are somewhat controversial. I want to offer some clarification as to why I find it to be a useful approach in light of recent arguments against it made by film critic and Mexicanist Ignacio Sánchez Prado. While Sánchez Prado is by no means the only critic to make the following critiques, he is one of the most prominent and recent scholars to do so in my own field of Latin American cultural studies. Thus I chose to respond specifically to his work here.

In “The Limitations of the Sensible: Reading Rancière in Mexico’s Failed Transition” Sánchez Prado elaborates his qualms with film research premised on close readings and art cinema. He critiques both Jacques Rancière’s work on the Hungarian director Bela Tarr and those who draw on Rancière’s work in research on Mexico arguing that it mistakenly portrays elite artistic spaces as redemptive ones where we can find political solutions to political problems. Sánchez Prado argues that art cinema excludes “the majority of potential spectators” (381) and critical readings like Rancière’s are reducible to “...the hyper-aware position of a member of the cultural elite who is able to produce, precisely because of her privileged status, an educated reading of a cultural object” (“Limitations” 377).<sup>3</sup> Sánchez Prado argues that in the

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<sup>3</sup> Many of Sánchez Prado’s critiques appear to be rooted in a concern over art film and critical readings as being too elite. Early in the article Sánchez Prado says, regarding the work of Mexicanists who draw on the work of Rancière, that he would “not necessarily endorse a populist objection that would question Rancière’s taste for art-house cinema and installation art on the mere basis of their inaccessibility to the very subjects that his philosophy locates in the voice and supplement” (“Limitations” 377). However he does, as noted above, proceed to reject Bela Tarr’s work and Rancière’s on these same grounds (“Limitations” 381) without offering any insight as to why they are

case of Mexico, the film industry's historical relationship to the state disqualifies it and other cultural industries as a point of dissident or democratic politics because these politics cannot be fully untangled from the state and hegemonic elites' control over the cultural industries ("Limitations" 376-377).<sup>4</sup> For Sánchez Prado, the contents of a film are eclipsed by its production, distribution, and officially sanctioned interpretations, which, by his count, can be assumed to reinforce unequal and violent social, political, and economic orders. Last, Sánchez Prado rebukes Jacques Rancière and Mexicanists who draw on his work in their own (be it about film or something else) because of their "inability to theorize anything other than fleeting moments of democratization" ("Limitations" 379). Here the suggestion is that a good theorization of politics is one that prescribes a comprehensive politics. In sum, it seems that for a film or a work of cultural criticism to be a source of political insight for Sánchez Prado, it must be accessible at the moment of its inception, totally separate from oppressive power structures, and offering a comprehensive political vision.

Sánchez Prado's arguments are symptomatic of a strain of anti-intellectualism that Verónica Gago deconstructs in "Intellectuals, Experiences, and Militant Investigation." Gago argues that this framework juxtaposes thinking and doing as separate and opposing practices. The former is understood as elite and rooted in comfort and a refusal to disrupt the status quo, and the latter, as popular and rooted in risk and experimentation. For Sánchez Prado, art cinema and readings of it are the former. They are reducible to elites performing their own privileged

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different. Additionally Sánchez Prado critiques what he perceives as film criticism's over attention to auteur cinema at the expense of commercial cinema and a capitulation to "aesthetic prejudices" ("Limitations" 9-10). Both arguments strike me as populist objections because he does not give any reason beyond mass appeal to justify this call for change.

<sup>4</sup> It is unclear from this article how Sánchez Prado sees the cultural industries following Mexico's neoliberal transformation, in particular during the 1990s, when so much was privatized. Given that they remained largely in the hands of elites, albeit increasingly business elites rather than politicians, it seems likely that this argument would remain valid for him.

position through esoteric scholarship. Gago proposes that we see thinking and doing as complementary, intertwined processes that are both ongoing. In particular, she argues that reading should be understood as an important part of political critical thinking, not because someone has written or formulated a perfect political response to present day violence, but because reading itself has “a productivity that cannot be reduced to pre established pedagogical models” (3). The goal in reading is not to memorize pre existing models and ideas, but rather to think about them critically and put them in conversation in ways that “take a risk in naming and valorizing modes of existence that denounce and combat forms of exploitation and domination” (3). Additionally, Gago argues that these readings are neither exclusive to nor of intellectuals and insists that this sort of anti-intellectualism is “...rather than a nod to the popular (which is often an overreaction), is a call to order and a confirmation of class-based hierarchies” (2). This is to say that insisting that critical thought is an elitist practice itself is an exclusionary practice that reduces those without formal educations to non-thinking people incapable of debating, disagreeing, and creating concepts. It is one thing to advocate for more diverse forums for intellectual exchange not limited to professional academics or more lucid writing; it is quite another to attempt to shut down critical and rigorous discourse.

This understanding of reading can be similarly ascribed to viewing. Similar to Gago’s theorization of reading, Jacques Rancière’s concept of viewing emphasizes textual analysis as an active, and often creative endeavor that cannot be reduced to the spectator passively accepting whatever is in front of them. In the first chapter of the *Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière lays out the titular concept of his book in a way that is illustrative of how a critical reading of film can be understood. As Rancière notes, theater spectators have often been reduced by critical theory to passive viewers, disparaged for their supposed inactivity and seduction by a spectacle.

The point of the theater in such readings is to convert the passive spectator into some kind of actor, to either inspire them or imbue them with knowledge so that they might go out into the world and do something. The show is understood as simply propaganda. Rancière contests this conceptualization of the spectator, offering an alternative relationship between performers, text, and spectator:

Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in terms of the new idiom that convey as new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story (22).

The spectator here is an active viewer, one whose role is to be in conversation with and interpret the text placed in front of them. To interpret is to act. Notably, Rancière begins by drawing a parallel between the researcher and artist, but his framing of the spectator, who interprets and possesses the story, also includes creative and intellectual impulses. To this end, film criticism, in which one is both researcher and spectator, seeking to interpret and discuss a text, is an active gesture. It does not preclude other forms of political action, but it does potentially facilitate, nurture, and dialogue with them. A critical interpretation of a text is not antithetical to change and it might actually be useful in understanding problems and working through alternatives.

Reading and viewing, especially critically and in conversation with others, are both potentially generative processes that result in new ideas and complicate old ones. In the essay "Más semilleros" by Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés and SupGaleano, SupGaleano argues that for the present moment, the Zapatistas and activists more broadly have a dire need for concepts to dissect and understand the present and theorize a possible future beyond it. Drawing on the book that precedes his concluding essay, *El pensamiento crítico frente a la hidra capitalista I*, he argues that capitalism in the present is a constantly changing hydra. Much like

the concept of contemporary necropolitics explored in Chapter 3, capitalism is rhizomatic and in constant flux, finding new ways to take over and insert itself into new arenas. Subsequently meaningful theories are ones that offer flexibility and respond to change, rather than being absolute and enduring over time. In contrast with Sánchez Prado and in keeping with Gago, SupGaleano warns against “recetas hechas” (355) or rigid political prescriptions meant to comprehensively and uniformly codify a world in motion. SupGaleano argues that concepts give us a means by which to transmit and share collective experiences and strategies. They are not finished projects, but rather tools and shared points of departure, meant to be debated, contested, modified, and perhaps discarded when and to the extent they are or are not useful. Concepts, be they hydras, necropolitics, or a theory of reading, invite collective thought and shared struggle. A theorization of a fleeting moment of democracy is not disqualified because of its impermanence but instead is understood as limited.

SupGaleano suggests that in this search for concepts and understanding, it is acceptable to use and reshape past concepts and ideas, just as it is acceptable to offer new ones. The goal is not to invent a concept under ideal and ideologically pure circumstances, but to modify and use pre-existing knowledge and thought to advance an anti-capitalist, pro-Zapatista project. He mentions an essay earlier in the book by Escucha Selena, which talks about how small daily practices and use of devices like a cell phone can become Zapatista practices when used towards a different political ends than intended. Keeping up with events and allies in Kobane using a phone is different than using the same phone as a consumerist status symbol (356-357). The human relationships and distribution of knowledge and power that the phone engenders are fundamentally different in these two scenarios. Escucha Selena points out it would be foolish to revert to smoke signals in the name of original purity when the phone can be a useful tool.

Similarly SupGaleano argues that ignoring all previous intellectual work out of a desire for that same purity is a poor use of time. I would add that while both art and commercial cinema and/or readings of either, can potentially exceed or be configured to exceed the intentions of the systems and tools that produce them. This does not mean that they always will or that none of the films and readings would reinforce the status quo, but that the possibility might be there and dismissing it in the name of purity is self-defeating.

Films, including art films, and the readings they inspire, like Zapatista cell phones and reconfigured concepts are potentially meaningful tools for broader discussions and theorizations related to sovereignty in Mexico, political and economic violence, and gender's relationship to both. They offer a potential shared point of departure for thinking through how the interconnectedness of these systems and institutions is being articulated and what those connections mean. As Gago and Rancière make clear, critical readings and viewing are part of active struggle and continued growth, not an obstacle to them.

This is not to the exclusion of other texts and sites of analysis, but one potential forum where such work can be discussed and done. While, perhaps their endings and the critical readings are partial and unsatisfying, such endings and readings are also a reminder of their own limitations as interventions and a gesture towards the complementary, further study, and action that needs to accompany them.

### **Organization of the Dissertation and Chapter Summaries**

This dissertation is organized into three chapters, each of which explores how a body of films from a specific time period represents the relationship between sovereignty and social reproduction. The films were chosen because of their thematic overlap, which, when read collectively suggests broader arguments about how the categories at hand (sovereignty, social

reproduction, sex, etc.) were or are being understood and articulated. It should be noted that individual texts were chosen primarily because they foreground the themes being discussed and are emblematic aesthetically and in terms of industrial conception of the periods from which they come. They are by no means the only films that satisfy these criteria, but were, in my estimation, and as is elaborated in the close readings, strong examples of the arguments being made and representative of this period of filmmaking. Each of the time periods chosen, the Golden Age, the Echeverría presidency, and neoliberal Mexico, represents a moment when the Mexican cinema was undergoing a paradigm shift in which the infrastructure of the industry drastically changed in a way that meant there were more resources and opportunities for filmmakers. Given that the Mexican state was so essential in funding and distributing early film as well as empowered to censor it, the relationship between the content of the films and their economic and political context is important and subsequently detailed in each chapter. These chapters, while organized chronologically, should not be understood as an exhaustive history of these tropes in Mexican cinema, but rather a study of how the film industry mobilized them in three specific moments in response to changing political and economic organization. To be sure, extending this analysis to B films and those from periods of decreased production with smaller budgets (as I begin to do with *sexicomedias* in Chapter 2) would no doubt be beneficial and enhance overall understanding of the connections between gender, economic development, and state in Mexican filmmaking.

Chapter 1, “*The Birth of Biopolitics in Mexican Melodrama*,” examines a subgenre of melodrama known as the *cabaretera* that emerged during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. *Cabareteras* are a commercial genre that follow the trials and tribulations of young female sex workers in big cities after the Mexican revolution. Traditionally they have been read as liberatory

texts because they represent women doing paid labor and being overtly sexual in public.<sup>5</sup> My readings of the films *Aventurera* (Dir. Alberto Gout, 1950) and *Víctimas del pecado* (Dir. Emilio Fernández, 1951) argues that they are better understood as treatises on how women's sexuality and gender roles relate to Mexico's post-revolutionary capitalist development and the consolidation of PRIista corporatism. I contend that while *cabareteras* are about sex workers seemingly outside of the prescribed norms, these films actually reinforce a gendered division of labor where women do unpaid reproductive labor on behalf of nuclear families. The chapter departs from Foucault's description of biopolitics at the end of *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* that the supervision of women's bodies in the service of childbearing and motherhood through biopolitical norms were central to capitalist development in Europe. Drawing on several decades of Marxist feminist scholarship, I expand this argument to suggest that capitalist development in Mexico depended more broadly on women's unremunerated domestic work framed as a natural aspect of femininity. Subsequently, *cabareteras*, through their representation of sex work, provide a series of arguments about the need for women to devote themselves to motherhood and domestic work within the context of a nuclear family. These arguments include that women are emotionally volatile and need male supervision, that the working class, which is indigenous and/or mestizo, depends on bourgeois, white family values as a source of stability and inspiration, that women are inherently unsafe and destabilizing when in public, and that marriage and romance will result in the actual emotional fulfillment of all involved. The second part of the chapter is a contrast between Foucault's descriptions of state power in *The Birth of Biopolitics* and PRIista corporatism. Foucault describes European liberalism as framed around concern about governments interfering too much in the economy and the idea of an individual as an

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<sup>5</sup> See López, 158-159, and de la Mora, *Cinemachismo* 15.



“entrepreneur of himself” (*Birth* 226). In contrast, PRIista corporatism, both on and off screen, sought to fuse the state with the citizenry. Cinematically this is represented through what I term scalar allegories, in which individual men become administrators of the state’s agenda on a small scale and serve as parallel figures to the president. Central to this is an onscreen rejection of both past and alternative forms of masculinity that do not prioritize moral, chaste living supervised by men and embodied in women. Ultimately, *cabareteras* suggest that participation in the state’s agenda will result in a secular redemption.

Chapter 2, “Rewriting the *Cabaretera*: 1970s Art Cinema, Sex Work, Land Reform, and a Critique of State Violence” explores the films *Las Poquianchis* (Dir. Felipe Cazals, 1976), *Tivoli* (Dir. Alberto Isaac, 1975), and *El lugar sin límites* (Dir. Arturo Ripstein, 1977) as critiques of the biopolitics outlined in Chapter 1. The films were made as part of the brief revival of Mexican national cinema during the Echeverría presidency during which filmmakers had access to increased financial support and reduced censorship. The result was a considerable body of high prestige art cinema, much of which plays on themes and tropes from the Golden Age, and takes a critical stance regarding the PRI. The three films at hand combine the themes of sex work and land reform. Similar to their Golden Age counterparts, they portray the state as a strong, hierarchical, masculinized institution that operates in excess of its own legal limitations. However, all three insist that the state, which is constantly intervening in the name of sexual propriety, is only using this morality as a pretext for dispossessing citizens of desirable land resources. Departing from Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *bare life*, which is life that lies outside of the rule of law and is vulnerable to impune violence, I argue that the films represent sexual morality as a tool by which to declare people *bare life* and to facilitate what David Harvey has termed *accumulation by dispossession*, or ongoing primitive accumulation. In making this

critique, the films suggest that the idea of the nuclear family partnered with the state, which is at the center of the morality proposed by the films examined in Chapter 1, is totally inadequate to provide for social reproduction. These 1970s films gesture towards the need of some other kind of community, one not yoked to the state and a heavily gendered division of labor, in order for the social reproduction of a community to be truly ensured. Ultimately, these films serve as a rebuttal to the image of the state in Golden Age film and the assertion that the state and population are partnered and monitoring sexual behavior and morality to the advancement of both institutions.

Chapter 3, “Neither Reform Nor Restoration: The Necropolitical Constructions of Gender and State in Neoliberal Mexican Film” examines films made following the privatization of much of the Mexican film industry and reorganization of remaining culture industry infrastructure under a series of neoliberal reforms that began in the 1980s following Mexico’s declaration of bankruptcy. After the Echeverría presidency, funding declined and creative freedom was once again increasingly constrained. This reorganization brought a second revival of Mexican cinema that, similar to its predecessor in the 1970s, yielded a considerable body of political art films for both domestic and international distribution. Different from the 1970s though is the fact that the industry was not as controlled by the state and operating in a market increasingly detached from its controls.

The films in this chapter, *Sin dejar huella* (Dir. María Novaro, 2000), *Traspatio* (Dir. Carlos Carrera, 2009), *Miss Bala* (Dir. Gerardo Naranjo, 2011), and *Las elegidas* (Dir. David Pablos, 2016) deal explicitly with contemporary violence in neoliberal Mexico and foreground its impact on women. I argue that they represent this violence as a form of contemporary necropolitics similar to what Achille Mbembe has described in contemporary Africa. In this

configuration, the state, organized crime, businesses, and other institutions and systems all potentially have access to sovereign power, which is exercised through violence and the threat of death. Central to this is a disregard for any form of social reproduction, which, unlike with biopolitics, is no longer key to the functioning of sovereign power or, it seems, its rhetorical legitimacy. The films represent this new dynamic through gendered subjectivities framed around the violence, with women as victims and men as aggressors. Notably these texts position themselves as critiques of contemporary violence, suggesting that the violence is wrong both because of the suffering it causes victims and the ways in which it distorts and maims the humanity of the aggressors. The films are intended as a call to stop this sovereign violence itself not so much through the securitization measures proffered by the Mexican state over the past decade, but the reprioritization of collective care or social reproduction outside of what Nancy Fraser and Karl Polanyi call *marketization*, or the pursuit of an economy without moral or ethical regulation (233). In doing so the films suggest that a successful response to this violence will include actively breaking away from and dismantling the system generating it. Given the state's participation in necropolitics, this is a call to look for something beyond a reform-based, state led solution.

Read together, these films offer a view of gender in Mexican film as an entry point into discussions about the links between representation, capitalist development, and state sovereignty. They gesture towards the need for new forms of social organization that accounts for social reproduction without gendered exploitation and raise provocative questions about how the relationship between gender, sexuality, state power and economic development is understood.

## Chapter 1

### The Birth of Biopolitics in Mexican Melodrama

*The postrevolutionary regime's vision, emphasizing commodity rather than subsistence production, demanded both a clear public-private divide and an active reproductive labor force. The ideal feminine domesticity provided more than just stability and continuity amid rapid social change; it promised the everyday labor required to reproduce Mexico's modern labor force. –Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico**

*...en el cine, este público vio la posibilidad de experimentar, de adoptar nuevos hábitos y de ver reiterados (y dramatizados, con las voces que le gustaría tener y oír) códigos de costumbres. No se acudió al cine a soñar; se fue a aprender. –Carlos Monsiváis, “Notas sobre la cultura mexicana en el siglo XX”*

#### Introduction

In 1932 *Santa* (Dir. Antonio Moreno), the first Mexican sound film, premiered. Based on a 1908 bestseller by Federico Gamboa, *Santa* is the tragic story of the titular character, played by Lupita Tovar, who becomes a sex worker in Mexico City after dishonoring her family by sleeping with a soldier. *Santa* rises to fame as a courtesan, but quickly loses her health and morals, falling victim to sin, poverty, illness, and finally death. The film, which highlights the challenges of urban life, the dangers of promiscuity and sex work, and the need for a strong nuclear family, raises many topics that would be foregrounded repeatedly in Mexican films for the next two decades.

As this chapter will argue, melodramas about sex work such as *Santa* became a key forum for expressing and distributing ideas about citizen responsibility, state power, and the

relationship between the two in the early days of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI).<sup>6</sup> Culminating in the emergence of the subgenre known as the *cabaretera*, sex workers represented an aberrant female sexuality that was critiqued in post-revolutionary Mexican film as anti-revolutionary and a threat to the state's prescribed gender roles, public health protocols, and economic prosperity. The constant attention paid to sex work in Mexican films from the 1940s and 1950s as well as the explicit and consistent cinematic contrast drawn between sex workers and chaste, industrious housewives reveal the ways in which femininity was being constructed and deployed in post-revolutionary Mexico to support economic and political goals.

Ultimately, the representations of sex work are a vehicle to discuss the post-revolutionary Mexican experience of what Michel Foucault called "biopolitics" or the expression of sovereignty as "the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop life" (*History* 136). According to Foucault, the rise of this form of sovereignty was key to the rise of liberal capitalism in Western Europe. Biopolitics established a set of social norms that provided a healthy, disciplined workforce while simultaneously not appearing to rely on a dictatorial form of governance that imposed itself on the market. As the first part of this chapter argues using a close reading of the *cabaretera* film *Aventurera*, Mexican melodramas about sex work, in keeping with Foucauldian biopolitics, are highly didactic and instruct audiences on how to structure their romantic and sexual lives in ways that will ultimately facilitate their ability to do assigned work tasks. As the second part of this chapter will argue, however, contrary to Foucault's reading of biopolitics as a means of governing minimally within a liberal state, the

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<sup>6</sup> The *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR) was established in 1929 and ruled Mexico until 2000 when the party lost the presidency. The PNR was renamed the *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* (PRM) in 1938 and then became the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) in 1946. Notably throughout this chapter the PRI, the Mexican government, and the Mexican state are often used interchangeably. This is because during the period in question, while nominally an electoral democracy, Mexico was a single-party state developed and controlled by the PRI. As such, the Mexican state, government, and the PRI rarely can be meaningfully distinguished from each other.

deployment of biopolitics during this period in Mexico reinforces the heavily centralized, corporatist state emerging under the PRI. This is reflected cinematically through an allegorical discourse centering on the interactions between a submissive, vulnerable woman allegorizing the nation, and a strong, benevolent patriarchal figure emblemizing the state. These films, as a close reading of the 1951 *cabaretera* film *Victimas del pecado* will be used to illustrate, suggest that the family and the state are parallel structures best headed by an empowered, single, masculine figure. Ultimately these films reveal the ways in which gender constructions changed to accommodate both an increasingly capitalist economy and corporatist state, as well as offer complex allegories that model the presumed ideal relationship between this state and the individuals and communities under its control.

### **The Construction of the Mexican Housewife in Golden Age Cinema<sup>7</sup>**

The silent film era in Mexico established both exhibition and distribution infrastructure as well as a culture of film going that were essential to national cinema's later success. Silent film arrived in Mexico City in 1895 and the first movie salon opened in 1898 (Mora 6-7). By 1907, major cities had theaters. Additionally ambulatory exhibitors held screenings in more rural areas of the country (Serna 23). Most films came from Europe and the United States, although during the Mexican revolution that began in 1910, various factions used film as a propaganda tool both domestically and abroad and some feature length films were made in Mexico (2, 23). Following WWI, European film industries were in disarray and Hollywood became an increasingly dominant film industry. This was particularly true in Mexico, where, following the

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<sup>7</sup> The Golden Age of Mexican cinema began in the mid-1930s when Mexican cinema began to have commercial success not only in Mexico, but also internationally. The industry boomed during World War II when Hollywood's control of Latin American screens loosened and the United States helped Mexico develop its own industry via the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) (Fein 129-135). Following the war, Hollywood again emerged as formidable competitor for Latin American screens and by the early 1950s the Mexican national industry was in decline (Fein 155-157).

Mexican revolution, US business interests, including the film industry, had taken note of a growing middle class and begun investing more heavily (28). Complimenting this was the idea of the Mexican market as a gateway into other Latin American markets, in particular those of Central America (39). By 1923, most major American film companies opened offices in Mexico City, often with subsidiaries in provincial cities and port towns (29, 36). Notably, the US government also saw film as a tool by which to promote American interests and ideals and used film as a tool of diplomacy (Serna 29-31).

In *Making Cinelandia*, Laura Isabel Serna documents how Mexican audiences enjoyed US films for their depictions of technology and an emerging consumer culture (26) but also both struggled to connect with them thematically because of cultural differences and sometimes rejected them because of political content. For example, audiences showed ambivalence towards a protestant missionary character in the 1928 film *Sadie Thompson*. The film company's manager in Mexico attributed that ambivalence to a lack of familiarity with protestant missionary work (41). Serna also recounts Mexican audiences' general rejection of the 1918 film *Pershing's Crusaders*, which celebrated the general who invaded Mexico following Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico (30-31). Similarly, she elaborates how audiences and also the Mexican government objected to Hollywood's depictions of Mexicans as "...sneaky, savage, hypersexualized, or simply primitively picturesque" (158). These representations were considered an affront to the country's modernizing efforts, particularly following the revolution, and the post-revolutionary state attempted to confront Hollywood on several occasions through legal mechanisms including a censorship council, an embargo, and bans (158-171).

Hollywood began making sound films in 1927 and struggled with how to make sound films for its foreign audiences. While Hollywood initially made some Spanish language films,

these movies generally had low production values and did not feature the silent film stars that audiences had grown to love (Ramírez Berg *Classical* 57). They also tended to have casts from multiple countries and the combination of accents was confusing and odd sounding to audiences unaccustomed to accents different from their own (Mora 32). Mexican producers realized that there was a void they could fill for Spanish speaking audiences by making their own films and creating their own stars (57). As Charles Ramírez Berg recounts in *The Classical Mexican Cinema*, *Santa* was the first sound film to result from this observation. *Santa* was a project spearheaded by Juan de la Cruz Alarcón, who had been a distributor of foreign films before becoming the head of the new Mexican production company, Compañía Nacional Productora de Películas. Cruz Alarcón struggled to find an affordable sound system to make the film. He eventually connected with two brothers, Roberto and Joselito Rodríguez, who had gone to Hollywood as teenagers to learn to make movies. The brothers had invented the Rodríguez Sound Recording System, which was remarkable because it was very lightweight compared to the other sound systems of its day, had higher sound quality than other sound systems, and produced tracks that could be lip synched with images more accurately. In addition to being the sound system used for *Santa*, the Rodríguez Sound Recording System was used for the next 10 years in Mexican film production. Notably the film's stars, Lupita Tovar and Donald Reed, were both Mexican stars based in Hollywood. The creation of a robust Spanish-language cinema was an important opportunity for actors whose accents and language skills had not been an issue in Hollywood during the silent era. As this anecdote suggests, the nascent Mexican film industry was the beneficiary of businesspeople, artists, and technicians who had learned filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition in or in relationship to Hollywood and other foreign cinemas, but for



various reasons were eager for Mexico to have a more robust filmmaking industry of its own (59-62).

As the Mexican state under the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* began to establish itself in the 1930s, film was recognized as an important medium for disseminating messages and ideology to the public. As the epigraph from Carlos Monsiváis suggests, film represented an opportunity to model new customs and social configurations in a rapidly changing country. While the Mexican government did not nationalize the industry, it did offer material and organizational support to it. For example, the state subsidized a modern film studio in the mid-1930s (Mora 53), supported the organization of the *Banco Cinematográfico* in 1942 to help finance films (Mora 59), consolidated major domestic distributors into *Películas Nacionales, S.A.* to promote better domestic distribution, and passed ill-fated protectionist measures in the late 1940s in hopes of staving off foreign competition (Fein 148-155).<sup>8</sup> The state also censored films made in and imported to Mexico, seeking to promote positive images of Mexico and monitor, in particular, controversial representations of the Mexican Revolution, poverty, political problems, and sexuality (Peredo-Castro 70-73).

Beginning with *Santa*, melodrama emerged as the preferred cinematic register for discussing and performing Mexican history, culture, and identity (Acevedo-Muñoz 81-84; Martín-Barbero 165-168; Monsiváis “Mythologies” 117). As Peter Brooks writes in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, historically melodramas have been defined by a struggle between emblems for virtue and villainy, in which virtue ultimately triumphs (32). This division between virtue and villainy in classical melodrama is emphasized via aesthetic and stylistic devices such

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<sup>8</sup> The *Banco Cinematográfico* offered funds for the production and distribution of films. While initially nominally private, the *Banco Cinematográfico* later reorganized under the state as the *Banco Nacional Cinematográfico* in 1947 (Fein 146).

as highly emphatic, exaggerated acting (41), the use of physical appearance as an indicator of a character's moral interior (33), peripetian plotlines full of climactic moments at which moral truths are declared (40), and music to cue specific emotional responses (48). The goal of melodrama according to Brooks is not simply to tell a story, but to code it so that the audience interprets it as intended and understands the social order being advocated as righteous and just (17). Brooks argues that melodramas appeared following the French Revolution when old institutions, such as the Church and Crown, lost power and new systems of power emerged, necessitating new cognitive maps of society and social order.

Both Laura Podalsky and Ana López have explained melodrama's popularity in Mexico using Brook's argument that melodrama emerges during periods of social tumult and is popular because it offers an image of stability and coherence (Brooks 14-20; López 152; Podalsky "Disjointed" 58-59). Indeed, during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, Mexico was undergoing a period of dramatic change and new social orders were emerging. As Pablo González Casanova argues in *Democracy in Mexico*, a strong presidentialist regime emerged in part in post-revolutionary Mexico as a means to impede old forms of institutional power, including "regional and local *caudillos* and *caciques*, the Army, the clergy and latifundists, and national and foreign entrepreneurs" (32) from regaining power. In addition to shifting sources of political power, post-revolutionary Mexico entered a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization (Moreno-Brid and Ros 93) during which people's work, families, and homes drastically changed. Melodramas provided a forum for imagining a cohesive society with shared moral and social norms in the face of all this change.

Throughout the Golden Age, beginning with *Santa*, sex work was a constant theme in Mexican filmmaking and has subsequently been widely analyzed (Ayala Blanco 128-161; de la

Mora *Cinemachismo* 21-67; Hershfield 77-105; López 150-160; Tuñon 277-282). The trope of the sex worker culminated in the 1940s with the emergence of a melodramatic subgenre known as the *cabaretera*. Loosely defined as “the tragic story of a hard-working and long-suffering B-girl” (Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 125), *cabareteras* testify to the urban strife that accompanied the rapid industrialization and urbanization of 1940s Mexico.<sup>9</sup> As their name suggests, *cabareteras* transpire at least partially in cabarets or other locations where women typically performed sex work. Their protagonists are downtrodden sex workers, often B-girls or *rumberas* and their plots chronicle the trials and tribulations of these women. These films typically end with the suggestion that women are happiest and safest when able to devote themselves to housewifery and/or motherhood as opposed to sex work. In some films like the 1950 *Aventurera* (Dir. Alberto Gout) and the 1953 *Ambiciosa* (Dir. Ernesto Cortázar), this happens when women leave their shameful, tragic lives as dancers/sex workers and find respite in domestic life. In others, like 1949 *Salón México* (Dir. Emilio Fernández) or the 1951 *Sensualidad* (Dir. Alberto Gout) the protagonist ultimately dies because there is no place for her in modern society (this ending is much less common). In addition to their plotlines, *cabareteras* are well known for featuring dance and music from Brazil and/or the Caribbean as well as starring performers who hailed from nearby Cuba- among them Ninón Sevilla, María Antonieta Pons, and Rosa Carmina. The titles of *cabareteras* generally allude to either the vulnerability of their protagonists (*Las abandonadas*, *Víctimas del pecado*, *Perdida*, etc.) or their sinful inclinations (*Señora Tentación*,

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<sup>9</sup> The *cabaretera* subgenre, which foregrounds the economic plight of the poor and contrasts it with the excess luxury of the wealthy are often seen as a pop culture response to the presidency of Miguel Alemán (de la Mora *Cinemachismo* 51-52; Mora 83-85; Niblo 50-51). Alemán, following on the heels of his predecessor, Manuel Ávila Camacho, took a sharp rightward turn away from the policies of the first PRI president Lázaro Cárdenas. He had a pro-business orientation and his time as president is characterized by growing wealth disparities, as well as an increasingly authoritarian government. The power of unions and working class participation in the state diminished during his term. One might add that the emphasis on patriarchal control, elaborated in part two of this chapter, and obedience in these films are also indicative of the increasingly authoritarian role of the PRI.

*La Perversa, Ambiciosa, Las Interesadas*, etc.), marking women's need for intervention from a greater power, who usually, as will be discussed, ends up being either a loving husband or paternal figure who takes care of the women and inspires clean living.

Past readings of *cabareteras* have hinged on the idea that the films are actually about the repression of female sexuality and women who break away from socially prescribed forms of femininity to find less conservative, more liberated forms of gender expression. These readings contend that the presence of women performing sexuality and handling money onscreen is proof of social progress and an increasingly dynamic and independent femininity. In "Tears and Desire" Ana López writes, "Idealized, independent, and extravagantly sexual, the exotic *rumbera* was a social fantasy, but one through which *other* subjectivities could be envisioned, other psychosexual and social identities forged" (López 160). Similarly, Joanne Hershfield argues, "The cabaretera attempted to update the La Malinche paradigm of the 'bad woman' in order to assimilate the Mexican working-class woman whose newfound social and economic power challenged the male's traditional position of superiority" (79).<sup>10</sup> As I will show shortly, these readings ignore the fact that these films typically frame sex work as the result of poverty and abandonment by patriarchal figures and frame it as a form of social degradation.

Such readings, which emphasize public, brazen expressions of female sexuality as indications of new freedoms and broken taboos, are a variant of what Michel Foucault, in *The*

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<sup>10</sup> La Malinche was the interpreter and lover of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador who defeated the Aztecs. She is often referred to as "La Chingada" (the fucked one) in pop culture and framed both as a traitor to and the mother of the Mexican nation. She is often contrasted with the Virgin of Guadalupe is the dark skinned apparition of Mary who appeared to an indigenous peasant named Juan Diego in 1531. As the virgin mother of God, she represents the binary opposite of the Malinche. Together they serve as a highly nationalized virgin-whore paradigm often used to theorize Mexican femininity (For readings that draw on the idea of the Malinche and the Virgin as images of femininity in post-revolutionary Mexico and its cinema, see de la Mora *Cinemachismo* 28-30; Hershfield, 18-23; López, 150-151; Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 56-61).

*History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, calls the “repressive hypothesis”. The repressive hypothesis is the belief that in modern society people are discursively repressed and unable to talk about sexuality. Sexual liberation comes from the production of discourse about sexuality and disrupting presumed silences around it. These readings, which suggest that a titillating cabaret performance onscreen emblemizes social liberation, revolve around the idea of a repressed femininity acquiring new ways to express sexual pleasure and desire, as well as to gain access to economic and social mobility (here meaning titillating forms of sex work). These readings problematically suggest that both gender and sexuality are relatively stable constructs that are simply seeking fuller expression and that when this expression occurs, regardless of its framing, progress for women is made.

In the *History of Sexuality Volume 1* Foucault disputes the repressive hypothesis and begins to outline his conceptualization of “biopolitics” which offers a useful alternative framework to read *cabareteras*. Foucault argues that, contrary to the repressive hypothesis, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe discussion of human sexuality was not only not repressed, but that there was “an institutional incitement to speak about it” (*History* 18). Sex was increasingly understood not simply as a solitary behavior, but as something related to economic growth and political stability and as such something to be controlled, monitored, taught, and ultimately publicly “administered” (24). This resulted in a profusion of discourse about sexuality (24-35). Sexuality became an indicator not only of human reproduction or physical pleasure, but deeper truths about an individual’s health, intelligence, and morality, as well as the health, intelligence, and morality of society as a whole. In what follows, I develop a framework from Foucault’s work, arguing that the appearance of female sexuality onscreen in *cabareteras* is not inevitably proof of expanded female self-expression and imminent sexual liberation, but rather a reflection of

societal beliefs and concerns about social order and health that may or may not include such expansions.

### **The Biopolitics of Reproductive Labor**

For Foucault, this new understanding of sexuality as a societal concern is a key part of what he calls biopolitics. First published in the aforementioned *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* and then further elaborated in the lecture series *Society Must Be Defended* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, biopolitics derives from the expression of sovereign power over life and death as the ability “to ensure, maintain, or develop life” (*History* 136). Beginning in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this “power over life” (*History* 139) emphasized two understandings of the human body that were compatible and mutually reinforcing. The first form conceptualizes the body as a machine that must be disciplined and trained in a way so as to “increase its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (*History* 139). Foucault calls this “*anatomo-politics of the human body*”. Notably this form of power focuses on the individual and their being disciplined. The second form addresses the body as a species, focusing on it as “imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (*History* 139). Foucault calls this “*a biopolitics of the population*” (*History* 139). Attention to the body as species has resulted in regulatory controls meant to manage the population, growing it and cultivating it at a supposedly optimal rate and targeting supposed measures of health and well being. As Foucault points out, both were fundamental to the rise of capitalism in Europe because capitalism required both “the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (*History* 141). Foucault argues that these two politics, one premised on the individual body and the other on the

population much more broadly, are joined through what he calls the norm. The norm is a standard of behavior or health that is ideally learned, achieved, and/or maintained in individual people through anatomo-politics and also regularized throughout the broader population via biopolitics (*Society* 252-253).

Under this new paradigm, the state sought to monitor and to control the female body because of its centrality to human reproduction and subsequently population growth. According to Foucault, this was accomplished through an understanding of the female body not only as biologically tied to reproduction, but the construction of a femininity marked by volatility and a lack of sufficient self-control that ultimately necessitated male supervision. Foucault describes the emergence of a “hysterical” femininity in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, which was “a thorough medicalization of [women’s] bodies and their sex...carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” (*History* 146-147).<sup>11</sup> This construction of femininity both medically labeled individual women incapable of self-control and suggested that the public monitoring of female sexuality and behavior was necessary in order to promote societal wellbeing. Notably this understanding of femininity also emphasized women’s place as being within the nuclear family as wife and mother, making it clear that women’s choices were of collective importance and not

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<sup>11</sup> *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* is not the first time that Foucault notes hysteria and its connection to constructions of femininity during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *Madness and Civilization*, he argues that hysteria was first understood as “the disorder of the spirit which, outside of all organic laws and any functional necessity, could successively seize upon all the available spaces of the body” (147). This meant that the body had to be conceptualized as continuous, or as one in which disease could spread from one part to another. Scientists theorized that hysteria was more common in women because their bodies were softer due to lighter work and as such they had more sympathetic organs that were susceptible to hysteria. Notably women who had more laborious lives were thought to be less prone to hysteria (149-154). While this understanding of hysteria was later supplanted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by new conceptualizations of madness and the body, it shows some of the ways in which conceptualizations of the body, gender, labor, and health were all linked to each other by scientists during this period. Furthermore, it is telling that while hysteria was used as a diagnosis to discredit women whose lives were less laborious (and presumably from the middle and upper classes), by labeling them ill, these women were not assigned “hard work” to counteract or treat their hysteria. Hysteria became evidence of their vulnerability and weakness as women, not proof of the need to restructure their participation in the workforce.

simply a matter of just one person's wellbeing. Foucault highlights that this took place on a very intimate level, leading to the public monitoring and scrutiny of childbirth, nursing, hygiene, and housing (*History* 46).

While the use of the word hysteria would seem to indicate a turn towards psychoanalysis, Foucault's emphasis on the rise of biopolitics alongside capitalism raises questions of how "hysterical" femininity relates to said capitalism. Foucault never (to my knowledge) elaborated the economic functions of this femininity beyond noting its ties to fertility and childbearing. However, scholarship done on reproductive labor by Marxist feminist theorists as well as labor historians and sociologists provides one potential response to this query (and indeed one which will prove useful in understanding cinematic representations of women in post-revolutionary Mexico).<sup>12</sup>

Reproductive labor is "the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labor are daily reconstituted" (Federici *Revolution* 5). It includes tasks such as cleaning, childbirth, childrearing, sexual relationships, and food preparation, as well as the support and guidance necessary to keep people physically and emotionally capable of doing labor and to provide a next generation of disciplined, cooperative workers. Reproductive labor is essential to capitalism's perpetuation because, as Leopoldina Fortunati summarily puts it, "The reproduction of individuals implies the reproduction of the labor-power contained within them" (Fortunati 11).

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<sup>12</sup> In making this connection between Marxist-feminist work on reproductive labor and Foucauldian biopolitics, I borrow a theoretical move from Andrea Righi's *Biopolitics and Social Change in Italy*. Righi argues that Foucault's work on biopolitics, in contrast to that of Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, foregrounds labor-power by arguing that biopolitics is a means by which to organize and control a workforce. In "Chapter 2: The Personal is (Bio)political!" Righi argues that the assignation of reproductive labor to women in particular is "properly biopolitical, since the regulation of sexuality/reproduction are measures governing life qua the general capacity to work (labor-power)" (47).



That is to say, after workers have sold their labor-power, they have to replenish themselves in order to have the energy, ability, and will to continue working.

Reproductive labor has been provided by a number of mechanisms in capitalist societies, including by purchase on the market and by government provision through the welfare state. Among the most common mechanisms, and the one relevant to Mexico during the Golden Age of cinema, is through a gendered division of labor in which women provide unpaid reproductive labor to their families on the basis of gender and presumed familial obligations.<sup>13</sup> Such a gendered division of labor typically revolves around a nuclear family of a heterosexual couple in which wives do unremunerated reproductive labor for their families in exchange for partial access to the wages earned by their husbands. Theoretically, the man earns enough to support the entire family and the woman trades her reproductive labor for partial access to his wage (Fortunati 13-14; M. González 5-9; Righi 60). However, the working class rarely, in any context, has been financially secure enough for only one adult member of a household to work (Federici *Caliban* 98-99; Fortunati 13-14; Endnotes 11; Nakano Glenn 37). Working class women in this paradigm therefore tend to have a double burden, being expected to bring in some money as well as to provide unpaid reproductive labor for their families.<sup>14</sup>

This breadwinner-housewife paradigm was very prominent in post-revolutionary discourse in Mexico, when the state sought to frame the role of women as unpaid reproductive laborers who were indirectly waged through their husbands. As Ann Varley has documented,

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<sup>13</sup> For elaborations on this point see: G. Dalla Costa 33-50; M. Dalla Costa and James 161-162; Endnotes 11; Federici *Caliban* 14-15; Fortunati 17-18; M. González 5-9; Nakano Glenn 6-7; Olcott 21-22.

<sup>14</sup> Women from immigrant groups and racial minorities often fall disproportionately into the working class and are often coerced through various mechanisms into doing paid reproductive labor for middle and upper class families (Endnotes 12; Nakano Glenn 7). This work is typically very poorly paid and often framed in terms of charity, education, or personal service rather than actual employment.

women during this period were legally responsible for their nuclear family's housework, while husbands were obligated to both financially support their families and to provide them with a place to live (this law remained on the books in most parts of Mexico until 1975; 242-243). As Mary Kay Vaughan points out, women were increasingly in charge of the social reproduction of a single nuclear family rather than participants in communal social reproduction. The 1930s in particular brought profound changes to female socialization as "migration, the nuclearization of families, and dependence on the market [...broke] down intergenerational female hierarchies built around reproductive practices" (203). Reproductive labor was increasingly understood as something done by an individual housewife for her husband and children rather than something done by women for the community as a whole.

Importantly, while women's expected subservience to their families was not new, the Mexican state introduced reforms and opportunities aimed at facilitating and rationalizing housewifery, making it clear that this system of social reproduction was not considered a remnant of the past, but part of the country's ongoing development. As Mary Kay Vaughan has documented, the state introduced new technology, medical advances, and educational opportunities in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s aimed at improving the quality of housewifery, as well as its efficiency and impact on overall health and education. Among these changes were the molino de nixtamal, the waist-level hearth, water sources close to home, paved highways, state subsidized fleets of buses, vaccines, new, more nutritious foods, and school for boys and girls (Vaughan 206). The ideal Mexican woman was increasingly understood as a giving reproductive laborer who used technology, hygiene, and sanitation to care for current Mexican laborers and their future replacements (i.e. her husband and children).

The state promoted this housewife ideal to all social classes regardless of its financial feasibility, often blaming working class failures to achieve this ideal on ignorance and immorality rather than poverty and the need for multiple wages. For example, Susan M. Gaus documents how, in 1940s Puebla, women who had long been involved in textile manufacturing were newly discouraged from working by unions that, during the 1940s, were increasingly co-opted by the government. Union leaders argued that while men worked to earn a family wage, women worked to satisfy their own selfish desires and neglected their families when engaging in paid labor (73). As Gaus points out, these critiques “circumscribed working-class femininity to reflect the expanding rhetoric of modern, middle-class motherhood that confined women to their homes” (76). Similarly, Sandra Aguilar Rodríguez’s “Cooking Modernity” explores how state-run dining halls for the working class were used in the 1940s to “educate” women and men about their family roles and how to be modern citizens. The dining halls encouraged women to do work that could be done in the home rather than take jobs more commonly available to them (e.g. factory work, street peddling, and domestic service) because working in one’s home was considered more appropriate for women (197-198). As these examples show, the state not only reinforced a biopolitics framed around gender, but also understood the working class’s failure to adopt these norms as proof of ignorance and the need for state intervention rather than the result of poverty and the need for higher wages.

Shaping women’s sexual practices was important to post-revolutionary understandings of modernity and was an important aspect of public debates regarding women, housewifery, and sex work. Along with providing housework, children, and childcare, women were seen as owing their husbands sex (marital rape was recognized and subsequently criminalized by the Mexican Supreme Court only in 2005 (Frías Martínez 85)). Sex work, which involved doing waged

reproductive labor (sex and recreation) for men outside of marriage and the home, was both common and a violation of social ideals. Katherine E. Bliss has documented how rural migrant women in cities in the 1920s and 1930s often turned to sex work after realizing that the low paying, degrading factory work available to them in cities was less profitable. Although dangerous, sex work offered higher wages, temporal flexibility, and more independence than the other jobs available to uneducated and illiterate women (“For the Health” 211). For its part, the state saw sex work as an affront to revolutionary morality, the nuclear family, and public health. The government attempted to curb sex work, enlisting “hygienists, teachers, social workers, and criminologists” (*Compromised* 98) to “sanitize and modernize social, sexual, and family relations in the new moral order” (*Compromised* 98). As Bliss points out, “the state’s quest to redeem the promiscuous citizens of the revolutionary capital medicalized female deviance, despaired over how to handle male sexual behavior, and pried open the door through which the Mexican Revolution entered the private homes and bedrooms of Mexican men and women” (*Compromised* 98). Much as described by Foucault with regards to 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the public management of sexuality was increasingly understood as central to the state’s ability to control the population and achieve its own political and economic goals through the successful instillation of normative behaviors.

The advantages of this breadwinner-housewife arrangement for states are numerous. Above all it places the responsibility for social reproduction squarely on the worker and provides an unremunerated mechanism for providing it: the unwaged work of women (Federici *Caliban* 97; M. González 5-7; Dalla Costa 33-50; Fortunati 8-9). Furthermore, this paradigm provides both a readily available reserve workforce (housewives) that can be tapped in times of need, such as war or industrial growth, but also sent home if it becomes redundant (Righi 49). Women can

be paid less under such a paradigm because they are presumed to be less reliable workers because of their family obligations (Endnotes 8-9). Last, a gendered division of labor creates divisions within the working class and complicates collective organizing (Endnotes 7-8; Engels 80; Federici *Caliban* 189-190; Righi 60).<sup>15</sup> This subsequently impedes collective action and protects state and capitalists' power.

As the examples from Mexico suggest, this division of labor is also profoundly disadvantageous for women because it means more work for little or no pay, an unequal work burden within the nuclear family, and dependence on men for access to sufficient money to support a family. As such, the state and other sources of institutional power seeking to impose it in any context have had to engage in several forms of coercion to instill and perpetuate it. Silvia Federici argues in her study of primitive accumulation in Europe, *Caliban and the Witch*, that this is achieved not only through legal restrictions and violence, but also through new constructions of gender that reinforce women's obligations to do reproductive labor for their families as well as their need for male supervision (100-103). Foucault's description of the hysterization of women, which defines women as volatile and in need of supervision, while also defining them as wives and mothers and inscribing them in the home, might be understood as one such construction.<sup>16</sup>

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15 In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* Frederick Engels argues that as women are integrated into the paid labor force the nuclear family will disappear (80). However, as Andrea Righi, citing Camilla Ravera, argues, "Centuries of ghettoization made difficult for even the most emancipated vanguard of the proletariat to dissociate maternity from self-realization of women as free individuals" (51). As Righi points out, this gendered division of labor was buttressed not only by the idea that the wage was masculine, but an understanding of femininity that obligated women to both have and raise children. As such, a change in gender relations required not only a change in women's access to money, but also a change in attitudes towards their obligation to become mothers and provide certain kinds of childcare. In short, Engels failed to realize the role that maternity served in a capitalist economy and attendant views of femininity.

16 Federici takes Foucault to task on several points and I want to clarify why it still makes sense to read their academic work in conjunction. First, as Federici points out, Foucault completely ignores the widespread witch hunts of early modern Europe, which, in addition to resulting in the deaths of tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of women (Federici *Caliban* 208), reveal hegemonic attempts to monitor and control female fertility and police social

In Mexico film became a space where changing understandings of families and appropriate gendered behavior were modeled, glamorized and popularized. *Cabareteras*, which foreground a contrast between housewifery and sex work, ultimately champion the former by suggesting that it represents compliance with biologized gender roles and is a means by which to protect not only individual families, but also safeguard an essentialized and racialized Mexican culture.

In the following reading of the 1950 *cabaretera* film *Aventurera* I look at how the film makes four major claims about femininity, labor, ethnicity, and marriage, each of which ultimately points towards the need for women to be in the home as a housewife. Notably, each of the claims is framed around concern over sexual deviance and social propriety, not social reproduction, but the solution that the film proffers for each concern is the confinement of women to domestic space as devoted wives and mothers under wise, masculine supervision. While none of these lines of argumentation explicitly insists that women are called to do unpaid domestic work, the social arrangements that they advocate are conducive to and necessary for a breadwinner-housewife paradigm to take root. As Foucault says, “power is tolerable only on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself” (*History* 86).

### ***Aventurera* and the Discursive Conditions Necessary for Bourgeois Housewifery**

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reproduction in general. This is a flagrant omission in a work titled *The History of Sexuality* that covers Early Modern Europe (*Caliban* 16). However, the witch-hunts, while they would nuance and modify Foucault’s account of biopower by elaborating the links between gender and sexuality (as I have shown here), would not invalidate the idea of biopolitics as essential to capitalism in and of itself. Federici also critiques Foucault for failing to take gender differences into account in the construction of biopolitics. As this chapter seeks to show, Foucault’s conceptualization of biopower is actually quite compatible with the Marxist-feminist account of gender, and particularly femininity, supported by Federici. While Foucault does not elaborate this connection, such a connection, as I argue here, is possible. Last, Foucault’s chronologies do not entirely align with Federici’s (hers are earlier, *Caliban* 86). Neither of their chronologies is directly applicable to Mexico, so my argument here is that the conceptual work they do is useful when adapted to be applicable.

*Aventurera* is one of three *cabareteras* made by the trio of director Alberto Gout, writer Álvaro Custodio, and the Cuban *rumbera* Ninón Sevilla. The film tells the story of Elena (Sevilla), a middle class girl from Chihuahua who is abandoned by her parents and sold by an acquaintance to a brothel/cabaret in Juarez. Elena eventually appears to escape the sex industry by marrying an aristocratic lawyer, Mario (Rubén Rojo). However, shortly after they become engaged she learns that the source of her fiancé's family wealth is the Juarez cabaret where she previously worked and her mother-in-law, Rosaura, (Andrea Palma), is her former madam. While often read as a critique of middle-class hypocrisy (de la Mora *Cinemachismo* 48; Mora 85), the film's fixation on female sexual improprieties also offers a fascinating treatise on sexual norms during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The first important claim that the film makes is that all adult women are potentially volatile and selfish and as such in need of constant masculine supervision. At the beginning of the film Elena learns that her mother, Consuelo (Maruja Grifell), is having an affair with her husband's business partner, Ramón (Salvador Lozano) (Image 1.1). While Ramón is conventionally attractive (tall, dark, and handsome), Consuelo is older, heavyset, and modestly attired and has what Jorge Ayala Blanco calls the "boca arrugada de menopáusica" (145) (wrinkled mouth of a menopausal woman). The revelation of the affair is shocking in large part because Consuelo is so homely and prim- the film gives no indication of her double life or sexual deviance before revealing them. She is not the presumed candidate for an extramarital affair. This plot twist and defiance of audience expectations throws into question the presumption of middle-aged, middle class female respectability. The film insinuates that Consuelo's husband, affectionate and kind,



Image 1.1: Elena discovers her mother's affair, *Aventurera*.



has been too trusting and allowed himself to be cuckolded. The film warns that all women, regardless of age and class, need guidance and scrutiny, not trust and indulgence from men.

This is underscored by the fact that the fallout caused by Consuelo's affair extends far beyond her own tiny family and takes a toll on society more broadly, suggesting the need for societal management of female sexuality. Upon being discovered, Consuelo runs away with Ramón, her husband commits suicide, and Elena is forced to disband her household due to both lack of funds and overwhelming sorrow. Before fleeing to Juarez, Elena dismisses the family's maid, an older *mestiza* woman named Juana (I have not been able to locate the actress's name). Their farewell is shot from a high angle to emphasize their height difference (Juana is very petite), making Elena appear larger and subsequently more authoritative. After a brief, tearful conversation, Elena watches Juana exit, suggesting a mother watching a child leave home. The scene implies that the turmoil of the bourgeois home is disruptive not only for the middle class, but the *mestizo* and working class people who depend on them for employment and the social stability of a family (8:26-9:38). According to the scene, working class *mestiza* women performing domestic service, like Juana, are excluded from adult sexuality, presented not as women at risk for sexual indiscretions, but rather the child casualties of middle class sexual deviance. The middle class housewife's propriety and chastity become a matter not just of gender, but essential to the upholding of certain classed and racialized orders necessary to educate society in this new post-revolutionary Mexico. Domestic service is presented not as work, but inclusion in a respectable (bourgeois, white) family. In keeping with Foucault's description of the hysterization of women, this scene makes it clear that the importance of

policing female sexuality and maintaining good order extends far beyond individual morality because female sexuality is a lynchpin for social hierarchies and general social stability.

The film goes on to suggest that the world outside of the home is violent and unsafe for women, who, if they venture outside alone, will be the victims of sexual predators. Following her father's suicide, Elena seeks employment and the film features three successive scenes of her doing various kinds of service work (maid, secretary, store clerk). Each scene ends with her male employer or customer lustily grabbing her (9:47-10:13). The repetition of the storyline suggests that the problem is not one bad man misbehaving, but that women doing paid labor are always in danger. By showing Elena's bad experiences with paid work following the loss of her home, the film reinforces the idea that the home is a space of refuge for women. It also suggests that spaces outside of the home are full of constant sexual danger. The confinement of women to the home is not only to control them, as the Consuelo incident suggests, but also to protect them.

Third, through its use of foreign music and dance in cabaret scenes, *Aventurera* heavily exoticizes sex work and labels it, and ostensibly women working outside of the home, as foreign and a form of ethnic deviance. Following her brief foray into service work, Elena is drugged by an acquaintance and sold to a brothel/cabaret owner. She becomes a star performer and the audience sees several of her "foreign" dance numbers. In the first she is dressed as a "Middle Eastern" woman who, wearing a bejeweled bikini top, a long sheer skirt and a slight veil, dances around the stage with an entourage of similarly clad women (Image 1.2, 24:17-28:30). During a solo, she gyrates slowly and seductively in front of turbaned men, sliding out her leg slowly and letting men fondle it before dancing away. In an aerial medium shot she leans back and rubs herself in a masturbatory fashion. Contrary to her initial rebukes of her employers who sexually harass her, this "Middle Eastern" Elena appears to enjoy and to solicit sexual attention. She



1.2 Elena performs a “Middle Eastern” dance, *Aventurera*.

personifies raw, crazed feminine desire. While the dance is clearly meant to be titillating for the audience, the film is careful to establish this overt female sexuality as characteristic of other nationalities, warning audiences that Mexican women, such as Elena, stand to be corrupted by participation in such rituals. Indeed, after beginning her career as a dancer, Elena becomes angry and violent during her time at the cabaret, getting into fistfights with other women and breaking a bottle over the head of her mother's ex-lover. Elena's experiences at the cabaret are violations not just of sexual, gendered, and economic norms, but also ethnic ones.

This connection between femininity, sex, and ethnicity coincides with Foucault's discussion of race as an aspect of biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, in which he argues that biopolitical understandings of reproduction are intimately tied to the supposed safeguarding of bloodlines. Attempts to control female sexuality and human reproduction, Foucault notes, were frequently framed around fear of racial degeneration and contamination by foreign influences. The racism that emerged as a state policy in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe was:

...a whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, [that] received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of blood and ensuring the triumph of the race. (149)

That is to say that in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, biopolitics, including the careful and diligent management of female sexuality, was in part justified as necessary because it was framed as sustaining and protecting the interests of a "race" or a perceived ethnic purity and unity. Biopolitics was not understood as merely promoting collective health, but also as a means by which to preserve "racial" exclusivity and prevent external contamination. As such it was useful in promoting territorial and cultural boundaries.

*Aventurera*'s framing of Elena's sexual degradation as foreign and exotic suggests a connection between her sexual comportment and Mexican ethnic identity, although one that is different from the one outlined by Foucault. Post-revolutionary understandings of race in Mexico were tied to *mestizaje* and fundamentally required racial mixing. However, as both Alexandra Minna Stern and Galadriel Mehera Gerardo have documented, these understandings of *mestizaje* privileged whiteness as intellectually superior and tended to either minimize or completely ignore Mexico's African heritage. As Laura Podalsky ("Negotiating" 63-68) and Maricruz Castro Ricalde and Robert McKee Irwin have argued, to the dislike of the Cuban press Mexican-Cuban cinematic co-productions from the Golden Age routinely foregrounded Cuba's African heritage, representing it as hypersexual and irrational and using it as a point of contrast with Mexico, which was represented as white and/or indigenous (Castro Ricalde and McKee Irwin 128). In keeping with these observations, Elena's second and third performances in the film reference Brazil and the Caribbean and are framed as hypersexual and exotic. Elena's second dance performance in *Aventurera* is sung in Portuguese and includes two costumes, both with a fruit covered headdress and the second with a banana skirt. These costumes invite comparisons to both Carmen Miranda and Josephine Baker (47:02-50:37). Her third performance, "Arrímate cariñito," in which she dances half clothed on a beach, is intended to be Caribbean (1:24:40-1:27:24). Her performances, which are clearly meant to be titillating and foreign, represent a kind of cultural regression in which she loses her sexual propriety and Mexican identity simultaneously. While Elena's deviance is not framed in terms of blood or a clear notion of race, as Foucault describes, this insistence on rampant female sexuality as foreign and un-Mexican still asserts the importance of monitoring female sexuality as a form of ethnic safeguarding. Elena's dancing is a sign of loss and impurity.

Last, *cabareteras* sentimentalize and romanticize heterosexual marriage, suggesting that housewifery is not a form of work or part of an economic agreement, but a sign of sexual attraction and enduring love. Towards the beginning of the film Elena marries Mario, an aristocrat from Guadalajara, but nearly ruins their marriage by using him as a pawn to avoid a blackmailer and to take revenge on her former madam. In the last minutes of the film, the two reconcile in a surprising, non sequitur twist. In the last scene of the film, they embrace and kiss passionately on a foggy Juarez night before walking off screen to a triumphant orchestral score, presumably to live happily ever after (1:35:53-1:41:32). While this change of heart is never fully explained, the film suggests that it is sincere and Elena's marriage is no longer a hideout or a mask, but a meaningful romantic relationship.

In order to further confirm the societal importance of their bond, the camera cuts to Elena's elderly *mestizo* henchman, Rengo (Miguel Inclán), who has been secretly watching the couple and is now weeping with joy. Much like Juana's plight following Consuelo's affair, Rengo's joy at witnessing the love between the couple suggests that the stability of their marriage matters not only to them, but also to society as a whole. The film leaves no doubt that the conflicts have been resolved and in true melodramatic fashion, virtue has triumphed over villainy.

Ultimately *Aventurera* offers a discursive framework for a gendered division of labor within which women are tasked with the social reproduction of their nuclear families. Both Elena and Consuelo, when left to their own devices, become vengeful and selfish, revealing a need for guidance and masculine control. This is important, the film tells viewers, because stability of all other members of society, as demonstrated by Juana and Rengo, rests on bourgeois women devoting themselves to their families. Furthermore, as Elena's forays into the workforce

represent, any space outside of the home is dangerous for women because of their potential sexual and ethnic degradation. Last, the film sentimentalizes and romanticizes heterosexual marriage, suggesting that it is not only fundamental to social propriety and safety, but also key to actual happiness and love.

While the film does not make much mention of the relationship between reproductive labor and these understandings of femininity, it sets up a discursive framework that valorizes and praises the biopolitical norms necessary to build and sustain a division of labor in which women's reproductive labor is unpaid and done in the home for her nuclear family. While a wealthy aristocratic woman (such as Elena after she marries Mario) would ultimately have little reproductive work to do, the values that she champions would, for most Mexican women at the time, mean doing a significant amount of housework. In keeping with Foucault's point mentioned earlier that power masks its mechanisms (*History* 86), here sentimentality, racism, and romance all serve to surreptitiously reinforce the idea that a woman's role is as an unpaid reproductive laborer.

## **Part II: Patriarchal Sovereignty and the Limitations of Foucauldian Biopolitics as a Framework for Mexico**

The emphasis on domestic space and the nuclear family in *Aventurera* gestures towards another interpretation often applied to Golden Age films and the implications of this interpretation for understanding biopolitical sovereignty. In this interpretation the nuclear family is a metaphor for Mexico. As Carmen Elisa Gómez-Gómez argues, the post-revolutionary state often emblemized itself as the father of a nuclear family. This symbolism carried over into Golden Age film where the father figure frequently represents the state and other household members typically represent different demographic groups within the nation:

En busca de la implantación de un modelo de pensamiento

uniforme, el Estado utilizó con frecuencia la imagen de la familia como una referencia elemental para la transmisión del concepto de unidad nacional, cuyo centro es el padre-Estado, que cobija y protege el bienestar de cada uno de los miembros de la nación. De ahí que resulte evidente el funcionamiento del símil ideológico entre las virtudes de sumisión de la madre en el cine mexicano, con el orden patriarcal prevaleciente en la sociedad mexicana, en que el Estado definió con claridad la díada: padre fílmico como equivalente del poder estatal. (2)

As Gómez-Gómez makes clear, the relationship between couples, as well as depictions of wifely submission and patriarchal control, function as emblems for the relationship between the Mexican state and the Mexican people. According to a reading based on these ideas, Mario and Elena must reunite not only in order to comply with biopolitical norms as a married couple, but also to reunify the state and nation, and restore what the film frames as an appropriate power dynamic between the two. If Mario is read as an emblem for the state one surmises that the ideal state exercises a centralized, paternalistic, authoritarian (albeit benevolent) power. Likewise, if Elena is an emblem for those under the state's control, it appears that individuals and society as a whole are best served by enthusiastic and affectionate submission. Such a model is quite different than the one described by Foucault as undergirding liberalism and the advent of biopolitics in Europe. It raises questions about the relationship between the PRIista state and citizens in post-revolutionary Mexico and how biopower either reinforces or undermines this relationship.

Foucault elaborated the liberal sovereignty that arose alongside biopolitics in Western Europe in a series of lectures given at the Collège de France between 1978 and 1979, later collected in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. The lecture series begins with a summary of Foucault's lectures from the year before and explains changes in understandings of sovereignty from the Middle Ages to the emergence of the state in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During the Middle Ages, the



sovereign was seen as emphatically paternal and charged with helping his subjects achieve religious salvation in the afterlife (*Birth* 4-5). The emergence of the state represented a sharp turn away from this paternal, expansive authority of kings. In order to be seen as legitimate, states were expected to restrict their behavior and adhere to principles and rules beyond themselves. Initially this meant respecting an external limitation- European states both recognized each other and ceased to seek total and global empire, while still maintaining an internal police state (*Birth* 6-7). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a system of internal regulation and limitation of the state appeared, making sovereignty's legitimacy contingent on its observance of internal laws and regulations as well (*Birth* 10-13).

Foucault attributes this internal limitation to the emergence of political economy, which he argues shifted the goal of good government from moral good to managing the population without impinging on the market. Foucault writes that for Adam Smith and political economists in general:

Economics is a science lateral to the art of governing. One must govern with economics, one must govern alongside economists, one must govern by listening to the economist, but economics must not be and there is no question that it can be the governmental rationality itself. (*Birth* 286)

The job of government for such thinkers was to manage the populace of a state (*Birth* 296) and facilitate its economic participation, but not to directly intervene in the market because of the government's inability to control and predict said market (*Birth* 283). Belief in these limitations ultimately produced "an age whose principle could be this: A government is never sufficiently aware that it always risks governing too much, or, a government never knows too well how to govern just enough" (*Birth* 17). Biopolitics, which organizes subjects through a series of norms

without appearing to commandeer the market, accomplishes these tasks. According to Foucault, it is one means by which to govern “liberally”.

In contrast, in post-revolutionary Mexico, a heavily centralized, authoritarian government that participated heavily in the economy with little if any self-limitation generated the biopolitical regime described in the first part of this chapter. Arnaldo Córdova describes the state that emerged following the Mexican Revolution in *La formación del poder político en México*, noting:

El nuevo régimen se fundó en un sistema de gobierno paternalista y autoritario que se fue institucionalizando a través de los años, en él se ha dotado al Ejecutivo de poderes extraordinarios permanentes que prevén un dominio absoluto sobre las relaciones de propiedad (artículo 27 de la constitución) y el arbitraje de última instancia sobre los conflictos que surgen entre las clases fundamentales de la sociedad (artículo 123). Del autoritarismo derivado del carisma del caudillo revolucionario, se pasó con el tiempo al autoritarismo del cargo institucional de la Presidencia de la República. (33-34)

This is to say that the Mexican state, which relied on biopolitical measures was not framed around a system of internal limitations, as Foucault suggests, but rather an extremely strong presidency whose powers extended unequivocally into the economic realm. That this was spelled out in the constitution makes it clear that there was no pretense of governance lateral to the economy as described by early modern European political economists. Internally, the centrality of the PRI and the authority of the empowered president were further reinforced by the fact that the Mexican state acquired businesses and industries and became the largest entrepreneur in the country (González Casanova 67). Furthermore, internally, by centralizing state power in the presidency and not having a strong legislative branch, the PRI prevented old sources of institutional power such as regional caudillos or the Catholic Church from participating in state power (González Casanova 68). Ultimately this centralization of powers under the president meant that the federal executive’s power was expansive and often unchecked. Restraint and

internal limitations were not seen as markers of good governance under this paradigm, but rather vulnerabilities.

This insistence on the centrality and pervasiveness of the state means that the Mexican relationship between governed and governing also deviates quite significantly from the relationship outlined by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Foucault elaborates two categories and their relationships to the state, *homo œconomicus* and civil society, the former referring to individuals, the latter to a community of these individuals. Foucault argues that, for political economists, both concepts are understood as external to the state and capable of contesting it and its policies.

*Homo œconomicus* is the individual under liberalism. Known as “the man of exchange,” he is motivated by his own needs (*Birth* 225). Aware of the juridical sovereign’s inability to totally control the economy, he demands the restriction of the juridical sovereign, not only the grounds of juridical rights, but because of the known inherent limitations of the sovereign (*Birth* 283). Thus, for *homo œconomicus*, the state lacks both the authority and the ability to fully and totally subjugate individuals, regardless of their role as citizens.

Civil society, which Foucault says quickly became known as both the “nation” and “society”, likewise has the potential to dissent from the state and its policies. Foucault writes that in the popular (and often theoretical) imagination, civil society is a community of people both governed by the state and capable of contesting it should the state attempt to govern too much or in a way deemed bad or inappropriate, generally understood as a way interfering too much in the economy (*Birth* 295-297). Foucault notes that, despite the popular misconception that civil society predates the state, this version of civil society actually arose alongside the liberal state in Western Europe during the second half of the 18th century and is “correlative to the form of

governmental technology we call liberalism” (*Birth* 297). Civil society therefore is not proof of a pre-existing community that has submitted to the state, but rather a testament to liberalism’s need to imagine some kind of historical split between the state and society in order to reinforce the separation of the state and economy. The anxiety over whether or not the government is inappropriately intervening in the economic sphere has meant, according to Foucault, that “the question which has obsessed practically all political thought from the end of the eighteenth century to the present ...[is] the question of the relations between civil society and the state” (*Birth* 309).

In contrast, in Mexico, there appears to be a need to minimize any distance between state and both the individual and civil society, making it a stark point of contrast to the liberal state outlined by Foucault. <sup>17</sup> Indeed, as Gareth Williams, discussing the limits of the applicability of *The Birth of Biopolitics* to Mexico, notes, “Modernity in Mexico was orchestrated by a total state that strived at all times to suppress the duality of state and society” (12). More governance and more intervention were imagined to be the solutions to social problems. Biopolitics here, instead of being viewed as a means by which to decentralize state power and have individuals self-monitor via social norms as in Foucault (Nealon 45-46), became a means by which to explicitly bind both the individual to the state apparatus and, in doing so on a broad scale, bind the whole of civil society to the state.

### ***Cabareteras* as Scalar Allegories**

This dynamic can be seen in Golden Age *cabareteras* when they are read as comparisons between the family and the nation-state, ultimately suggesting that the two are parallel structures

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<sup>17</sup> I use “civil society” when talking about this construction here. It should be noted that I used it as Foucault does in *The Birth of Biopolitics* to loosely refer to the community of people governed by a state rather than as a fully developed theory of civil society.

differentiated on the basis of scale. This comparison is made via the use of individual characters as synecdoches for the larger institutions of which they are a part. Coupling becomes a structuring metaphor for the relationship between state and civil society and fatherhood becomes the structuring metaphor for state power. Perhaps the two most important synecdoches are adult men who reference the state and the sex worker-protagonists emblemizing civil society. When read collectively they function as what I will call a scalar allegory.

Adult male characters in *cabareteras* framed as successful and morally good function simultaneously as, on a literal level, the Mexican equivalent of Foucault's *homo oeconomicus* and, on the emblematic level, synecdoches of the PRIista state. Men framed positively by these films are those who provide for women and children by facilitating their compliance with biopolitical norms. When male characters do this, they become part of the state, serving as a kind of emissary for its goals and agenda, and in doing so erase the line between themselves and the state. Individual men and the state fuse and these male characters become synecdoches, or actual parts of the state. In contrast to Foucault's liberal individual who contests the state and insists on separation from it, the men in these films ideally merge with it.

The sex worker protagonists of these films can be read as synecdoches for civil society.<sup>18</sup> While these characters often start off in or quickly fall into extremely vulnerable positions (as does Elena in *Aventurera*), they are typically redeemed through the intervention of a wise, kind male counterpart, who is typically a synecdoche for the state. Men are seen as succeeding as heads of household when the women in their care are thriving. As will be shown via a close

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<sup>18</sup> These synecdoches are perhaps less unexpected than men as synecdoches for the state. The women are presumed to be members of civil society in Foucault's paradigm too and thus their deployment here as emblems of civil society is not a source of difference. That being said, it does make clear the foundational differences between female and male citizenship in this Mexican paradigm as only men appear to fuse with the state, while women are the surface onto which the state imposes itself. It also raises the question of how citizenship was or was not gendered in the paradigm described by Foucault.

reading of Violeta, the protagonist of *Victimas del pecado*, the changing fortunes of women and their transition towards biopolitical norms serve as emblems for the integration of the population into national life and inclusion in the revolutionary process. The health and happiness of female characters provide the measure by which masculine leadership and uses of power are evaluated: happy, biopolitically normal women are held up as proof of the efficacy of a political system, while their suffering and sexual deviance are used as evidence of a system's failings. Contrary again to Foucault's description of liberal civil society, these films suggest that submission to the state (emblemized by an individual male character) is necessary for safety and prosperity. The concern is not an overbearing state, but an alienated one.

These comparisons, in which couples are used to emblemize the relationship between the state and civil society, can be called allegories in that they seek to map out the relationship between a state and those it governs through a series of emblems and synecdoches that interact over the course of a narrative. However, a few clarifications are needed in order to explain precisely how allegory, as a term, is being used in this context.

First, this comparison suggests that the two institutions (nation-state and family) are differentiated on the basis of scale, rather than sphere of influence. For example, this type of allegory understands father figures both to be operating in parallel to and working in tandem with the state towards the same objectives. Paternal power operates only over a single family, while the state acts on all of civil society, but they do so in cooperation. While multiple versions of paternity might be seen onscreen (as is true in *Victimas del pecado*), the forms of paternity framed as morally upright and permissible establish a clear connection to state power and serve as an extension of it. Paternal and state power are represented as simultaneous and coterminous, not mutually exclusive and distinct.

This understanding of allegory is at odds with many definitions of national allegory, which foreground the idea of allegory as a juxtaposition of dialectically bound public and private spheres. For example, in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, Fredric Jameson conceptualizes national allegories as “...a radical split between the private and the public ... between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic of secular power: in other words, Freud versus Marx. (69).”<sup>19</sup> Similarly Doris Sommer argues in “Allegory and Dialectics: A Match Made in Romance” that national allegories in 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin American love stories are a form of “narrative in which erotics is coterminous with politics in an interlocking rather than parallel relationship” (74). Biopolitics, as has been established, does not allow for a split between erotics and politics because sexuality is a societal concern to be publicly and socially managed. Likewise, the private sphere itself becomes a problematic spatial demarcation because biopolitics is understood as encompassing and saturating all aspects of life, including the domestic. As such, *cabareteras* cannot be seen as allegories comparing the public and the private.

This understanding is also separate from the one outlined in Walter Benjamin’s description of Baroque allegories in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as those in which profane, worldly, objects are used to express an abstract and/or divine idea. According to Benjamin, in these allegories “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else” (175), but when an object or person becomes a signifier for an idea in an allegory, it is sanctified. This means that, “Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both

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<sup>19</sup> Aijaz Ahmad makes a similar critique of the “bifurcation of public and private” (24) that I make here, pointing out that this separation has long been critiqued in feminist circles (just as I note via the use of Marxist-feminism). I flesh out Ahmad’s critique by placing it into a biopolitical framework and arguing that such a distinction is impossible in a biopolitical regime because there is no private sphere in a biopolitical regime.

elevated and devalued (175)”, on the grounds that while still fundamentally earthly, it becomes inherently ennobled by being linked with this new meaning. In *cabareteras*, this is not so as the family is understood as a microcosm of the state, not an earthly proxy for something of the divine or even an intellectually grander idea or abstraction. Instead, as I suggest here, these films use the nuclear family to suggest its connection to the state and to suggest that the two are joined and mutually reinforcing, serving as extensions of each other. While the nuclear family emblemizes the nation-state, it also is of great importance in and of itself.

That being said, *cabareteras*, like the *trauerspiel* allegories studied by Benjamin, must be read as a form of history that is fragmented. Benjamin argues that in baroque allegories “the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape” (166) and that this landscape includes fragments of earlier orders and historical systems no longer present. In the *trauerspiel* studied by Benjamin, the fragments are often quite literally the remains of the past- architectural ruins of ancient civilizations, the death’s head, etc. that accumulate over the course of history. *Cabareteras*, as will be seen, are strewn with characters serving as reminders of past traditions and alternate forms of social organization and cultural identities ranging from regional politics to *pachuco* culture. Characters who are incompatible with the image of Mexican modernity being advocated by the film often die or dramatically change, suggesting that the modernity featured by *cabareteras* is actually the discontinuity of certain traditions and not just a form of linear progress or evolution. As will be elaborated, female characters, particularly sex workers, function as the surface on which other characters act, and as such serve more as the primordial landscape, physically registering the marks and behaviors of others, ultimately serving as a form of historical record. As Benjamin points out, this assortment of emblems and fragments does not add up to a singular whole (or a



perfect, seamless system or a form of linear progress), but rather a collection of pieces by which “The false appearance of totality is extinguished” (176). *Cabareteras* include not only the accepted parts of modernity, but also its exclusions and, if read as allegories require that this allegory be understood as actually capturing that fragmentation and often exclusion.

In addition to serving as historical records, baroque allegories and their *cabaretera* counterparts end with a promise of redemption. Benjamin writes that baroque engravings and descriptions from this period routinely feature Golgotha/Calvary (the site of Jesus’ crucifixion), which Benjamin reads as simultaneously referencing the suffering of the crucifixion and the promise of Christian salvation. He argues that, “Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem.” (232) *Cabareteras*, as evidenced by Elena and Mario’s improbable reuniting at the end of *Aventurera*, often have similarly redemptive endings in which the protagonists escape their lives as sex workers and find a promise of some kind of new life with the help of generous men. Although they are characters and not settings, sex workers, like Golgotha, simultaneously embody both the grief and suffering of a past way of life (pre-revolutionary Mexico and the parts of the country still not integrated into modern Mexico), and the possibility of salvation and a better future. While the source of the redemption is the father/state rather than the Christian God, these films often draw heavily on Christian imagery. If these films are read as national allegories, such endings are portals into an idealized, post-revolutionary future that, while not yet achieved, is thought to loom on the national horizon of Mexico should the institutionalized revolution come into its fullest expression. This is not to say that the redemption is universal (because, as discussed, allegories also evidence remainders and exclusions), but rather that it is understood as possible.

In what follows I develop these ideas further through their application in a close reading to the film *Víctimas del pecado*. First I examine how individual male characters interact with the state and how these interactions suggest that individuals are best served by actively cooperating with the state, not contesting it. I then suggest, via a reading of a benevolent civil servant, that the role of the father is understood as an allegory for the state. Finally, I turn to their female counterparts and explore how individual women serve as synecdoches for civil society and how these depictions ultimately suggest the need for a state that heavily intervenes in everyday life.

### **PRI Paternalism, *Homo Oeconomicus*, and *Víctimas del pecado***

*Víctimas del pecado* (Dir. Emilio Fernández) is the story of Violeta (Ninón Sevilla), a *fichera* who adopts the baby of a coworker, Juanito (Ismael Pérez), after the co-worker throws Juanito in the trash at the behest of her pimp and the child's father.<sup>20</sup> The film chronicles Violeta's struggle to move away from sex work and towards a biopolitically-sanctioned motherhood. In doing so it sheds light on both the dangers of individuals and communities being alienated from the state while suggesting the state's ability to care for and redeem those who have not yet been integrated into its vision of modernity.

*Víctimas del pecado* has three key male characters, each of whom has a very different relationship to the state. When these relationships are read alongside each other, they reveal a biopolitical ideal of masculinity linked to enthusiastic participation within the state and attendant institutions. Via the juxtaposition of these men, the film reinforces an ideal of a proper revolutionary masculinity that involves legal, waged labor, and the support of a nuclear family. Furthermore, through its virulent rejection of foreign cultures and criminal behavior, as well as the film's celebration of state intervention, the film promotes the idea of men as potential

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<sup>20</sup> A *fichera* is a woman who dances with patrons at a cabaret as well as provides company and, sometimes, sexual services. She is paid in *fichas*, or tokens, which are later redeemed for money (de la Mora *Cinemachismo* 180).

representatives of the state, not just as emblems, but also as synecdoches (meaning that they are not simply signifiers, but actual parts of the state). It suggests that men should adhere not only to the state's ideals, but actively work on its behalf by administering its goals to those around them. Unlike *homo æconomicus*, who is separate from the state and capable of contesting it, this image of a "homo mexicanus" is an active participant within the state (as will be elaborated in the second half of this reading, the role of women is separate and passive).

The first man profiled in the film is a *pachuco* pimp Rodolfo (Rodolfo Acosta), who represents the outright rejection of biopolitical norms of masculinity and total alienation from the state. This becomes apparent in the first few scenes of the film during which audiences learn that Rodolfo not only does not participate in waged labor, but forces women to do sex work to finance his desires. The film opens to Rodolfo preening in a barbershop and audiences watch him tip a barber handsomely, pulling several bills from a large wad of cash (1:44-2:53). A few scenes later in a cabaret, the source of his wealth becomes apparent when he demands another wad of cash from a woman working as a *fichera* (see Image 1.3) after refusing to help pay for the mother of his newborn child to be released from the maternity ward (8:20-8:53). With Rodolfo pressed up against her in a way that suggest sexual interest, but also the ability to physically overpower her, the *fichera* unearths the money from her bra, underscoring that this money comes from her own physical exploitation. The demand for this money makes clear that Rodolfo is actively extracting value from the women around them to satisfy his own desires. This extraction, which requires the violation of sexual norms and family obligations, is framed as seedy and coercive. Counter to the *homo æconomicus* motivated by his own desire described by political economists, *Victimas del pecado* emphasizes men's responsibility to work and to provide for women and children.



Image 1.1: Rodolfo demands money, *Víctimas del pecado*.



Image 1.4: Rodolfo throws away his son, *Víctimas del pecado*.

Rodolfo's deviance from biopolitical norms of masculinity is further confirmed and linked to the state, when he tries to murder his son and the film links the life of the child to Mexico's future. After one of his workers gives birth, he forces her to discard their child in a trashcan (Image 1.4). In the closing shot of the scene, a large light display of the eagle and serpent pictured on the Mexican flag features prominently in the background for no discernible reason (16:19-18:16). This invocation of the Mexican flag serves as a reminder that Rodolfo is discarding not only his child, but also the next generation of Mexicans. Such framing reminds audiences that the parenting of children is not only an individual concern, but also something owed to both the government and the rest of society. Here the alignment between the nuclear family and the state becomes apparent, hurting one hurts the other, they are inextricably linked, both relying on the success of the other. Rodolfo's choice is not an individual one outside of the purview of the state but one owed to both the family and the government. That this alienation involves infanticide suggests Rodolfo's rejection of the state is both morally repugnant and very dangerous to the future of Mexico.

The film proceeds to label Rodolfo as inadequately Mexican and ultimately suggests that his criminality is incompatible with the film's understanding of modern Mexico. As Sergio de la Mora points out in *Cinemachismo*, Rodolfo is a *pachuco* and his zoot suits and use of Spanish, English, French, and caló (*pachuco* slang), mark him as not exclusively culturally Mexican (57). Instead he is an emblem of youthful counterculture and an amalgamation of styles and traditions. The film codes this culture as deviant when, in one scene he teaches a French sex worker, presumably also one of his workers, how to walk sexily while shouting at her angrily in French (15:34-16:12). Rodolfo's use of French and his ability to perform a walk understood as feminine undermines his own identity as a Mexican man by briefly transforming him into a French

woman. Via the film's insistence on a biopolitical order and its naturalizing of gender categories, "gendered deviance" such as a man exhibiting feminine traits, even in jest, should be read as proof of Rodolfo as bad, abnormal and not fully healthy. The film's rejection of Rodolfo supports a biologized understanding of gender in which it is not a learned performance but an expression of "nature." Rodolfo here is an aberration to masculine norms. Much like Elena's dancing in *Aventurera*, his behavior is a sign of ethnic and gendered degeneration, a failure to be Mexican and an indication of being unwell.

The film makes its final condemnation of Rodolfo when Violeta shoots Rodolfo while he tries to enlist her adopted son, his biological child, into his criminal activities, suggesting that he is incompatible with modern Mexico (1:13:08-1:14:05). Effeminate, criminal, and foreign, he has no place, the movie tells audiences, in modern Mexico. Allegorically, his death is a rejection of criminal, culturally other, non-paternal men from post-revolutionary Mexico. It suggests that men who do not align themselves with the state are antagonistic to it and must be excluded from it if it is to prosper. In keeping with the fragmentation of the Benjaminian allegory, Rodolfo emblemizes groups of people external to the state's ideal and, according to the film, incompatible with Mexican modernity.

Santiago (Tito Junco), the second lead male character in the film, models a partial acceptance of biopolitical norms and a less antagonistic, but not yet cooperative, relationship to the Mexican government. As Violeta's boss at a cabaret/ brothel called the *Maquina Loca*, he immediately sets himself apart from Rodolfo by offering cash and shelter to a destitute Violeta (52:07-57:20). Furthermore, unlike Rodolfo, Santiago is emphatically Mexican as evidenced by his frequent association in the film with mariachis, a generic totem of Mexican culture, and trains, a similarly generic totem of the Mexican revolution. Last, after Santiago and Violeta become lovers, he

effectively adopts Juanito, taking on the title of “padre,” participating in the boy’s baptism, and hosting a series of birthday parties. By all accounts he is a successful father (1:03:25-1:07:32).

However, Santiago’s failure to extricate himself from the sex industry and continued exploitation of Violeta as a dancer are used to suggest that he is still too far from biopolitical norms to be a citizen in modern Mexico. When Juanito is six, Rodolfo kills Santiago in the lot outside of the *Maquina Loca*. The scene of Santiago’s murder is crosscut with shots of Violeta, who is dancing sensually in a tight, revealing satin dress for a crowd at the cabaret (1:08:17-1:12:59). While not imagined as foreign (as Rodolfo is), Santiago is still associated with the exploitation of Violeta’s body and his death suggests that this and all that it emblemizes renders him ultimately incompatible with post-revolutionary Mexico. His partial adherence to biopolitical norms through fatherhood proves insufficient. Like Rodolfo, he emblemizes an unacceptable form of citizenship that is ultimately relegated to the past and being a fragment or ruin in the landscape of this allegory.

The third man to enter Violeta’s life, and the one who ultimately models an appropriate revolutionary masculinity and relationship to the state, is a benevolent, unnamed prison warden (Arturo Soto Rangel). Violeta finds herself in the warden’s prison after she shoots and kills Rodolfo. As a middle class, paternal state employee charged with helping enforce the law, the warden functions as a synecdoche for the state. He is the voice for its positions and attitudes towards Violeta. The film does not elaborate his character or intentions or even name him and this further reinforces his function as a representative of the state rather than an individual.

Only onscreen for two scenes, the warden both advocates for an extremely powerful state unrestricted by the law and the responsibility of the state to facilitate the role of women as mothers. In his first onscreen appearance, after learning that Violeta is in prison for killing



Rodolfo, the warden responds to a guard, “A veces la justicia es lo más injusto del mundo mayor” and promises to reopen Violeta’s case. His goal is for her to be out by Mother’s Day so that she can fully devote herself to motherhood (1:18:04-1:19:05). His comment reveals three key points. First, it suggests that the law, as a system of rules applied uniformly, is often unfair and fails to enact any sort of justice. This in turn suggests that what is needed is not a regulated and ostensibly limited state (a la Foucauldian liberalism), but a sovereign who can administer a subjective justice as he sees fit. Second, the comment suggests that there are individuals in Mexico, such as Rodolfo, who are outside of the biopolitical order because they deviate too much from the norms. Non-conformity is socially unacceptable, and dangerous, and, as such, eliminating aberrations is a service to society, not a crime. Third, the comment reaffirms the importance of women serving as reproductive laborers above all and the responsibility of men and the state to facilitate this labor together. This is not just a private domestic arrangement but of general importance to society as a whole.

In keeping with Benjamin’s baroque allegory, the film ends with a rapid about-face and the promise of redemption. The warden releases Violeta on Mother’s Day in what the film frames as an act of salvation (1:22:13-1:23:50). In the final scene of the film, immediately following her release, Violeta walks out of the jail into a pool of sunlight with her arms around Juanito. The camera is behind her at a high angle, suggesting a heavenly gaze. In a voice-over benediction, the warden declares:

Estas rejas que se abren están abriendo una vida nueva y el pasado queda aquí. Sigán juntos adelante que la luz de la esperanza los lleve lejos hasta encontrar algún remanso de paz adonde todavía reinan la bondad y el amor. Que tendrán que brillar siempre a pesar de la maldad y la ambición.

The scene suggests that Violeta's exit from prison is an act of divine grace on the part of the state. The state, embodied here in the warden, is conflated with an all loving and all-powerful (presumably Christian) god, suggesting that this paternal, loving sovereign will bring peace and protection to the vulnerable individuals in his care. Implicit in this conflation is the idea that the warden is an agent of revolutionary change and doing the state's biddings when helping Violeta. This is not just the response of a kind, warm, fatherly man, but a wise, giving regime. It is the response of an empowered man and a regime not constrained by the internal limitations of a liberal state.

The representation of these male characters in *Víctimas del pecado* suggests that only men fully aligned with the state and administering its goals can prosper in the new Mexico. The goal becomes not to be an entrepreneur of the self, a *homo œconomicus*, but to fuse with the state, which itself overwhelms and supersedes written law. The warden is a synecdoche for the state that goes beyond the law to help those around him. This relationship, which emblemizes connection and even merging between the individual man and the state, results in a form of sovereignty in which the state is not at risk for interfering too much, but rather being too distant or acting insufficiently. Santiago and Rodolfo both focus too much on their own desires and too little on caring for and monitoring Violeta. As such, they are meant to be excluded from modernity. Biopolitics here implies a heavily centralized, powerful regime.

### **Women, Civil Society, and Measuring Revolutionary Success in *Víctimas del pecado***

These depictions of state sovereignty foreground gendered difference in the experience of citizenship. Men are represented as active participants administering the state to those around them while women are the most visible benefactors, passively receiving men's interventions. In this gendered experience of citizenship the health and wellbeing of women, as defined by

biopolitical norms, become the measure or indicator of the overall success of revolutionary values in contemporary Mexican society. When female characters are healthy and happy, the sovereignty emblemized by men is understood as good and righteous, while women's suffering indicates masculine and state failures. Women, as individual members of "society" become the synecdoches representing society or the community under the state as a whole. Unlike Foucauldian civil society, which potentially challenges and/or potentially rejects state interventions, this image of civil society is one that receives state interventions with docility and gratitude.

The use of sex workers' bodies as emblems for revolutionary failures and successes draws on a long history of using women as national allegories in Mexican public art. In "Angels and Prostitutes" art critic Mary Coffey notes that, particularly during the *Porfiriato*, young, beautiful women were used as allegories of national virtue.<sup>21</sup> In a reading of José Clemente Orozco's 1934 mural *Catharsis*, Coffey argues that the prominent featuring of a sex worker in this mural is a caricature of this tradition. She calls this woman a "defiled allegory," which she defines as an emblem of the corruption and failures during the *Maximato* (1918).<sup>22</sup> By representing the period as a vulgar sex worker rather than a beautiful, healthy, young, and virtuous woman, Orozco suggests that the nation is in shambles and being pimped out for the benefit of others.

*Cabareteras* expand on this trope by suggesting that these women, through successful, righteous

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21 Coffey never elaborates what she means by allegory. However her use of the term, in which a collection of emblems is used to deliver a critique of post-revolutionary life by referencing present and past failures via a woman's sexual behavior is compatible with my own use of allegory here.

22 This period known as the *Maximato* refers to the period of Mexican history during which Plutarco Elías Calles controlled much of the federal government. Elías Calles is the founder of the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, or the party that would ultimately become the PRI. He was the President of Mexico from 1924 to 1928 and the de facto president during the puppet presidencies of Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, and Abelardo Rodríguez.

state intervention can be guided towards biopolitical compliance and general health and wellbeing.

Both Violeta's physical wellbeing and her domestic situation are used to indicate the wellbeing of Mexican society under each man and his respective relationship to the state in the film. Her visual appearance onscreen reflects her quality of life under each man. Rodolfo bloodies Violeta's face while repeatedly slapping her after she tries to stop him from killing baby Juanito (46:10-49:26). Much like the Benjaminian ruin, the blood is the trace of the violence and misery of his foreign, criminal behavior and lack of regard for the future generations of Mexico. Similarly, Santiago's double life is embodied by Violeta, whose costuming and behavior correspond to their context and reveals the incompatibility between these two modes of life. When celebrating Juanito's birthday, she wears modest clothing and is extremely reserved and decorous. Conversely, when working in the cabaret, her clothes are tight and revealing, suggesting her exploitation and exposure under Santiago's guidance. Here she flirts openly and has no regard for propriety. The film's implicit comparison between these two versions of the same woman draws attention to Santiago's hypocrisy and ultimately his failings, despite his good heart and love for Violeta. Santiago's death serves to confirm the impossibility of this double life. The warden's decision to save Violeta from misery is represented as righteous and a model of how men, and ostensibly the state, should use power. In the last scene of the film, when Violeta walks into a pool of sunlight with her back to the camera holding her young son's hand, she becomes an idealized mother moving towards a hopeful future. The renewed hope and possibility that she embodies are indicative of the importance and righteousness of the warden's intervention. Violeta's physical person is the continual referendum on male leadership in the film.



Image 1.5: Rodolfo Beats Elena, *Victimas del pecado*.

Rather than the contestatory civil society formulated by Foucault, Violeta serves as a passive surface onto which the successes and failures of different political paradigms inscribe themselves. Violeta remains good-natured and loving throughout the film and this suggests that she is always either the victim or beneficiary of the systems of power to which she is subjected.<sup>23</sup> This depiction suggests an unthinking, highly malleable and highly needy civil society, which requires intense direction from the state. Her big heart and adoration for her adopted child make clear that she is worthy of such direction, while her constant suffering and inability to get ahead necessitate it. Violeta lacks the capacity to independently change her own situation. Violeta's ultimate redemption at the end of the film, only after the state breaks its own rules, makes clear that what is needed is not consistent, clearly stated rule of law, nor a self-limiting state with defined functions, but rather a state intensely involved in all aspects of life that is not hamstrung by rules. This is all underscored by the fact that the warden is not Violeta's lover or father, but a civil servant who is taking the place of men who could not provide sufficient paternal protections. The ending suggests that in Mexico, a successful man is not a *homo oeconomicus*, who like Rodolfo opts out, or like Santiago only partially opts-in, but actually one who integrates himself into the state in order to care for a reliant, feminized civil society.

## **Conclusion**

Viewed through a Foucauldian biopolitical lens, *cabareteras* become extended commentaries on the ways in which gender was constructed in post-revolutionary Mexico to support economic and political goals and the ways in which these constructions helped build a

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<sup>23</sup> There are *cabareteras* such as the 1952 *Sensualidad* (Dir. Alberto Gout, also starring Ninón Sevilla) in which sex workers are hardened by their experiences and, as is the case in *Sensualidad*, are never saved. However, while the movies do not end with the protagonist's redemption, the insinuation is still that women need men to provide moral guidance and protection. For example, Aurora, Sevilla's character in *Sensualidad*, manipulates the men around her and ultimately everyone suffers. Here, the message seems to be that women need guidance and if men allow themselves to be controlled by their desires everything will fall apart.

symbolic economy that reinforced the PRI's authoritarian, centralized style of governance. Gender in these films becomes a key aspect of a new biopolitical order and is used to dictate work, living arrangements, parenting, and sexual choices. Using moralism, sentimentality, and biologized notions of gender and race, these films obfuscate the functional aspects of these norms (i.e. the ones that account for reproductive labor and political submission) and instead frame them as necessary for the safety, prosperity, and contentment of all.

Simultaneously gender emblemizes the relationships between civil society, citizens, and the state. The sex worker's body is used to emblemize a passive civil society that the state is tasked with redeeming. Individual men are portrayed as their best when they participate in this redemptive process and act in a synecdochic capacity, administering the state agenda to those around them. Conversely, women appear to passively accept the interventions of men, and emblemizing a broader civil society that, likewise, passively accepts the interventions of the state. Ultimately these depictions, read both on a literal and an emblematic level reinforce the idea that a centralized, empowered sovereign power will benefit Mexico. They also suggest that a heavily gendered form of citizenship in which men and women do not participate in the state in the same way.

Ultimately these films suggest a form of biopolitical normativity that while, as Foucault suggests, is not exclusively administered at disciplinary sites, also, contrary to Foucault's observation, does not preclude a centralized, authoritarian state either. Indeed, these films suggest that when individual biopolitical norms reinforce hierarchical forms of power on an interpersonal level, they are potentially compatible with similar social hierarchies and forms of distributing power on a much broader scale. They attempt to instill social norms that directly bind the health and behaviors of individuals and communities to the state and in doing so create

an image of the state as a source of protection and prosperity. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault posits that beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and through the present political thought has obsessed over “the question of the relations between civil society and the state” (309). Post-revolutionary Mexican political thought seems to have been similarly concerned with this question, although contrary to what Foucault describes, the solutions proffered focused not on separating them, but drawing them as close together as possible.



## Chapter 2

### Rewriting the *Cabaretera*: 1970s Art Cinema, Sex Work, Land Reform, and a Critique of State Violence

*Desde luego, el gran movimiento, lo que sacude todo, es la crisis que tiene su culminación en Tlatelolco. México ya no es el mismo. Muchas cosas se desenmascararon. – Alberto Isaac “Los atajos del cine mejicano”, 1974*

*The generation I belong to always had the idea that one had to destroy the status quo, one had to destroy tradition. Mexico is a country with great gaps in its history, so tradition has to be continually reinvented. We took upon ourselves the task of making certain kinds of films, which would destroy our cinematic traditions and build a new one. – Arturo Ripstein, “A Career in Perspective: An Interview with Arturo Ripstein,” 1999*

*Lo curioso en el caso de Las Poquianchis es que sus víctimas nunca se quejan de ser prostitutas. Se quejaron del maltrato, del hambre, de los golpes, de estar presas, pero nunca de ser prostitutas. Además, la camaradería entre las prostitutas, como se ve en el cine mexicano tradicional, no existe. Eso de que las prostitutas se abracen y se consuelen no existe. – Felipe Cazals, Felipe Cazals habla de su cine, 1994*

#### Introduction

As these epigraphs suggest, Mexican cinema during the first half of the 1970s was characterized by the desire to break with the political and artistic traditions of the Mexican Golden Age of cinema. During Luís Echeverría’s *sexenio* (1970-1976) filmmakers had a chance to do so when the state began reinvesting in the Mexican national film industry after nearly two decades of declining budgets and infrastructural neglect. This change was part of a broader policy of *apertura* or “democratic opening” of the Mexican state. In addition to increased

massacre at Tlatelolco, the *apertura* sought to reframe PRIista Mexico as progressive and democratic rather than totalitarian and violent (Costa 31; Monsiváis “1968” 20; Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 42-44). This short-lived revival of Mexican national cinema resulted in a body of artistically innovative and provocative films about social issues.

This chapter examines three iconic films from this period, *Las Poquianchis* (Dir. Felipe Cazals, 1975), *Tívoli* (Dir. Alberto Isaac, 1974), and *El lugar sin límites* (Dir. Arturo Ripstein, 1977), each of which combines the themes of sex work and land reform in order to discuss the connections between biopolitical state violence and political economy. As argued in Chapter 1, Golden Age melodramas model a form of biopolitical sovereignty that focuses on increasing the health and wellbeing of the citizens who collectively form the nation. Central to this mission were the heavy regulation of female sexuality and the promotion of the nuclear family headed by a breadwinner father/husband who is paired with a mother/wife tasked with the family’s social reproduction.<sup>24</sup> Different from the Foucauldian model of biopolitics in which the liberal state is in constant fear of governing too much (*Birth 17*), these films frame the corporatist Mexican State as a benevolent father to the nation who frequently and righteously oversteps his legal limitations in order to care for the nation. Fathers and the head of state in these films are seen as parallel structures working together towards shared goals, albeit on vastly different scales.

The films analyzed in this chapter provide a counter-narrative of biopower and the relationship between the state and citizens. Contrary to the sexual and marital norms celebrated

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<sup>24</sup> Social reproduction is the continued replenishment of workers’ energies and ability and willingness to do work. Reproductive labor, or the work done to socially reproduce, is “the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labor are daily reconstituted” (Federici *Revolution* 5). It includes tasks such as cleaning, childbirth, childrearing, sexual relationships, and food preparation, as well as the support and guidance necessary to keep people physically and emotionally capable of doing labor and to provide a next generation of disciplined, cooperative, and possibly educated workers.

in the Golden Age *cabaretera* film of Chapter 1, which were represented as attempts to incorporate the poor and vulnerable into the state apparatus through the fatherly love of the government, these films suggest that the Mexican state seeks to exclude and dispossess the same groups using sexual and gender norms as a pretext to legitimate state violence against them. The films suggest that these norms of family life and sexual propriety are not, as Golden Age cinema suggests, patterns and behaviors that can maximize health and wellbeing, but rather a tool to justify state violence and exclusion of people as aberrations.

These films offer a new understanding of biopolitics aligned with that of Giorgio Agamben's descriptions of biopower in totalitarian states. This biopolitics is rooted in as the constant redefinition of an inside governed by a juridical order enforced by legally-sanctioned state violence with recognized limits, and an outside state of exception that is excluded from this order and is totally subjectable to any form of violence, state or otherwise (*Homo* 131). Agamben argues that the boundaries between these two zones are becoming increasingly indistinguishable in contemporary politics and that citizens deemed inconvenient are disenfranchised by a state, externalized from the juridical order, and reconceptualized as what he calls *bare life*, which dwells in a state of exception and can be harmed with no legal repercussions.

Departing from Agamben's concept of *bare life*, this chapter asks how this changed understanding of biopolitics relates to both capitalist development in Mexico and social reproduction. I argue that these films suggest that, in the case of Mexico, this form of biopower, in which citizens are easily legally divested of their presumed rights and protections, facilitates what David Harvey has termed *accumulation by dispossession*, or the seizure and development of land and natural resources to unload an overaccumulation of capital. Harvey argues that this is typically framed as a progressive or moral intervention rather than economic and the violence

becomes socially legitimate once reframed as righteous and protective of the population. In the films at hand, the cyclical seizure of land by the state is typically related to the eradication of vice, particularly sex work, and the promotion of the nuclear family (both, of course, harkening back to the Golden Age and its cinematic morality). The films critique this pretext on three fronts. First, they problematize the idea that sex work is inherently immoral, dangerous, and different from other forms of work when not coerced. Second, they reject the family as the preferred unit for social reproduction, suggesting that it is a woefully inadequate way to organize a community in terms of providing materially and emotionally for its members. Last, the films suggest that, despite its framing in Golden Age cinema as allied with nuclear families, the state does not actually support and help most families, but is actually often antagonistic towards them. Subsequently, being in a family unit and complying with biopolitical norms does not guarantee being included in the juridical order or prevent one from being reduced to *bare life*.

In rejecting this heavily gendered form of the nuclear family and its connection to the state, these films both hint at the possibility of and need for non-state prescribed, autonomous social formations. I will argue that they gesture towards what Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar and Huáscar Salazar Lohman call a *community weaving*, which is a form of community that organizes social reproduction using a system of mutual obligation with flexible individual roles rather than a rigid, heavily gendered division of labor and laws enforced by state violence. While such communities appear to be happier and more sustainable for members, the construction of such alternative communities, the films suggest, is impeded by *accumulation by dispossession*, which, in clearing communities off of land, tends to dismantle and disperse people living in alternative social formations. Subsequently, finding new ways to account for social reproduction requires not only abandoning restrictive sex and gender norms, especially those undergirding the

nuclear family and the state, but also finding a way for communities to either hold land in the face of violence or ending the threat of violence.<sup>25</sup>

In what follows I begin with a brief overview of the industrial context of these films, and then elaborate the theoretical framework sketched out here. This elaboration starts with a close reading of Agamben's concept of *bare life* and then puts it in conversation with the film *Las Poquianchis*. The chapter then proceeds to explore *bare life*'s connection to Harvey's *accumulation by dispossession* using the film *Tívoli* as an example. Third, the chapter examines how Gutierrez Aguilar and Salazar Lohman's concept of the *community weaving* can be used as an interpretive framework for *El lugar sin límites* and how this type of communal formation is potentially a model for an alternative to the nuclear family and participation in the state explored and critiqued in all of the art films included in this chapter. Last, this chapter ends with a brief discussion of a commercial genre called the *sexicomedia* that appeared at the same time as these films and that, while it critiques Golden Age ideals about sex and gender, does not connect them to biopolitical state violence or economic development.<sup>26</sup> Similar to the Golden Age *cabaretera* film, the *sexicomedia* focuses on how the collective health and wellbeing of the population can be achieved through properly managed sexuality (albeit a new understanding of what constitutes properly managed). The proliferation of this very explicitly sexual genre following the end of the

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<sup>25</sup> This reading, which emphasizes political possibilities outside of the state, departs from other studies of Agamben that try to locate political potential in *bare life* by having it be reintegrated into the state into a more desirable position within the juridical order. For example, Elena Plonowska Ziarek's "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender," argues that hunger striking British suffragettes temporarily reduced themselves to *bare life* in order to gain access to previously unheld voting rights within the juridical space of the state. The films explored in this chapter offer images of *bare life* remaining outside of the juridical order (in the space of exception) and finding new ways to self-organize that account for social reproduction and are not controlled by the state. In doing so, they are neither *bare life*, which is vulnerable to all forms of violence, nor are they reintegrated into the juridical space. Instead they offer a new form of community.

<sup>26</sup> *Sexicomedias* are also often referred to as *cabaretera* films and *fichera* movies. In this chapter, for clarity, I use *cabaretera* film to refer to the Golden Age genre elaborated in Chapter 1. *Sexicomedia* is used to denote the genre of films about sex workers that emerged in the mid-1970s. This differentiation is not universal and readers should be aware that elsewhere both are referred to as *cabaretera* films and *fichera* films because of their subject matter.

Echeverría *sexenio* when other forms of political filmmaking were being defunded and censored suggests, I will argue, that what is political is not the sex itself, but the recognition that its regulation and regimentation is tied to questions of political economy, particularly matters of land and social organization that are not bound to the state. Ultimately all four films gesture towards the reconceptualization of state power, the family, and social reproduction in 1970s Mexico and potentially offer a nascent push to consider new communal forms rather than simply reform the state.

### **The *Apertura* and the Resurgence of Mexican National Cinema**

As discussed in Chapter 1, between the early 1950s and 1970, the Mexican national film industry fell into decay. Post World War II Hollywood began competing in Latin America with renewed vigor. Decreased funding from the Mexican state made it difficult for the industry to keep-up both domestically and internationally with this competition. Quality was also hampered by union rules for the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (STPC), which made it hard for new directors to enter the industry and subsequently the industry generally lacked artistic innovation or competition (Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 41). Last, while the state owned Banco Nacional Cinematográfico (BNC) acquired much of the infrastructure necessary to produce, distribute, and exhibit films in Mexico, the BNC had failed to renovate them and run them in an efficient, cost-effective way. It was also plagued by corruption and misuse of funds (Costa 61-64; Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 40). Within Mexico, Mexican films were considered lowbrow and noticeably less popular than foreign films. They suffered a similar reputation abroad and Cuba, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela stopped importing Mexican film during this period (Costa 58).

As mentioned, following his inauguration in 1970, Luis Echeverría began investing heavily in the national film industry and reduced censorship as part of the broader set of policies of *apertura* or democratic opening. Reinvesting in the film industry and relaxing censorship were seen as an overture to the intelligentsia and artistic communities. Echeverría also saw cinema as a key ideological tool with which Mexico could improve its international reputation as a progressive country, aligned with Castro's Cuba and Allende's Chile, rather than be in the pocket of the United States (Costa 152).<sup>27</sup> Film was also a passion for both Echeverría and his brother, Rodolfo, who served as the head of the BNC starting during the end of Díaz Ordaz's presidency and during his brother's *sexenio*. Luis Echeverría had been involved with the film industry while working as the undersecretary of the interior and then as the actual secretary of interior. Rodolfo was an actor and STPC union activist before becoming the head of the BNC.

Under the Echeverrías, the state began investing money in production equipment, improving theaters, and distribution (Costa 72). Particularly important to this set of policies were the creation of state-run production companies. The Echeverrías initially tried to recruit private producers to support artistically innovative projects and when those efforts proved inadequate, the state itself became a major producer, starting with Churubusco and adding three production companies, CONACINE (Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica), CONACITE I (Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado), and CONACITE II as time went on (Costa 73-74, 91; Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 44). The state also opened the *Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica* (CCC) in 1974, which offered education to aspiring filmmakers (Maciel 202). Subsequently filmmakers who had not had access to adequate producers and funding before now

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that the 1960s and 1970s were key decades in Latin American cinema, with the emergence of filmmakers such as Bolivia's Jorge Sanjines and Cuban directors like Sara Gómez, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and Humberto Solás.

found themselves with the resources and skills to pursue projects. Notably the majority of films remembered from this period were made between 1974 and 1976 because, as Costa points out, they relied on reforms passed earlier in the *sexenio* that had to be implemented (75).

A number of new directors emerged during this period including Felipe Cazals, Arturo Ripstein, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Alberto Isaac, Paul LeDuc, Jorge Fons, and Alberto Bojórquez, many of whom continued to be key players in the Mexican film industry even after the end of the Echeverría *sexenio*. Many of these men had participated in an emergent Mexican film culture in the 1960s that focused on the artistic and political possibilities of film albeit without much state support. This period included the short-lived, but impactful publication of *Nuevo Cine*, which was put out by a group of the same name (Costa 86-87). The 1960s also included two major film competitions: the STPC's 1963 experimental film competition, in which Alberto Isaac placed second for *En este pueblo no hay ladrones*, and the 1966 Concurso Nacional de Argumentos y Guiones, sponsored by the Dirección de Cinematografía y la Asociación De Productores and the BNC, which Carlos Fuentes y Juan Ibáñez won for their screenplay *Los Caifanes* (Costa 59-60). In 1963 UNAM opened the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC), where training for directors became available to would-be filmmakers, including Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and Jorge Fons. Many of the directors who rose to prominence during the 1970s also went abroad to receive training, including Felipe Cazals, Paul Leduc, Tomás Pérez Turrent, and Sergio Olhovich (Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 47). However, not until Echeverría's *sexenio* did these filmmakers really have access to adequate resources and creative freedom to make the innovative films they aspired to make during the 1960s. As Paola Costa argues, "Por un corto lapso, de 1971 a 1976, parecía que las inquietudes



de los cineastas coincidían con las de los productores (estatales o apoyados por el Estado naturalmente)” (81).

Different from the Golden Age, which relied heavily on recognizable, formulaic genres, the aesthetics and narrative structure of this period in Mexican cinematic history can be understood using David Andrew’s conceptualization of art cinema. For Andrews, art cinema is an “...ongoing set of events impelled by an aspirational idea of cinema. These events have left behind legitimate, quasi-legitimate and illegitimate movie products that serve high-art functions in many subcultures, forming a diffuse and fluctuating super-genre across human cultures” (22). In short, art cinema is not so much a certain set of aesthetics or narrative techniques that span cultures and time periods uninterrupted, but rather a type of film that a culture or a subculture has dubbed high prestige and/or artistically innovative. During the Echeverría *sexenio* in Mexico this aspiration is defined primarily by a desire to get outside of the bounds of traditional genre films that characterized the Golden Age and subsequent decades such as the *cabaretera* film, as well as to make films about serious social issues without reducing them to facile solutions or moral lessons, as was common during the Golden Age. The three art films highlighted by this chapter are notably tonally and visually very different, but each offers a social critique based around similar themes. Andrews stresses that the classification of something as an “art film” is also often a reflection of both its industrial context and its reception from critical, institutional, and evaluative contexts (22). In Mexico, the emergence of state-owned (or partially owned) production companies and tensions between the state and private production companies are reflective of the desire to produce internationally and nationally prestigious films rather than ones that were simply profitable. Art cinema in this context connotes a focus on art and politics in film over profit and popular entertainment.

Importantly, while the Echeverría administration was interested in a national cinema that produced films of artistic and cultural significance, it did not want films that directly challenged state power. Censorship, referred to via euphemism as “supervision,” continued to exist during this period, although filmmakers had access to more themes, foul language, and nudity (Costa 91-97). As a result, many of the films made during this period employed a kind of doublespeak in which films, while not explicitly about Mexico or the regime in the 1970s, display clear references to both and offer incisive critiques through symbols, historical allusions, metaphors, and wordplay among other techniques. In an interview with Peruvian critics Alfredo Barnechea and Isaac Leon Frías, Alberto Isaac suggested in order to evade censorship, a screenwriter “...hace una cosa de manera alegórica, la sitúa en otro tiempo” (20). As will become apparent in this chapter, many of the films are based on past events and literary works, suggesting that by having the plausible deniability offered by a literal interpretation of the text, they could include, on this allegorical level, pointed critiques. Many films also revise old, iconic cinematic tropes (such as the Golden Age sex worker) as a means of challenging past narratives about state power.

These films were neither universally accessible nor appealing to all Mexicans and subsequently one has to be cautious not to overstate their political importance. As Costa makes clear, films made during this period were only available to and enjoyed by a small portion of the Mexican audiences made up primarily of middle and upper class urbanites. Given the lack of theaters in rural areas and that many of these art cinema films were not transferred to 16mm (which would have made them more accessible to rural, ambulatory film exhibitioners) these films often were not shown to campesino and rural populations. Furthermore, Costa notes that both the urban and rural poor generally rejected the content and aesthetic of these art cinema

films, preferring more straightforward entertainment (145, 148-152). Subsequently, despite often being about issues most severely impacting the poor, both rural and urban, the audiences for these films were primarily urban middle class and international viewers.

Costa reads this as proof of the fact that the state successfully coopted voices of dissent and negated the possibility of an actual political cinema (which to her seems to mean film that incites social movements in the working classes) (155). I take a less conclusive stance. This does illustrate some of the major limitations of film as a political intervention, particularly in Mexico at this time. Making a film requires money, equipment, and access to large distribution networks that, in 1970s Mexico, were controlled by the state being critiqued. However, these limitations do not mean that these films had zero impact on the audiences that saw them. The challenges to state narratives about daily life in Mexico offer an opportunity to map out changing views and public discourse about the role of the Mexican state, particularly in contrast to the Golden Age and in response to the high profile massacre at Tlatelolco. Indeed, as will become apparent, these films suggest that despite the desire of authorities to have the democratic opening woo the middle class and intelligentsia back, the individuals making these films saw the state as a source of constant violence.

My work departs from past scholarship on film from the Echeverría *sexenio* in two key ways. First, this chapter reads the representation of changing gender norms and sexual comportment not as the results of a zero sum game between two complementary genders vying for power (Ramírez Berg *Cinema 97*, 211; Noble 115), but rather acknowledgement of the flaws of the nuclear family as a communal formation that uses gender and sexuality as a way to structure work and community. Both gender and sexuality are understood here as cultural constructs used to organize society rather than innate, biological realities seeking expression, as

Ramírez Berg in particular seems to argue. While Sergio de la Mora begins to do some of this with his reading of *ficheras* in *Cinemachismo*, his readings focus primarily on how gay characters are represented and their appearance in these films expands and queers traditional notions of masculinity (105-134). My reading argues that, in addition to visibilizing historically ignored and obfuscated sexual and gender diversity of the population, these films offer a critique of both the nuclear family and the state as ways to organize a community that rely on gender and sex norms.

Second, my work does not attempt to extrapolate a cohesive notion of Mexicanidad or national culture from these films (Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 1-3; de la Mora *Cinemachismo* 132-134), but instead focuses on how state power and state violence, both of which are largely unexplored in prior criticism, are articulated. As I make clear in my reading of *El lugar sin límites*, these films make space for new concepts of community and collectivity that, unlike the nation, are not dependent on the state.

### **Giorgio Agamben and Theorizing Biopolitical State Violence in Mexico**

The question of state violence is a central one for anyone grappling with how to understand the corporatist PRIista state in film or elsewhere during the 1970s. As events such as the massacre at Tlatelolco suggest, the Golden Age version of biopolitics elaborated in Chapter 1, which relied on individuals adopting a series of norms and working in concert with the state, was no longer a tenable vision of the relationship between state, citizen, and society in Mexico during the 1970s. Subsequently, neither was the filmmaking explored in Chapter 1, which understood cinema as an entertaining educational tool by which the state could promote and model new, post-revolutionary norms including gender roles, family organization, correct sexual comportment, and racial and class dynamics. Not surprisingly then, not only did some 1970s

filmmakers abandon residual genre conventions, but their films reflect a new relationship to the state that reflects a biopolitics much different than the one found in Golden Age film. This biopolitics suggests that one of the chief ways in which the state operates is through physical violence and coercion directed at its own citizens rather than the promotion of health and wellbeing.

Art cinema from this period focuses on people who fail to adapt to the behavioral norms championed by Golden Age films such as lifelong sex workers, criminals, poor campesinos demanding land reform, the disabled, immigrants, dissatisfied housewives, prisoners, and others who, by definition, are irreconcilable with what a Mexican citizen was theoretically supposed to be. As will be discussed, these populations are routinely shown as either the direct victims of some form of state violence (be it physical violence, imprisonment, or being cut off from resources like farmland or education) or the victims of violence from other members of the community who are able to injure them with impunity (men who beat their wives, landowners who exploit campesinos without consequences, etc.).

Foucault's model of biopolitics is not well equipped to explain these characters or their experiences because it offers little analysis of domestically-directed state violence outside of racism and focuses on how norms in a liberal state are used to create order without the state appearing to be, as Foucault puts it, "governing too much" (*Birth* 17).<sup>28</sup> While these norms might

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault's first comments on sovereign killing within a biopolitical state come from *Society Must Be Defended* in which he argues that within a biopolitical framework "...racism is the indispensable precondition that allows someone to be killed, and that allows others to be killed. Once the state functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State" (*Society* 256). Racism here is understood as the belief in populations as biologically distinct and subsequently at risk of being diluted if mixed with another race. Racism suggests that racial purity and success depends on the elimination of other races. Notably this sometimes includes the mentally ill or the criminal who are understood as biologically defective in this model. He argues that the Nazis are the paragon of this biopolitics, but that a similar racism is also found in both liberal, capitalist states and socialist states (*Society* 260-261). He further elaborates these points in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (149-150). There is not an elaboration of state violence against those perceived as abnormal or undesirable (politically, physically, and/or economically) that does not rely on the category of race or a supposed biological difference. As the films

still be practiced by those comfortably enfolded into the state, the art cinema of this period generally asks what happens to those that are, despite technically being Mexican, excluded from the state's protections and exposed to violence from the state and anyone else. Furthermore, just as in Chapter 1, restraint from governing too much does not appear as a virtue for the Mexican state.

As such I now turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben, which examines the biopolitics of totalitarian regimes of 20th century Europe and offers insights that are relevant as to how state violence in 1970s, corporatist Mexico functions as a biopolitical state. Agamben argues that the policing of who qualifies as belonging to the juridical order of a state and who might be excluded from that order despite their physical presence inside of the territory governed by the state is one of the primary tasks of a totalitarian regime. Agamben's work develops a category called *bare life*, which is life potentially both within the physical confines of a state apparatus and not protected by any form of sovereign limitation or legal protection. This is to say, *bare life* can be subjected to violence from anyone anywhere within this space without legal repercussions. This is in contrast to qualified citizen life, which is supposedly protected by the state and enjoys legal protections from the violence of others enforced by state violence.

As Agamben points out, these internal spaces of qualified, elevated life protected by a juridical order become increasingly few and far between as the state of exception becomes the rule. Traditionally the space of exception has been understood as the space physically external to the juridical order and is inhabited both by the sovereign and *bare life*. While the sovereign and

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explored in this chapter suggest, sexual and gendered deviance such as sex work, even when not biologized but attributed to circumstances, are represented in these films as reasons for state violence in 1970s Mexico. Second, these films often highlight the hypocrisy of state officials who seem uninvested in the morality they promote and focused on their own enrichment. These two observations necessitate a theorization that includes and goes beyond a belief in racial difference.

*bare life* are seemingly polar opposites (one totally powerful, the other totally vulnerable), both were defined by the fact that they did not belong to the internal juridical order of the state and thus were outside of its hindrances and/or protections. Both were “sacred” by virtue of this externality. While historically *bare life*’s equivalents, such as the Roman *homo sacer*, were literally external to the physical space of polis (which is to say that they were not in the space of qualified life, they were physically removed from it, in addition to being conceptually excluded), today they appear and exist within spaces understood as being controlled by a legal order imposed by the state. This can be seen both in flows of people into states where they may not have enforceable legal protections (e.g. refugees and the undocumented), as well as totalitarian states that strip people of citizenship (e.g. German Jews under Nazi law (*Homo* 170-171)). Agamben argues that this spatial distinction of inside and outside is far less territorially stable in modern biopolitics and characterized by constantly changing borders (*Homo* 131). This is to say the geographic borders of a state do not inherently separate *bare life* and qualified citizen life in the eyes of the state. Subsequently this has meant that:

Sacredness [here meaning externality to the juridical system] is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens. If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri* (115).

This is to say, even those presumed to be citizens and protected by rights in the present can quickly lose this status and be placed into an exceptional situation where the juridical order is not in effect and they find themselves suddenly exposed to impune state and/or non-state violence.

The state of exception has spatial implications that disrupt the idea of a national territory to which law is evenly and ubiquitously applied. Agamben argues that these states of exception often appear inside of spaces presumed to be under a juridical code: “What happened and is still

happening before our eyes is that the juridically empty space of the state of exception...has transgressed its spatiotemporal boundaries and now, overflowing outside them, is starting to coincide with the normal order, in which everything again becomes possible” (*Homo* 38). This means that a sovereign order is not applied evenly to a concrete, uniform territory constantly over linear time but rather is applied to a constantly changing set of people who at times may or may not be *bare life*. As Agamben points out, borders are always contingent and a government might, as I will argue these films suggest about Mexico, simply ignore a space for an extended period before reentering it and selectively (not uniformly) enforcing the legal code. Likewise, rights are not universally enforced or uniformly applied within a territory, they appear only in spaces not subsumed by the state of exception, which are increasingly hard to recognize in part because they are so impermanent. As such citizenship and the rights associated with it are incredibly tenuous. This has temporal implications too because it means change is not necessarily cumulative or stable. In the films at hand this is shown by suggesting that people integrated into a state formally as citizens are easily excised and disenfranchised with total impunity. One cannot assume that having one's rights enforced will be a constant, nor can one assume that they will never be enforced and subsequently should be disregarded.

Mexican films from the 1970s expound on this view of the state by taking archetypal characters, such as sex workers and campesinos, historically understood as being brought into the state and being redeemed by it, and offering images of them being excluded from and abused by it instead. In doing so these art films undermine the mythology of a collaborative, paternal Mexican state charged with protecting and nurturing citizens found in their Golden Age predecessors. Instead, these films depict the state as a source of daily violence and repression and reveal a citizenry continually reduced to *bare life* and deprived of its rights.



In this vein, I turn to Felipe Cazal's 1976 film, *Las Poquianchis* that uses the figures of the sex worker and the ejido farmer to decry state violence. The film highlights the failure of the state to enforce the law and citizens' rights as well as its willingness to reduce its people to *bare life* through this refusal. Similar to the prison warden in *Víctimas del Pecado* analyzed in Chapter 1, the government in *Las Poquianchis* exercises power far beyond what is prescribed by law. However, counter to *Víctimas del pecado* and other earlier films, in *Las Poquianchis*, the state does so to exploit rather than uplift its citizens. Notably it also routinely ignores violence against these groups by third parties and fails to enforce promised legal protections for the vulnerable. Through a depiction of sex work and the seizure of land as parallel experiences, the film suggests that the state, rather than a protective father, is an unrestrained tyrant. Complementing this is its representation of the nuclear family with a heavily gendered division of labor as a weak and ineffectual institution that places a great strain on its members and offers no protection from outside pressures. While such families are rhetorically still championed by the state, the film makes it clear that the state does not, in praxis, offer adequate support to them, nor are these families capable of adequately providing for themselves materially or emotionally in this context.

### ***Las Poquianchis and the Production of Bare Life***

Felipe Cazals was one of the auteur directors whose career took off during the Echeverría *sexenio*. He studied filmmaking in Paris at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques during the early 1960s and then returned to Mexico in the mid-1960s where he participated in the emerging art cinema culture (Tsao 26-27). He is well known for the feature films *El Apando* (1975) and *Canoa* (1975), both of which, similar to *Las Poquianchis*, revolve around the intersections of poverty, violent crime, and a state that only selectively enforces the law. *Las*

*Poquianchis* was co-written by Tomás Perez Turrent and Xavier Robles, both of whom collaborated with Cazals on multiple occasions. The film features actress María Rojo, who starred in *El Apando*, and Diana Bracho, both of whom were major stars during the Echeverría *sexenio*.

*Las Poquianchis* is based on the story of sisters Delfina and María de Jesús González who ran a brothel in Guanajuato during the 1950s and early 1960s using slave labor. They murdered dozens of women who became or were seen as unfit to work in the brothel for some reason such as disease, attitude, or age. In 1964 the brothel was closed and the sisters were tried and imprisoned. The press heavily sensationalized the story when it broke and provided considerable fodder for *nota roja* pages (Fourez 60). In addition to the film, their story was also the inspiration for Jorge Ibarguengoitia's 1977 satirical novel *Las Muertas*.

The film follows a fictional family that becomes embroiled not only in the Poquianchis scandal, but also a land dispute between campesinos and a cattle rancher. The main storyline follows sisters, Adelina (Diana Bracho) and María Rosa (Tina Romero), who are sold by their father, Rosario (Jorge Martínez de Hoyos), to the Poquianchis. He believes he is sending them to do domestic and restaurant work and will receive part of their paychecks.<sup>29</sup> The two are forced into sex work and their new situation dissolves their sisterly affections to the point that Adelina murders María Rosa. The second storyline is about Rosario, who, simultaneous to his daughters' struggles, is engaged in a prolonged fight over land between ejido farmers and a wealthy cattle rancher backed by corrupt local officials. Through the juxtaposition of these storylines, viewers

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<sup>29</sup> As Felipe Cazals would later admit in an interview with Leonardo García Tsao, the use of white actresses to play campesinas is not convincing. Ultimately, while the film takes on the intersections between state violence and class and gender, it obfuscates the role of race through its casting (178-179). Thus while the film highlights many forms of structural violence in this period, audiences should be aware that it is an incomplete and subsequently distorted representation.

see the gendered mythology of the Golden Age, in which women find refuge in family and domesticity, and men in paid labor, debunked as unsustainable and not central to the Mexican state's actual agenda. Through this critique the film gestures towards the need for new subjectivities and forms of relationality unmediated by the state and beyond the nuclear family (although it does not go so far as to offer models for such subjectivities). It is worth noting that the use of the “true events” of the Poquianchis story provides a useful cover for the political critiques discussed in the following sections.

### **Irredeemable Sex Workers and the Reduction to *Bare Life***

In *Las Poquianchis*, sex workers, rather than being redeemable national subjects as suggested by the Golden Age *cabaretera* film, are portrayed as *bare life* stuck in a brothel where they can be abused with impunity. The reduction of the women to *bare life* becomes apparent onscreen as they are squeezed and prodded like livestock by the Poquianchis and customers alike with no reaction or protest, suggesting a total lack of bodily autonomy and absolute physical vulnerability. For example, one of the Poquianchis, Delfa (Leonor Llausás) attempts to sell two of the women in her employ to another madam (Erica Mireles). The two madams sit facing the camera on screen and drink tea while, off-screen, the two sex workers being sold stand facing them in silence. Viewers only briefly see one of the worker's faces and for most of the scene only parts of their bodies are visible onscreen. After the two madams sit down, just the side of the skirt of one of them, which peaks in front of the camera. The potential buyer lifts up the skirt of this woman and observes the woman's crotch and legs, complaining that she is too skinny to be useful (Image 2.1). The woman with her skirt pulled up does not react at all to the madam's exposure of her genitalia nor the prospect of being sold. Instead, she stands passive (50:39-52:00). The reduction of these two women to body parts both by the camera and the madams



Image 2.1: A potential buyer inspects one of the women, *Las Poquianchis*.

suggests that the women are not fully human and can be treated as objects. Their total passivity during this scene indicates that they see themselves as *bare life* with no ability to contest their own exploitation. They can be touched, moved, sold, and treated as anyone else wishes. They are totally vulnerable to the whims and violence of others.

The notion of *bare life* in this film is not only defined by being subjected to sovereign violence and unchecked power, but also total isolation and absolute exclusion from any form of community. This is evidenced by the film's depiction of the breakdown of the sisterly bond shared between Adelina and María Rosa. Initially the two appear to be close: they whisper to each other, they hold hands when they leave their home for the first time, and they prefer to be physically near each other (6:30-8:00). Early on in their time at the brothel, one of the Poquianchis, Chuy (Malena Doria), tells them, “Las vamos a tener separadas, la una lo hace, la otra lo paga” (22:22-23:56). While initially this appears to simply exploit their solidarity and force them to obey because of their love, the separation ultimately results in total alienation from each other. Towards the end of the film Delfa has Adelina beat her sister to death after María Rosa becomes ill. The scene begins with a two shot of Delfa and Adelina. Delfa stands over the seated Adelina and grabs her by the hair, both her violence and towering position making it clear that she is in charge (see image 2.2). When Adelina beats her sister, she is shot at a low-angle in a close up (counterpoised with her crouched, shrieking sister, who is shot at a high-angle) (1:35:28-1:38:06). The camera mimics the power structure, making it clear that Delfa, shown as the highest, can be violent with both sisters, Adelina can only be violent with María Rosa, and María Rosa, who is lower than everyone, cannot be violent with anyone. The women assert their power through physical harm to other women. They are prevented from solidarity and find themselves always trying to stay on top because being pushed down literally means death. In

order to not be *bare life*, one must reduce others to *bare life*. Thus while Adelina does not die, she is also in a state of constant precarity in which she must routinely commit acts of violence in order to avoid becoming the victim. This suggests a power structure that only allows for relationships of dominance and submission; one is always exceptional, being either sovereign or *bare life*.

The film suggests that the Mexican juridical system itself is a state of exception with little difference from the brothel. Several of the women imprisoned by the Poquianchis are convicted as co-conspirators because of their involvement in violent acts against other women. Many, including Adelina, have indeed participated in acts of violence, but as the preceding close readings suggest, this violence was the result of the power structure within the brothel where they could kill or be killed. In the epilogue set in 1975, a voice-over informs viewers that the women convicted as accomplices to the Poquianchis were sentenced to 26 years of prison on top of the fact that “habían pasado la mayor parte de sus vidas, quince, veinte, veinticinco años, prisioneras en las casa de las Poquianchis” (1:45:28-1:47:45). The voice-over draws a parallel between the brothel and the prison and suggests they are comparable. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes of concentration camps that “...the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation. This is why the camp is the very paradigm of space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen” (171). Through this comparison between brothel and the prison, the film suggests that in both cases the women are *bare life* with no protections and that the two institutions are by and large identical structures. Subsequently, the state of exception extends far beyond the brothel, which is the obvious comparison to the camp, and can be found in both the courtroom and the prison. Just as



Image 2.2: Delfa pulls Adelina's hair, *Las Poquianchis*.

Agamben indicates, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between spaces belonging to the juridical order and those that are exceptions.

### **Campesinos and the Dispersion of *Bare Life***

The reduction of Adelina and María Rosa to *bare life* runs concurrent to the story of their father, Rosario, who also is reduced to *bare life*. Rosario's story is about the loss of ejidal land to corporate farmers and subsequent campesino alienation from the roles of citizen and worker. This parallel, while it suggests that the reduction to *bare life* is gendered, makes clear that neither gender in the film's binary, despite their different experiences, is benefitting from its relationship to the state. Rosario and his colleagues are shown going through a series of legal attempts to gain access to land that is ultimately gifted by the corrupt local government to a cattle rancher. When they challenge a public official about this decision, noting that the small parcels of land they have been given are insufficient to feed their families and sustain themselves, the official rebukes them, saying ranching "Es toda una industria. Cientos, miles de familias viven de ella. Es una fuente de trabajo, una atracción turística" (24:03-27:30). The irony is obvious: the state does not care about the sustenance of the families onscreen, they are outside of the communities understood as being within the state's juridical space. The land is for some other, abstract families who are within the protected juridical order.

Notably this policy is framed by the film not only as depriving the ejido community of resources, but also as a means by which to break them up as a center of political resistance. When the men try to retake the land, they are shot at and several are gunned down (54:18-55:10). The end result of this confrontation is that the campesino men are forced to disperse and scatter because they have no land and must support themselves. Some go to the US. Others go elsewhere to farm. The ties between local farmers are broken down into individual, lonely, *bare*



*life*, just as Adelina and María Rosa are reduced to antagonists in the brothel. This is the inverse of the Golden Age narrative around proper masculinity elaborated in Chapter 1: these men are attempting to participate within the state's structures and comply with its sanctioned roles as fathers and workers, only to be violently attacked for doing so. Here the instability of the state of exception is visible: Rosario and his colleagues presumed themselves to be under the law and within the juridical order only to discover (too late) that they have become *bare life* and that the land they occupy is a space of exception where they can be harmed and killed with impunity. In keeping with Agamben's description of biopolitics, the borders between the juridical and the exceptional are neither stable nor predictable in contemporary Mexico.

The end of the film directly links the events onscreen to a series of campesino land occupations in the 1970s in order to suggest that the state's claims to represent and support campesinos is disingenuous and a cover for violence. Following an interview with Adelina in prison during the 1970s, the film cuts to black and white footage of Rosario and other men doing work after their bloody confrontation with the cattle rancher and the state. In a voice over interview, several anonymous campesinos talk about how the ejido system is failing, noting that people are not able to produce enough on the given land to sustain themselves and that young people are moving away. At the end of the interviews the camera slowly pans over a row of men seated on a bench at eye level. The film, through these individual portraits and testimonies grouped together, makes it clear that these men hold a struggle in common and are working as a community. The film then cuts to a CNC (Confederación Nacional Campesina, the government sponsored peasant union) rally where we see a large, depersonalized crowd shot from a high angle (see Image 2.3). Off-screen, a speaker condemns provocateurs and tells the crowd that campesinos should be dedicated to solving problems via law and state institutions. The camera eventually locates

Rosario in the crowd. He does not applaud with those around him. His past struggle is a secret (1:40:05-1:44:08). The audience knows that he is both a “provocateur” in the eyes of the law and that this designation is absurd because he is someone who tried desperately to work within the law to confront an unjust situation. The scene provides an explicit contrast to the first set of voice-overs, suggesting that the official position of the state as a protector and ally of working people has not changed despite the massacre that appeared on screen. There is a disconnect between rhetoric and action that the state has no interest in resolving. This scene also makes clear another strategy for keeping individuals isolated beyond breaking down bonds: by pushing them into state-controlled unions, the state prevents workers from organizing independently. The rally scene in particular highlights the ongoing problems of the 1970s with PRIista corporatism by invoking the particular failings of the CNC. The CNC was formed under Cárdenas to both redistribute land and place campesino movements under PRI control. In the 1940s and 1950s rival peasant organizations emerged including the Unión General de Obreros y Campesinos de México (UGOCM) and the Central Campesina Independiente (CCI), both of which started in response to campesinos’ dissatisfaction with the CNC.<sup>30</sup> Other organizations such as the Confederación Agrarista Mexicana (CAM), which split from the CCI in 1970, appeared later. As Dolores Trevizo’s work on the role of Communist party networks in rural Mexico makes clear, in addition to explicitly campesino organizations, rural areas were also organizing through other political frameworks. Notably in the 1970s a growing number of

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<sup>30</sup> The CCI appears in Cazal’s 1976 film *Canoa*, when it is mentioned that the tyrannical priest who is the villain of the film chased off CCI organizers before lynching the main characters of the film, whom he apocryphally labels communists. As Paola Costa points out, these minimal mentions of the CCI in *Canoa* alongside allusions to student struggles and Tlatelolco serve as ways to make a critique of the political climate in Mexico while still maintaining plausible deniability of the film having anti-government sentiments. This is complimented by a mention in the opening credits of the fact that the events in question did in fact occur (101-108). Thus, much like *Las Poquianchis*, *Canoa* is a film about the political present that uses past events as a potentially protective mask.

peasants were occupying private property and demanding more attention from the federal government. While Echeverría made some efforts to support campesinos including the formation of an agrarian congress, he is generally understood as only superficially interested in reform and not committed to sweeping changes to the institutional infrastructure of the CNC and Mexico's agrarian system. Furthermore, in some cases he did deploy the military and violence in order to curb peasant protests (Bartra 193-207; Coerver 114-117; Trevizo 285-287, 290-299). As the film suggests, peasant organizations controlled by the state, such as the CNC, were not actually tasked with advocating for their members, but rather, in the spirit of corporatism, keeping them in line with the state agenda. Campesinos were violently discouraged from autonomous organizing.

Ultimately *Las Poquianchis* suggests that any community anchored in solidarity and nonhierarchical relationships between members is incompatible with this form of biopolitical sovereignty. María Rosa and Adelina are booted from their own family after they become too expensive to maintain and their own bond disintegrates when they enter the brothel. Adelina's supposed re-entry into the state via the court system keeps her reduced to *bare life*, isolated from any kind of community via imprisonment. Similarly, Rosario is cut off from the land that allowed him to sustain a family and participate in an ejidal collectivity. *Bare life* here is not only subject to continual violence, but it is a state of isolation, the exclusion from any form of community. Relationships are reduced to a sum zero game where only one party can succeed and the other must lose. All relationships are understandable only as referents to a vertical, hierarchical power structure. Biopower here, rather than the ability to instill norms and control behaviors, is the ability to exclude, deprive, and isolate with impunity.



Image 2.3: The CCI rally, *Las Poquianchis*.

## **Tivoli, *Accumulation by Dispossession*, Circular time, and the Myth of Sexual Morality**

The economic functions of this kind of biopower are further elaborated in Alberto Isaac's 1975 *Tivoli*. Similar to *Las Poquiánchis*, *Tivoli* revolves around the themes of sex work and land reform while modeling a form of state power that isolates and excludes individuals assumed to be in its care. It further elaborates how this form of state sovereignty functions by showing how it enables what David Harvey calls *accumulation by dispossession* or the process by which a state and/or business(es) dealing with an of overaccumulation of labor and capital are able to seize desired materials and markets and initiate "developmentalism" to unload the over-accumulated resources.

The film suggests that *accumulation by dispossession* is often initiated as part of a state-led morality campaign that the film critiques as an empty pretext meant to mask the illegal seizure of land. Indeed, through an exploration of both marriage and sex work as varied experiences that are irreducible to a clear, uniformly applicable moral code, the film suggests that the morality campaigns targeting so called sexual vices and promoting the nuclear family are oversimplifications used to seize land rather than sincere attempts at collective prosperity or wellbeing. In making this critique, the gender roles and sexual morality outlined in the Golden Age *cabaretera* film are reframed as damaging and specious ideals meant to mask state violence and the seizures of resources, rather than useful principles for organizing a society.

*Accumulation by dispossession* is ongoing primitive accumulation in which resources held in common (be it as state property or shared communal property) are privatized in order to support expanded reproduction (the production of more than a society needs to simply sustain itself). As Harvey points out, primitive accumulation in Marx's *Capital, Volume 1*, is

conceptualized as the set of processes underlying the transition from feudalism to capitalism and includes:

the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; conversion of various forms of property rights – common, collective, state, etc. – into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative, indigenous, forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets, including natural resources; monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; slave trade; and usury, the national debt and ultimately the credit system (2004 74).

As Harvey, following Rosa Luxemburg, points out, these processes are necessary not only to the inception of capitalism, but also the basis of its continuation. They provide new spheres for expansion when existing markets are inadequate. Harvey argues that these processes are often repeated during periods of overaccumulation when there are labor and capital surpluses that need to be absorbed and existing markets are unable to do so (2004 64). *Accumulation by dispossession* opens up new markets and facilitates investment (the unloading of overaccumulated resources) in new development projects aimed at making these new markets profitable and fully integrated into the broader capitalist economy. State-sponsored violence often has to power *accumulation by dispossession* because *accumulation by dispossession* requires that people dismantle other ways of living and sharing resources that they have no reason to give up (2004 74). This violence is typically justified by some kind of civilizing or moral argument meant to cast the process as one of progress and righteousness (2004 82). Harvey makes it clear that the expansion of markets is not a means by which to “open up competition but merely creates opportunities to proliferate monopoly power with all manner of social, ecological, economic and political consequences” (2004 71). As such, *accumulation by dispossession* and the forcible opening up of new markets via imperialism and colonialism have often led to anti-dependency and national liberation movements that emphasize national self-

sufficiency (2004 77). Notably, as Harvey details in *The New Imperialism*, *accumulation by dispossession* is at the heart of the privatization campaigns so characteristic of the neoliberal present (2003 149; 157-161).

Importantly, *accumulation by dispossession* relies on a structure that divides groups of people into an inside and an outside, much like Agamben's biopolitics, and in doing so illustrates why this form of sovereignty is potentially very useful to capitalist development. Harvey writes that “capitalism does indeed require something ‘outside of itself’ to accumulate....but capitalism can either make use of some pre-existing outside (non-capitalist social formations or some sector within capitalism, such as education, that has not yet been proletarianized) or it can actively manufacture it” (2003 141). This is to say, even if no part of a society is actually outside of capitalism, there are tools (such as privatization or eminent domain) that can be used to dispossess people of what was presumed to be their property. Agamben’s biopolitics lays out a potential state framework for creating such an outside in that it facilitates excising people from the juridical order and making all violence against them permissible.

For example, in the plot of *Tivoli*, the claims of the Mexico City government to be trying to rid Mexico City of vice centers, particularly those of a sexual nature are exposed as a campaign to dispossess a group of poor people of their neighborhood and develop their land into luxury housing. *Tivoli* is the story of the demolition of a low-budget follies theater known for its stripteases and comedy. The performers and workers at the theater are a close knit community of people from groups often excluded from traditional ideas of citizenship including immigrants, the disabled, sex workers, and the poor. They are shown as a community throughout out the film— eating together, celebrating together, and protesting together to save the theater. While these characters are not outside of capitalism, they live from their wages as performers and

theater workers, they are a marginal community that does not comply with social norms. The film suggests that such a group, within this biopolitical framework, can easily be moved or exploited in order to access resources desirable to elites such as land. The film follows the characters' campaign to stop the theater from being destroyed as part of a morality campaign being used to seize and clear land for a housing development project. The urban setting (the theater is in Mexico City), which supposedly already has been developed, is shown as being redeveloped and this further illustrates the cyclical nature of capitalism and the reality that development and *accumulation by dispossession* are not linear or finite processes. The characters ultimately lose and, following the destruction of the theater, are forced to scatter. This dispersion is important for two reasons. First, it shows how the loss of space serves as a means by which to politically weaken individuals opposing the government (just as happens in *Las Poquianchis*) by breaking-up their communities and reducing them to isolated *bare life*. Second, this dispersion frees up land and subsequently markets for developers, showing the economic utility in this dispersion.

Much like *Las Poquianchis*, *Tivoli* is based on true events and has messages relevant to 1970s Mexico disguised as an episode from the past. The film references the morality and beautification campaigns of Mexico City's mayor, Ernesto P. Uruchurtu. Appointed by multiple presidents, Uruchurtu was the mayor of the city from 1952 until 1966 and became known both as "Mr. Flowers and Fountains" ("Señor Flores y Fuentes"), in reference to his attempts to beautify and morally renew the city, and the "Iron Regent" ("El Regente de Hierro"), in reference to his heavy-handed tactics, which included bulldozing homes and neighborhoods (Kram Villarreal 51, 105). Uruchurtu was particularly concerned about the role of "vice centers" and heavily regulated cabarets, bars, restaurants and other businesses specializing in nightlife, including the



real life Tívoli, which played a prominent role in the cabaret scene of 1940s and 1950s Mexico City. The theater was razed in 1961 (Fox 160). His policies were aimed at the working class, which was heavily pathologized and framed as inherently immoral and ignorant (Kram Villarreal 74-75, 88). Uruchurtu resigned in 1966 after outcry in the chamber of deputies regarding his decision to demolish 400 homes in the neighborhoods of Ajusco and San Juan de Aragón (Kram Villarreal 228). By the time that the film *Tívoli* was made he no longer was well regarded in the PRI and thus was seen as an acceptable political target for a film shown in Mexico. That being said, the critique against him in the film, which takes aim at the dispossession of the poor by the state, is much more broadly applicable and can also be read as a more generalized rejection of these modalities of state power.<sup>31</sup>

*Tívoli's* creators and performers were a dynamic group, many of whom have had extended careers in the film industry in Mexico. As mentioned previously, Alberto Isaac was active in the 1960s Mexican film scene that preceded the Echeverría *sexenio*. In 1980 under Miguel de la Madrid he was appointed director of the newly formed Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía or IMCINE. He cowrote *Tívoli* with Alfonso Arau, who also stars in the film as Tiliches. Arau attended film school at UCLA and has been a key actor, director, and producer in Mexican film since the early 1970s (perhaps best known for directing the 1992 film *Como agua para chocolate* based on a novel by the same name written by his ex-wife, Laura Esquivel) (Dent

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31 As Juan Carlos Moreno-Brid and Jaime Ros, citing numbers from INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática), point out, Mexico enjoyed impressive economic growth from the 1940s until the 1970s with an annual pace of 6.4% in real terms and per capita gross domestic product at 3.2% (93). However as Moreno-Brid and Ros also make clear, the benefits of this growth were unevenly distributed and most Mexicans remained poor and many still lacked adequate access to services including medical care, electricity, water, sewage, and education (93). Subsequently *Tívoli's* assertion that the development projects to “improve” Mexico City during the 1950s and 1960s were actually a means by which the rich were simply getting richer has much broader implications than a simple critique of Uruchurtu.

6). The cast includes Carmen Salinas, who also stars in *El lugar sin límites* and *Bellas de noche*, and Lyn May, who is one of the iconic exotic dancers of the subgenre of the *sexicomedia*.

### **The Razing of the *Tívoli* and *Accumulation by Dispossession***

The idea of developmentalism as oppressive to the poor and a ruse for the wealthy to acquire resources in a biopolitical state is established early in the film. The second scene begins with the camera surveying the interior of a humble shack and then settling on an old man who lies asleep in a twin bed with a rebozo wrapped around his head, presumably to keep warm because there is no heat. The man awakens the sound of a motor and the camera switches position to reveal a bulldozer literally driving through the wall (see Image 2.4). He grabs a suitcase and a bundle, hobbles outside, and seconds later his whole house has been bulldozed. The scene captures the idea of becoming *bare life*, of finding oneself shockingly exposed to the violent machinery of the state as it mercilessly takes down the walls of one's home and reduces one to absolute vulnerability. The camera, after surveying the damage and the piles of rubble being crossed by bulldozers and other people also having now lost their homes, pans over and up to a group of suit-clad men surveying the scene from a cliff. One man (who we later learn is Reginaldo (Ernesto Gómez Cruz)), the project's lead engineer) tells his colleagues “Vamos a hacer un gran beneficio a la zona. Aquí van dos edificios de siete pisos”. When asked to clarify whether or not the new homes being built will go to those currently having their homes bulldozed, he replies, “No precisamente a los que usted ve” (4:53-8:25). The suggestion here is that the project at hand is a means by which to purge a desirable space of undesirable people and use it to the benefit of the already wealthy, not to raise everyone up as a community. In keeping with *accumulation by dispossession*, the people occupying the space, much like the campesinos in *Las Poquianchis*, must be removed so that the land they currently hold in common can be

developed and converted into something profitable for elites. Much as Harvey suggests, the aim of developmentalism is to locate new investments for the already wealthy to continue to invest their capital not some moral rejuvenation.

The violence of the state is complemented by its simultaneous refusal to engage with the people being displaced, suggesting that they are outside of the juridical order and, in this space of exception, do not have access to some means of explanation or redress. Early in the film, after learning that the Tívoli is slated for destruction, a group of performers goes to the Mayor's office to lobby him to leave the theater. After being made to wait for a long period of time by a bureaucrat, they are shuffled into a second waiting room, then through a series of elaborate passages in the colonial city hall, then through offices with secretaries typing away, and then deposited by a backdoor into the street, next to a beggar (Image 2.5, 28:30-33:21). The scene, which shows the dizzying, confusing M.C.-Escheresque architectural space of bureaucracy implies that the government itself has a similar shape- meant to confuse and befuddle and finally exclude. Like the ejido farmers in *Las Poquianchis*, the film makes it clear that the Tívoli performers have no real access to dialogue with the state. What *Tívoli* adds to Harvey's work on *accumulation by dispossession* is the idea that *accumulation by dispossession* also prevents *bare life* from organizing itself and potentially fighting back. While the employees of the Tívoli are already involved in the capitalist economy, their codependence on each other and communal formation other than a nuclear family or union represent an alternative to state-sanctioned forms of collectivity (namely the family and the union seen in *Las Poquianchis*). Their decision to collectively oppose the state's behaviors is a direct threat to the state and subsequently, *accumulation by dispossession's* success requires not only clearing them from the land, but breaking up this group and forcing them to disperse.



Image 2.4: A home is bulldozed, *Tivoli*.



Image 2.5: The architecture of bureaucracy, *Tivoli*.

The end of the film makes clear how politically incapacitating this decentralization can be. In the last scene of *Tívoli*, the cast and crew stand in a line, embracing and sad as they watch the wrecking ball destroy the theater. After the wrecking begins, the group's leader, Tiliches first watches, then has a breakdown, then walks away slowly and alone, a single individual, no longer defined by his relationship to the theater and its community. Throughout the film Tiliches has brought people together for meetings, rallies, and fundraisers to try and save the theater. His leaving the group here suggests the reversal of all of his efforts beforehand to form a community powerful enough to stop the demolition. Walking away he comes across Reginaldo's car and, taking a rock, scratches the paint job (see Image 2.6). The final shot of the film is a close-up of the scratched paint (1:46:36-1:51:20). The scene testifies to how *accumulation by dispossession* breaks up political dissent. Tiliches goes from being a leader of a group of people working together to confront the theft of land to a petty vandal keying a car to express frustration. Just as Rosario and his colleagues in *Las Poquianchis* could not stay together after losing access to the land they need, the destruction of the Tívoli breaks apart this alternate community by denying it a space to gather and inhabit. In so doing, it reconfigures the cast as lonely individuals, rather than a collectivity. Development once again is not only the seizure of land, but also the elimination of groups of people who collectively contest its failures and abuses.

The film's depiction of state-led development as the cyclical abuse of poor people to the advantage of economic and political elites lies in sharp contrast with Golden Age films that rely heavily on narratives of progress and redemption. Films such as *Aventurera* and *Víctimas del Pecado* trace the journey of their protagonists from wretched situations as sex workers towards



Image 2.6: Tiliches's scratch, *Tivoli*.

deliverance courtesy of the biopolitical norms being instilled by a patriarchal state. In contrast, films from the 1970s reveal a cyclical time in which the state and business elites routinely dispossess the poor for their own enrichment. Development is not, as suggested in the Golden Age, the slow, collective march forward of progress, it is actually the ongoing forcible seizure of land and subsequent dispersion and scattering of those reduced to *bare life*.

### ***Tívoli* and the Ambiguity of Sex Work, Sexual Acts, and Feminine Behavior**

In addition to its commentary on land loss, protests, and citizen access to the state, *Tívoli* also offers an extended commentary on the ways in which the state relies on gender and sex norms to facilitate *accumulation by dispossession* rhetorically and why these norms are harmful. As mentioned, development here is presented by the state in the film as a means by which to rid an area of vice and sexual immorality found in establishments such as the Tívoli. This harkens back to the Golden Age *cabaretera* films, which emphasize both the dangers and degradations of sex work to both society and women and the celebration of the nuclear family headed by a heterosexual couple committed to a gendered division of labor. Via the character of Eva Candela (Lyn May), who begins as the star performer at the Tívoli and ends up the wife of Reginaldo, the engineer in charge of the development project, the film suggests that sex work is a highly varied set of experiences that is irreducible to violence and shame, and that marriage, even to a rich man, has serious flaws and is not inherently good for women. In showing sex work and marriage as ambiguous and varied institutions, the film rejects norms around either as a basis for public policy and/or state violence.

In *Tívoli*, sex work is portrayed as ranging from boring to creative to dangerous, and this ultimately indicates that it cannot be logically flatly condemned as the Mexico City government





Image 2.7: Eva Candela is forced to strip, *Tivoli*.

does in the film. Eva Candela first appears on stage sitting to the side, staring at the audience, and looking bored as she peels off pasties while she bickers with another performer (4:03-4:48). She does not care for her coworkers and doesn't seem particularly animated by the reaction from the crowd to her bare breasts. Here sex work is like many jobs—tedious and not particularly fun, although not miserable or dangerous either.

Later in the film, Eva Candela performs a long striptease which the film frames as requiring skill by showing another woman later try to repeat the exact same routine and comically failing (17:29-22:49; 55:06-57:18). The movie suggests that Eva Candela is both an artist whose talents extend beyond being sexually appealing and a person for whom being sexually objectified is not a dehumanizing or painful experience. There is nothing in the film to suggest that the destruction of the Tívoli is a necessary or urgent endeavor in terms of protecting women.

The film suggests that sex work is objectionable and bad only when it is forced or coerced, implying, much like the Cazals epigraph, that what is wrong with coerced sex work is that it is slave labor and violent, not that it is sexual. This counters the state in the film's claim that these displays of sex are communally dangerous. At the end of the film, Eva Candela is onstage with the theater's owner and other performers bidding her former public farewell at the last show. The crowd begins to shout "Senos! Senos! Senos!". When she declines to strip, Tiliches tears off her dress. She has a fearful expression, crosses her arms over her body, and resists showing herself (see Image 2.7). The owner of the theater tells her she owes it to the crowd to expose herself and she briefly flashes her breasts (1:30:53-1:33:42). While the film frames the scene as comedic (the camera cuts to the state censor positioned in the audience who sheds a tear as her breasts are exposed), it is tonally uneven because Eva Candela appears

uncomfortable and un-participative. It is clear in this moment that she is being forced into something that she does not want to do. Ultimately the scene offers viewers a new possible distinction for what makes sex work good or bad, and that point of differentiation is whether or not it is coerced.

This representation of sex work as a set of dynamic and incommensurable experiences allows for the film to decenter discussion of the morality of sex work by instead suggesting that this discussion is, itself, nonsensical, because sex work is not uniformly anything. Thus, the film suggests that sex work contains a myriad of activities and shifting power dynamics, some of which are good and some of which are bad and none of which individually define these behaviors in their entirety or into perpetuity. Subsequently, what appears bad is the violent coercion of someone to do work against their will.

On a related note, the film suggests that, rather than an inevitable source of stability and mutual respect, marriage is sometimes lonely and emotionally unsatisfying and does not always lead to conservative sexual behavior. After getting married, Eva Candela is forbidden from her work at the Tívoli and can only go out to dance at clubs with a chaperone and a bodyguard who are meant, more than anything, to guard her chastity and protect her as a piece of her husband's property. In one scene Tiliches struggles to chat with her while dancing because she is so heavily surveilled (1:05:00-1:06:50). Later in the film, when Reginaldo is away, she hosts a party for her former co-workers. They dance and drink and tell jokes. She wears a leotard without pants, dances sexily, and makes it clear that she misses performing and spending time with her former colleagues (1:37:26-1:42:29). Marriage has been lonely. Complementing this depiction of marriage as not fulfilling for Eva Candela, is the revelation that Reginaldo and his colleagues, despite their claims that their work has to do with cleaning up a slum and safeguarding morality,

spend time at an upscale brothel watching pornography and presumably patronizing the business. Stopping this supposed sexual immorality, the film makes clear, is not their actual motivation in knocking down the Tívoli. Marriage does not appear to actually lead individuals to upholding a more conservative sexual morality. Nor does marriage appear to be an essentially protective or fulfilling institution or even one that precludes sex work. In the same way that not all sex work is bad, marriage is not a clear solution to anything.

As a political critique, *Tívoli* functions as a denunciation of the political status quo in Mexico in the mid-1970s. It focuses mainly on how the state seizes and develops land, atomizes citizens, and denies them any kind of participation in these political and economic processes. Additionally, the film debunks the idea of sexual propriety as a legitimate motivation for the state's development process through its representation of state officials as hypocrites and sex work as irreducible to immorality or exploitation, and marriage as potentially unfulfilling. Last, through its representation of the theater community, *Tívoli* alludes to the fact that, in addition to state-sanctioned forms of community like the nuclear family and state-run union, other forms of collectivity that account for caring work and solidarity exist and potentially even challenge the state. However, the film does not elaborate the internal space of this collectivity beyond showing the community's actions to contest the state and the gendered internal power dynamics that impede solidarity between men and women (e.g. the men's' entitlement to Eva Candela's body).

In order to more fully consider this question of the internal space of a community of people not tied to the nuclear family that accounts for reproductive labor and access to money, I turn to Arturo Ripstein's 1977 *El lugar sin límites*, which elaborates a community of supposed misfits who provide and care for each other. *El lugar sin límites* examines a woman-run brothel and, counter to *Las Poquianchis*, which shows only coerced sex work, frames it as a site of

community and collective care that is more effective than the nuclear family as a site of social reproduction. The film suggests the possibility of sex workers both gaining control of the means of production through bodily autonomy and the possibility of restructuring social ties and organization to something other than the nuclear family working in tandem with the state. According to the film, such a community is framed around mutual obligation and a commitment to collective social reproduction over individual wealth. Subsequently, while outside of the juridical space of a sovereign order, such a community is not isolated like *bare life*. The film also suggests that the state's use of *accumulation by dispossession*, which pushes people out and away from each other, disrupts the possibility of such a community forming and thriving. As such, disrupting this cycle of *accumulation by dispossession* and holding space are highlighted as key to establishing enduring alternate forms of community.

### ***Community Weavings in El lugar sin límites***

*El lugar sin límites* is Arturo Ripstein's 1977 cinematic adaptation of Chilean novelist José Donoso's 1966 book by the same name. The film tells the story of a group of sex workers living in a house in a village being slowly bought up by the PRIista town cacique, Don Alejo (Fernando Soler) so that he can sell it off to make a profit.<sup>32</sup> One of the sex workers, raised a boy but living primarily as a woman, is named Manuela (Roberto Cobo). She has caught the eye of Pancho (Gonzalo Vega), a local young man who both pursues her romantically and beats her, evidencing both his attraction to her and self-loathing for this attraction.<sup>33</sup> The film ends with

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<sup>32</sup> Don Alejo's PRI affiliation is implied rather than explicit. As Ripstein later noted in an interview with Emilio García Riera, he was not allowed to use any party affiliation during the scene in which Don Alejo celebrates his new post as a *diputado*. While Ripstein wanted to use the name of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (the PNR was the predecessor to the PRI), censors would not allow it (192). Instead, viewers are left to surmise that he belongs to the party given his successful political career outside of the town and his behavior as a local strongman who controls the utilities, land, and credit.

<sup>33</sup> It is important to note that the labeling of Pancho's sexual identity and Manuela's sexual and gender identities is difficult because neither clearly self-identifies nor complies with a clear set of gender norms. Additionally, the identities that current criticism offers (e.g. transgender, genderqueer, etc.) in their present understandings postdate

Manuela's murder after Octavio (Julián Pastor), Pancho's brother-in-law, witnesses the two kissing and Pancho and Octavio beat Manuela to death. Ultimately the film serves as a comparison between Manuela, Pancho, and Don Alejo, each of whom models different relationships to the ideas of community and masculinity, and their relationship to the state. In offering this commentary the film not only critiques the institutions of the nuclear family as the primary form of community, but it critiques the idea of the state as a father to the nation.

Unlike many directors from the period, Ripstein had deep industrial ties to the Mexican film industry and in many ways *El lugar sin límites* is illustrative of those ties. His father, Alfredo Ripstein, Jr., was a very successful movie producer and Arturo Ripstein grew up around the Mexican film industry. He dropped out of law school in the early 60s and began to study film at the predecessor to the CUEC. Thanks in part to his father's connections, he was mentored by Luis Buñuel. He directed his first film, *Tiempo de morir*, in 1965.

*El lugar sin límites* itself went through two directors and several rewrites before being made. Buñuel had initially planned to adapt the novel but abandoned the project after the actor he had planned to cast in the main role died. Ripstein became interested in the project and convinced Rodolfo Echeverría to buy the rights. He hired Argentine novelist Manuel Puig to

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the text and one has to be careful not to project these subjectivities on to the text or characters as if they were transhistorical. Subsequently, I focus mainly on how each character's individual actions deviate from the textually established social expectations without offering an identitarian term because neither character self-identifies nor do other characters give a clear category. Ultimately both characters push up against societal norms regarding masculinity and heterosexuality and find themselves subjected to frequent violence and, in the case of Pancho, participating in violence, related to the enforcement of these norms. Other critics have chosen to describe Manuela as both a transvestite (see de la Mora "Fascinating" 97-98) and as a gay man who uses femininity to help gay patrons justify their desires (Subero 163-164). Analyses of Donoso's novel have similarly explored how to understand la Manuela. For example, Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui's analyzes her as a transvestite (for his reading of the novel, see 87-118 in *Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature*. For a broader overview of his theorization of transvestism, see 1-14 of the same monograph). Similarly, theorists in other disciplines have debated and explored how to understand gender and sexuality and the applicability of academic and medical terminology to non-gender conforming communities in Mexico. For example, see Annick Prieur's discussion of the terms Vestida, jota, tortilla, mayate and buga in *Mema's House* (24-31).

write the script and Puig began the project, but then abandoned it over concerns that the film would caricature homosexuals. It was then rewritten by three Mexican writers, José Emilio Pacheco, Cristina Pacheco, and Carlos Castañón (García Riera 183-184). Conacite II produced the film at Estudios América.

### **The Brothel as *Community Weaving***

The brothel at the heart of the film is framed as a collaborative, dynamic institution that shifts and changes over time to adapt to the needs and ability of the women who live there. The sex workers in the film live in a house owned by Manuela and her daughter, La Japonesita (Ana Martín). They work for themselves, not pimps or madams, and, in doing so, have essentially seized the means of production by remaining in control of their bodies and the space where they work. Frequently they are shown in domestic, daytime situations rather than in the evening when they are entertaining clients. Viewers watch them make food, chat while mending clothes, paint their nails, and gossip together (see Images 2.8 and 2.9). They clearly provide for each other in ways far beyond simply earning enough money to meet their financial needs. Among them is an old sex worker named Clotilde (Hortensia Santoveña), who, despite being well past her prime, is allowed to stay at the brothel and has been told that if she can't earn enough doing sex work she can stay on as a maid. When Pancho comes to town and appears ready to harass Manuela, the women close the brothel for the night in an attempt to keep Manuela safe, prioritizing her wellbeing over profits. It is clear that the women have a community defined by a sense of mutual obligation to each other and that extends beyond business, they are attentive friends and caretakers. While poor, they are independent and not defined completely by their labor and ability to earn.

Importantly, while the brothel is technically family-owned, friendship and not the nuclear family is the central organizational structure in the house. The women came to control the house after the now-deceased mother of La Japonesa Grande (Lucha Villa) bets Don Alejo that she can have vaginal intercourse with Manuela in exchange for the house she is renting. In a flashback to the night of the bet, viewers see La Japonesa Grande and Manuela in bed both before and after the encounter. La Japonesa sells the idea to Manuela saying that if they win the house, they cannot be run off, both will have her own room decorated as she likes, and they will not have a pimp. Their goal in winning the bet is to have some kind of domestic stability and autonomy as workers so they will not be subject to the ubiquitous violence faced by sex workers reduced to *bare life*, such as those of *Las Poquianchis*. Furthermore, in addition to avoiding violence, they would avoid social isolation and are able to create an alternate form of community that is outside of society and the state's prescribed norms. Indeed, the film makes it clear that this is not just another configuration of the nuclear family, but a distinct form of collectivity rooted in friendship. Post coitus, Manuela intimates that she is falling in love with La Japonesa Grande, invoking traditional heterosexuality and the idea of being a male-female couple. La Japonesa Grande immediately rebukes Manuela, telling her not to become a man because "los hombres son todos brutos," suggesting that masculinity is inherently a sign of domination and violence. They two decide to remain "amigas" (1:12:36-1:18:19). This foundational moment is an affirmation of friendship and partnership outside of a heterosexual coupling framed around complementary gender roles. It represents the possibility of another kind of caring and collectivity in which both parties are entitled to their own gendered expression and





Image 2.8: La Manuela drinks coffee with Clotilde, *El lugar sin límites*.



2.9 La Manuela paints La Japonesa Grande's nails, *El lugar sin límites*.

in which both friends are cared for in various ways, not only those deemed a gendered responsibility.

Importantly, the brothel is not framed as a last ditch source of employment for women, but a supportive and sustainable alternative to a nuclear family. The unplanned daughter that results from this one time encounter, La Japonesita, grows up to be a sex worker herself. Counter to the Golden Age melodramas, neither parent sacrifices everything for her to avoid this fate, suggesting that the women do not experience it as some kind of ultimate shame, as does Violeta in *Víctimas del pecado* in Chapter 1. This is borne out in the representation of the brothel as a loving and mutually supportive community of women not structured around romantic couples.

This brothel, characterized by community and mutual aid, could be understood as a variation of what Raquel Gutiérrez and Huáscar Salazar Lohman have termed a community weaving. A community weaving is a collective arrangement that provides for communal reproduction without revolving around exchange values and the production of abstract labor. This is to say, people produce goods and perform duties for their use values and the consumption of these goods is communal, not individual. Gutiérrez Aguilar and Salazar Lohman emphasize that in a *community weaving* relationships are characterized by collective decision-making, ideas of reciprocity, obligation, and inclusivity. A *community weaving* does not protect members via a notion of legal rights, but rather understands membership through a system of collective obligation that can adjust over time to reflect needs and capacities (i.e. children, the disabled, and the elderly contribute and oblige differently than able-bodied, young adults). This ultimately means that:

...establecer y restablecer permanentemente acuerdos entre los miembros de una trama comunitaria, a partir de marcos de significación propios siempre susceptibles de ajuste, es

la específica práctica social que vuelve imposible la solidificación-cristalización de las relaciones de poder: es una gestión compartida de lo que se “puede”- en términos de poder-hacer-, de lo que los otros y uno mismo puede-podemos hacer. (39)

In contrast to the rigidity of codified rights and biopolitical norms, such as gender roles in a nuclear family, both of which presume some degree of uniformity over time, this flexibility allows for the continuance of the weaving as its structural conditions change and avoids the imposition of a legal code that is not logically applicable to a set of conditions. This is to say that, in a *community weaving*, it is possible to avoid applying strict rules to a site in which they do not logically apply because the structure allows expectations to be constantly be modified. For example, La Japonesa Grande and Manuela don't have to live as a heterosexual couple in a nuclear family with their daughter. Clotilde can remain in the brothel whether or not she can make as much money as the others. Flexibility and context inform the expectations of the women in the house, which means that unlike the norms of Chapter 1 and the biopolitical state described by Agamben, in which inside and outside are assiduously policed, this structure allows for a great--degree of nonconformity and change without falling apart.

For Gutiérrez and Salazar Lohman, *community weavings* usually exist alongside capitalism and are produced as kinds of overlays when capitalist systems fail to provide adequate reproductive labor in order for a community to be self-sustaining. In *El lugar sin límites* the women are not producing use values as Gutiérrez Aguilar and Salazar Lohman suggest (they are still exchanging sex for cash in order to support themselves), but there is a sense of collectivity in which the needs of one woman are not entirely dependent on her own momentary, individual ability to earn money. Indeed, the community is structured around the ability of the collective to produce and procure enough to sustain everyone regardless of what each individual herself can, at a given moment, contribute. This allows, for example, Clotilde to remain at the house despite

being too old to bring in as much money as the others. Counter to participation in a state-sanctioned form of community, which demands compliance with some kind of biopolitical norms or social role, a *community weaving* allows difference and change. This form of community, which does not threaten non-compliance with rejection from the community and reduction to *bare life*, in turn offers a different means by which to think and create community.

This emphasis on the wellbeing of the whole community and belief that wellbeing is not synonymous with profitability changes both how a community sets priorities and chooses to allocate its resources. This is in contrast to a relationship framed around capital that “de-forma la reproducción social sostenida en el valor de uso, suplantando violentamente la capacidad colectiva de decisión sobre la producción por la toma de decisiones emergida desde la propiedad privada” (25). This is to say that when capital is at the heart of social relations rather than collective wellbeing, everything is reduced to exchange value and the ability to accumulate wealth. Instead, other needs such as safety and rest are used to make decisions. For example, when Manuela is in danger, the other women can close the brothel and momentarily forego the profits because this is what will actually preserve and reproduce the community as a whole. There is no longer the vertical relationality seen in *Las Poquianchis*, which does not allow for those outside of the juridical space of the state to ally themselves and protect each other. Instead we see a community forming that is committed to everyone's wellbeing.

### **Point of Contrast: Pancho and the Nuclear Family**

This film contrasts this *community weaving* with that of the nuclear family framed around rigid gender roles and suggests that such a communal form is not one focused on social reproduction, as suggested by the Golden Age, but rather a tool by which to control and discipline individuals within the family and threaten them with reduction to *bare life*. Through the character of Pancho,

*El lugar sin límites* suggests that the family's dependence on rigid gender roles and a subsequent gendered division of labor is deeply harmful to the people pushed into it. Hyper-masculine, muscle-bound, sexually aggressive, and violent, Pancho at first appears to be the stereotypical working class Mexican man, a sort of 1970s Pepe el Toro. However, the film reveals that Pancho is actually unable to comply with many of the gender expectations placed on him and this results in instability and anguish for Pancho and his family. Early in the film viewers learn that Pancho does not have enough money to support his wife, Emma (Marta Aura), and their child. He has been dodging Don Alejo because he owes Don Alejo a considerable amount of money. When he returns to town, he is reunited with Emma, who rebuffs his sexual advances and tearfully expresses her frustration and disappointment that he has not been paying off his debts, noting that the homes she wanted to buy are no longer available. Throughout the scene she is visibly tense. When Pancho attempts to embrace her and make eye contact she looks away and tries to break free (see Image 2.10). She is clearly uncomfortable around him, while he appears desperate for contact or some kind of affirmation that she loves him. She then calls Octavio over and the two explain that Octavio is going to lend Pancho the money to pay off his debt to avoid bringing shame on the family. When Pancho resists, Octavio tells him to comply or “Olvídese que esta es su familia” (39:52-43:40). Rather than a source of support, the family is a disciplinary mechanism. Unlike the *community weaving*, which adapts to the changing needs of members, being the head of this nuclear family means that Pancho needs to be compliant at all times. Membership in the nuclear family is contingent on one fulfilling rigid, gendered duties and failure to do so potentially results in exclusion from the community. Aid for one's shortcomings is steeped in shame and humiliation.



Image 2.10: Emma struggles to get away from Pancho, *El lugar sin límites*.

## Don Alejo and PRIista paternalism

Parallel to the unraveling of the idea of the husband/father as protector and provider is the unraveling representation of the state as a benevolent patriarch. As a *diputado* Don Alejo has obvious ties to the Mexican government and his treatment of those in the town becomes emblematic not only of the tyranny of a small town official, but the state more broadly. In the film he tries to buy up the whole town and push everyone out so that he can sell it. He cuts off the town's electricity, depriving the townspeople of state services in an attempt to force them to relocate. Here, rather than serving as a state official attempting to welcome people into modernity, as was typical in Golden Age film, viewers see him cut people off from modernity and deprive them of resources necessary to thrive. Similar to the state engaging in *accumulation by dispossession* described by Harvey, the goal here is not collectively beneficial development, but rather the further enrichment of the already wealthy.

Not surprisingly, Don Alejo also depends on a conservative sexual morality to obtain land and grow his fortune. When the women communicate that they are not sure that they want to sell the brothel, he tells his lawyer that if they don't give in, “la cerramos por escándalo o por lo que sea” to which his lawyer agrees, also noting that if this does not work, “la ley nos ampara” (23:59-26:37). This discussion makes it clear that the law is not an impartial system of protections for citizens to settle disputes, but an exceptional space where elites can harm the vulnerable by invoking the legal code. Just as in *Tívoli*, this film makes it clear that public decency laws facilitate social control and the ability to seize resources rather than actually protecting the community or enforcing some kind of moral code (indeed Don Alejo, like all the men in the town, is a patron of the brothel). While not explicitly linked to developmentalism or imperialism, Don Alejo's actions resemble *accumulation by dispossession* in that land is being



freed up for the wealthy to use through coercion. State power here is not that of a benevolent father, as is the case with the films analyzed in Chapter 1, but rather a greedy old man seeking to hoard what he does not need at the expense and suffering of those around him.

Furthermore, masculinity and being either a state official or the head of family appear to be premised on reducing other men to *bare life* and enforcing a vertical power structure in which individual men are subjugated to each other based on perceived degree of authority. There are no horizontal relationships. Pancho loses his power after both Don Alejo and Octavio threaten him and humiliate him for not paying his debts. Octavio's main reason for wanting to pay back Don Alejo is to make sure that Don Alejo has nothing on their family and Octavio himself does not occupy a vulnerable position with regards to the local strongman. At the end of the film, Don Alejo watches Pancho and Octavio kill Manuela and tells the employee who is with him, that he, Don Alejo, will have both Pancho and Octavio arrested and "En la cárcel van a tener un buen tiempo para pensar que son muy machos y para acordarse de que un día me enfrentaron dos veces" (1:46:23-1:48-34). In many ways it parallels the scene when Adelina kills María Rosa in *Las Poquianchis*- one can only avoid being reduced to *bare life* and total isolation by performing acts of violence within a structure that similarly disallows horizontal relationships. Furthermore, Don Alejo's invocation of the law, similar to the parallel drawn between the brothel and the jail in *Las Poquianchis*, suggests that the courtroom will be a space of exception in which *bare life* is subject to unchecked sovereign violence.

### ***Community Weavings, Accumulation by Dispossession, and the Question of Space***

The role of Don Alejo, and by proxy the state, raises temporal and spatial questions with regards to the idea of a *community weaving* and its potential use as some kind of response to state violence and the atomization of individual people via this form of biopolitics. Gutiérrez Aguilar

and Salazar Lohman argue that one of the chief problems with the way in which social transformation is conceptualized is that it is understood as a utopian horizon that will be reached at a specific moment in the future, after which everything will be transformed, that it is an “*negación imaginaria del presente*” (18). The *community weaving*, located in the present, offers an alternate notion of social organization and reproduction that begins in the present and might be expanded, protected or adapted. As such it is a glimpse into a possible, more desirable future, but one that does not require abandoning the present in its entirety. For example, the brothel offers the possibility of community not structured around the nuclear family that accounts for protecting the most vulnerable members of its community. While the brothel has many imperfections (dependence on waged labor, the frequent exposure of these women to gender and sexual violence, etc.), it constitutes a starting point for an alternative because it offers a structure beyond the state and the accompanying nuclear family, whose maintenance, as evidenced by the experiences of Pancho and Don Alejo suggest, rely on vertical power structures and violence.

Notably, this film, like the other two, suggests that the state is actively trying to break up these communities which means that a key part of their expansion as *community weavings* and an alternative way of organizing socially will be finding a way to hold space and not allow the state to seize it. Indeed, the women at the brothel in *El lugar sin límites* will likely be forced to disperse shortly after the end of the film, just as in *Tívoli*, when the theater is destroyed and Tiliches splinters away, and in *Las Poquianchis* when the campesino men are forced to scatter. Furthermore, Manuela is physically chased out of the brothel and ultimately killed as the sovereign violence of the two manages to break its way into the house, making it clear that they are in a space of exception. *Accumulation by dispossession* here not only means loss of land, but also the breakdown of community and the repeated reduction of those communities to lonely

individuals and *bare life*. Thus while the film offers a glimpse of an alternate form of social cohesion- the *community weaving*, it also highlights both the fragility of this structure and suggests that long term social change requires holding space and finding a way to deal with a biopolitical sovereign constantly attempting to take that space. The challenge here is not only how to expand the *community weaving*, as suggested by Gutiérrez and Salazar Lohman, but holding on to its spatiality and keeping the state and other purveyors of violence at bay (or perhaps finding a way to stop the violence all together). Thus the goal cannot only be to relax or modify sex and gender norms, but requires simultaneously finding a way to build a community that has consistent access to shared, centralized space.

#### **Coda: *Bellas de noche* and the Invisibilization of State Violence**

This focus in art cinema on how to stave off the state and its rhetorical use of sexual morality to facilitate *accumulation by dispossession* lies in stark contrast with the body of work most often held up as the descendent of the Golden Age *cabaretera* film, the *sexicomedia*. The *sexicomedia* emerged at the end of the Echeverría *sexenio* and proliferated during the López Portillo *sexenio* (1976-1982), a time during which the art films described above found diminishing financial support and increased social constraints. López Portillo's administration prioritized profits and business interests over the artistic innovation and the political re-branding of the Mexican state emphasized by Echeverría. Censorship of content increased again. Funding for art cinema declined and the art films that were made were given very poor distribution characterized by undesirable time slots and short runs. CONACITE 1 was dissolved in 1979. Private producers were given access once again to credit from the BNC and, later, after the BNC was dissolved, from the Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía (RTC). Notably the RTC oversaw all state-owned mass media production under the direction of Lopez

Portillo's sister, Margarita. The period saw a return to formulaic genre films. While many of the directors who emerged during the Echeverría *sexenio* continued to work in the Mexican film industry, the period can be characterized as offering fewer opportunities and more challenges for artistically and politically innovative projects (Ramírez Berg *Cinema* 50-54).

The *sexicomedia* appeared and proliferated during this period. Like their Golden Age predecessors, *sexicomedias* revolve around the trials and tribulations of big-hearted sex workers and have some kind of happy ending after a formulaic, but also peripetian, plot unfolds. The genre has its own set of stars, perhaps most famously Sasha Montenegro, who later married López Portillo, Lyn May, who stars in *Tívoli* as Eva Candela, and leading man and heartthrob Jorge Rivero. The casts of these films tend to include a myriad of character actors who provide frequent comic relief including Carmen Salinas whose career spans both periods and appears in *Tívoli*, *El lugar sin límites*, and *Bellas de noche*. *Sexicomedias* frequently include extended performance numbers (although usually stripteases rather than song and dance numbers). They are also considerably more visually explicit than their forbearers, including not only female nudity, but also, on occasion, full frontal male nudity, and often soft-core pornography (here meaning long takes of sexual acts, often with cameras focused on specific body parts, but never showing penetration). They are extremely campy and almost always have outrageous costuming with enormous wigs and ornate, over-the-top lingerie. These films also include more varied representations of masculinity than their predecessors including gay men, impotent men, sexually inexperienced men, and conventionally macho men who find themselves in financial straits. Last, *sexicomedias* generally have low production values.

Unlike the art cinema films analyzed earlier in this chapter, the *sexicomedia* is a genre film that explores sex work without reading it in conversation with land reform, development, or

any discourse linked to political economy. Instead, this genre offers audiences a revised, less strict sexual morality that allows for women's sexual pleasure and destigmatized participation in non-marital sex (and in some cases a more varied masculinity). In *Bellas de noche*, which I explore here, this fixation on sexuality and its elaboration shifts the conversation away from state violence and towards individual behavior and focuses, much like a *cabaretera*, on what constitutes an appropriate, healthy, and supposedly normal sexual self-expression. Barriers to this ideal self-expression appear to be individual hang-ups rather than norms rooted in social, political, and economic systems. The state is only vaguely present, acting neither as a father figure (as seen in the *cabaretera*) nor an antagonist (as in 1970s art cinema). Indeed, rather than a treatise on biopower administered by the state, these films suggest that individuals are acting on their own individual beliefs and desires that appear to be unrooted in other, larger systems of power.

*Bellas de noche* is one of the first, if not the first, *sexicomedia*. The film's director, Miguel M. Delgado, got his start during the Golden Age and, different from the art cinema directors who rose to fame during the Echeverría *sexenio*, directed many genre films including several Santo movies. The film has two key and loosely overlapping plotlines. Germán (Jorge Rivero) is an injured boxer who starts working in a *ficheras* bar to make ends meet and support his little sister, Lupita (Lupe Leticia Perdigón). He falls in love with one of the dancers at the bar, Carmen (Sasha Montenegro), and struggles to reconcile his job and his love for Carmen with his sense of morality, which revolves around a belief in the shamefulness of Carmen's work and the need to protect his little sister's purity. At the same bar, a pimp, Vaseline (Lalo el Mimo), finds himself unable to pay the mob what he owes them and must borrow money from three of the sex workers at the bar, all of whom want to be repaid in sex. This storyline alternates

between being a comedic aside and a premise for including extended sex scenes. The film ends with Germán realizing that women can be sexually active and good people simultaneously and Vaselinas escaping the mob by faking his death with the help of the three women already helping him pay off his debts.

*Bellas de noche*, while mainly a series of loosely connected comedic episodes and sex scenes, at its core critiques the virgin-whore paradigm and suggests that women who have non-marital sex and/or do some form of sex work are not bad women or undeserving of marriage (which, just as in the *cabaretera*, is held up as key to the nuclear family and optimal health).<sup>34</sup> This is a central point in the exploration of the romance between Germán and Carmen. One night, after Germán and Carmen have just had sex, Germán confesses that he is ashamed of his work and does not want to tell his little sister about it. Carmen becomes visibly irritated and responds that if he is ashamed of his work, he must also be ashamed of her. She says that often her clients at the cabaret describe their wives as saints and suggests that Germán's sister is probably less innocent than he thinks. The two eventually stop arguing and proceed to have make-up sex (56:46-58:46). Notably, while the content of the scene is quite serious, its presentation is meant to be arousing for the audience. The entire time they have this discussion Carmen is topless and her bare breasts are visible on screen (see Image 2.11). After they reconcile, the camera focuses first on the couple kissing passionately and then lingers on their naked torsos and thighs grinding into each other before cutting to the next scene. It is clearly meant to be erotic. It also visually supports Carmen's interpretation of sex as far less harmful to women than Germán contends (as evidenced by its framing, the audience is meant to enjoy their

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<sup>34</sup> By virgin-whore paradigm I mean the belief that women are either good and chaste (virgins before marriage and frigid after) or evil and sexually active. In this paradigm wives and mothers are relegated to domestic spaces and women who work (sometimes in sex work, but often simply outside of the domestic sphere) are imagined to be single and temptresses.

sex, not be offended or scandalized by it). Furthermore, the scene highlights the hypocrisy of Germán who clearly enjoys Carmen's company and wants to sleep with her. The scene suggests that his sexual ideals are too restrictive and must change. Importantly, Germán's opinions and behaviors have no structural explanation or clear origin (e.g. capitalist development, a corporatist state, etc.), but instead appear to be a result of his own, individual, innate conservatism.

Complimenting Carmen's critiques of Germán is the representation of sex work as a well paid employment option for unskilled women and the suggestion that the stigma it carries is misguided. Carmen explains to Germán that she became a *fichera* because her mother was sick and she did not have the time nor the resources to get an education or vocational training. She then gently points out that being a *fichera*, which involves drinking and dancing with clients, and not necessarily sleeping with them, is not particularly bad as far as jobs go (53:03-54:14). In another scene, when Germán tells her that he wants to get married and have her to leave the cabaret, she points out that his salary is not enough to support the two of them and Lupita (1:11:55-1:13:01). In both scenes, her work as a *fichera* is framed as a logical choice of employment and that while maybe not her first choice or a particularly desirable one, is not tragic. Here the film works to de-stigmatize sex work as a sign of immorality and frame it as a lucrative source of employment for women with few skills.

Despite the fact that the film links Carmen's employment to a lack of opportunity and the inadequacy of Germán's own salary, the film never takes aim at the economy or the plight of the working class as a collective entity. The film frames these characters as suffering from individual misfortunes and challenges to which they should, as Carmen does, resign themselves and seek to remain optimistic. Thus while the content of the film reflects the failure of this capitalist

economy to adequately provide for its workforce, there is no suggestion that it needs to change or that it is unjust.

Eventually, through an odd and unsettling chain of events, Germán's attitudes against women being sexually active change and this in turn is used to suggest that traditional attitudes disapproving of women for having non-marital sex are old-fashioned and need to be modernized. Germán's transformation is set into motion when his friend, Raúl (Enrique Novi), tells Germán that he needs to sleep with his girlfriend because she is from a nice family that would not approve of their relationship. Raúl thinks if they have already consummated their relationship, the family will feel obligated to support their marriage because the girlfriend will no longer be a virgin. The two hatch a plan for Raúl to lure the girlfriend to the cabaret and drug her (1:09:24-1:11:00). While the girlfriend initially resists Raúl's attempts to undress her, after her second laced drink, the film cuts to a shot of the couple in bed, with the girlfriend totally nude and orgasming, suggesting that both the drink and the plan have worked. However, Germán accidentally interrupts them and realizes that Raúl's girlfriend is his sister, Lupita. There is a drawn out conflict between the two men that includes fist fighting and jail time (1:15:33-1:21:16). The two men eventually reconcile and Raúl asks for Lupita's hand in marriage. Germán consents and everyone is happy (1:36:54-1:37:39). Nobody, the film assures viewers, has been harmed in this exchange of Lupita from her brother to her boyfriend and in fact everyone ends on good terms.

According to the film, the problem with Germán's obsession with his sister's sexual purity is not male control of female sexuality, but rather a fixation on female chastity. These scenes imply that drugging a woman and having sex with her is not rape, but an adolescent trick





Image 2.11: Carmen and Germán in bed, *Bellas de noche*.

necessitated by a repressive culture that glorifies virginity (i.e. the film frames this incident as a reason to change attitudes towards non-marital sex, not as an act of violence). *Bellas de noche* suggests that the virgin-whore paradigm's main flaw is that it limits which women men have access to under certain circumstances and in the film, the male characters want their female counterparts to be both halves of the paradigm, sexual and good, all of the time. Thus while the film destigmatizes non-marital sexual pleasure (and possibly sex work) for women, it does not advocate for equality between men and women. Indeed it reinforces men's authority over women. This is a revised sexual morality that keeps in place the gendered power dynamics found in Golden Age cinema in which a patriarchal family remains the preferred form of social organization.<sup>35</sup>

Social change in this film becomes a question of individual behavior rather than structural upheaval or the reorganization of a community. Characters are shown as having outdated beliefs that need to be modernized and the film suggests that with updated ideals regarding sexuality, sex work, and gender roles, everyone will be better off. In the film the state is only minimally present and uninvolved in these changes. Police arrest Germán after he assaults Raúl and Germán is held in prison for a brief time while he calms down. He is then able to solve his problems without state interference or guidance (he briefly faces court proceedings, but there are no legal consequences for his behavior). There is no *bare life* or ubiquitous violence, only choosing to maximize one's own well-being through the adoption of the best

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<sup>35</sup> Complimenting this is the secondary plotline suggesting that even as sex workers women have strong maternal impulses and are committed to the social reproduction of others. As mentioned, in addition to Germán's transformation, the film chronicles the story of a pimp, Vaselinas, who agrees to sexually satiate three sex workers in exchange for the cash he needs to pay off the mob. While initially Vaselinas is able to successfully sleep with all three women every night, the film shows him growing increasingly tired and unable to perform. The women however do not appear to mind and instead begin to mother him. In one scene they sit with an exhausted Vaselinas at a table at the cabaret. They have him drink milk and speak to him in baby talk (1:15:04-1:15:16). While he is not satisfying a sexual desire for them, he does satisfy this maternal urge. The scene suggests the women enjoy this aspect of their relationship and reinforces the notion of women as natural reproductive laborers.

norms available which themselves are not explicitly linked to the state. Likewise, marriage and the nuclear family remain the preferred form of communal organization, despite the financial concerns highlighted by Carmen. In contrast to the art cinema films discussed in this chapter, *Bellas de noche* suggests that societal understandings of sexuality are detached from the other systems and institutions they uphold and are understood as matters of personal preference and innate, biological desires. Similar to Echeverría's *apertura*, which sought to rebrand Mexico as a more accepting, tolerant state without divesting the PRI of power, *Bellas de noche* offers a revised sexual morality that is less restrictive and more tolerant without displacing the state, the nuclear family, or masculine control over women. In doing so, it offers a useful counterpoint to the art cinema, suggesting that reforms or cultural shifts that only target identitarian categories (sex, gender, etc.) without taking into account their connection to broader systems of power will not result in more than slight, superficial changes to the status quo.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately *Las Poquiánchis*, *Tivoli*, and *El lugar sin límites* return to Golden Age tropes in order to offer three key insights. First, the nuclear family characterized by a gendered division of labor is revealed to be inadequate in terms of providing materially and emotionally for its members and the gender roles that it advocates are revealed to be highly constraining and emotionally harmful. The norms for sexual propriety, rather than a useful standard for health and wellbeing, become a tool by which the state can exclude members of the population and abuse them with impunity in the name of protecting the rest of the population. Second, these norms are a pretext by which those already in power can seize property, as well as break-up potential sources of political unrest and gain access to new resources. Concern over these norms expressed by the Mexican state is understood as disingenuous and manipulative. Last, building alternate

forms of community that adequately provide for social reproduction requires not only relaxing social norms regarding sex, gender, and work and allowing for more variation, but finding a way to hold space either in the face of state and/or other, external violence or a means by which to end violence itself.

These films pose the question of whether or not the state as an institution is inherently antagonistic to its citizens. Both communal and bodily autonomy are articulated as key values for a prosperous society and the Mexican state, because of its use of *accumulation by dispossession* and biopolitical norms, is represented as inherently hostile to both. The films make it clear that neither a more inclusive state or one with less restrictive sex and gender norms, such as that of *Bellas de Noche*, would make citizenship less tenuous and vulnerable to being reconfigured by a violent biopolitical state such as the one seen in 1970s Mexican art cinema. Indeed, that films from this period propose a community organized not around the expansion of rights backed by a state, but forms of community that are both separate from the state and not subject to the violence of the state of exception. Rather than managed by a state, this community exercises self-governance via collective decision making and flexible, variable understandings of obligation. The biggest challenge for organizing such a community is how to either keep the state and others from quickly and cyclically dispossessing it, or to end violence from outsiders all together. How to create such a community is not clear, but its possibility and necessity are.

## Chapter 3

### Neither Reform Nor Restoration: The Necropolitical Constructions of Gender and State in Neoliberal Mexican Film

*La violencia que generan los narcos es tremenda y tampoco quise retratarlos como víctimas. Pero me interesaba hacerle sentir al espectador la humanidad detrás de los números, porque los que se están muriendo son personas y no son los capos de los carteles, sino los jóvenes.– Natalia Almada, Detrás del cuidador de un opulento camposanto narco*

#### **Introduction: *Sin dejar huella* and Neoliberal Sovereignty**

In the 2000 road trip movie *Sin dejar huella* (Dir. María Novaro) two women travel their way from Mexico's northern border to the Yucatán peninsula. Marilú (Aitana Sánchez Gijón), traveling under the alias Ana, is fleeing a federal police officer, Mendízabel (Jesús Ochoa). While he's technically after her for selling Pre-Columbian forgeries to a museum in Colorado, their interactions suggest that he cares little about her crimes and is mainly trying to sleep with her. Aurelia (Tiaré Scanda) is a single mother of two who steals and sells her narco boyfriend's drug stash in order to finance a journey to southern Mexico. She is tired of working in a maquiladora in Juarez amid increasing violence against women. She thinks she will be able to find better work in southern Mexico's hotels. The film chronicles Marilú/Ana and Aurelia's chance meeting at a truck stop, their subsequent journey to the Yucatán, and violent confrontations with the Mexican state and drug traffickers along the way. The film uses ambiguity between the drug traffickers and police officers to suggest that both institutions have access to the same sovereign violence in contemporary Mexico. For most of the

journey a red car with tinted windows and no plates chases the two women. Both women suspect that the car is after them. Marilú/Ana believes it is the police, Aurelia, the narcos. Indeed, while viewers eventually learn that police are in the car, they learn that the narcos are also following the women with intent to harm them.

The state and the narcos do not fight with each other or exist in some kind of clear hierarchy. Both feel at liberty to harm the women and seem nonplussed by the presence of the other. Indeed, in the film's epilogue Aurelia's narco boyfriend is working as a bodyguard for one of the corrupt policemen who survives his boss, suggesting that in Mexico, one goes from drug trafficking to working for the state quite easily. The two are complementary.

Additionally, transnational corporations appear to be exploiting both Mexico's workforce and natural resources. Using clips of TV news, road signs for the fictitious Exxell oil company (a combination of Exxon and Shell), and Aurelia's career trajectory from maquila worker to waitress in a tourist trap, the film highlights the presence of transnational corporations on the border, international tourists at the beaches, and the privatization of Mexican natural resources. Different from the films made during the Golden Age and the Echeverría sexenio, the state no longer appears to be the only institution or system in Mexico with access to exceptional violence or control over the territory and population. Rather the state seems to be sharing it with new sources of sovereign power interwoven in an increasingly complicated assemblage.

Women characters in this film, also contrary to their predecessors from the 1940s and 1970s films discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, are not a device used to discuss social reproduction, but rather one to discuss the experience of Mexicans from a variety of backgrounds amid contemporary violence. The film's two protagonists are quite different and initially struggle to form a bond. Marilú/Ana is highly educated, single, grew up in Spain, and while momentarily

broke, wears Gucci sunglasses and a Longines watch. The character of Aurelia likes corridos, never finished high school, and is constantly drinking beer, which she insists helps her produce milk to nurse her son. She wears midriffs and cowboy boots. They bicker regularly at the beginning, but ultimately come to rely on each other as the threat of violence from the men in the car begins to feel increasingly intense. Nearing Yucatán, they build a trap together that catches and kills the men in the car. Ultimately the film suggests that what eventually binds them together is mutual recognition of their vulnerability to violence and the shared desire to survive.

This chapter argues that *Sin dejar huella*'s representation of contemporary violence in Mexico as a multifaceted and the product of a complicated assemblage of sovereign actors, is characteristic of the body of films made following Mexico's neoliberal transition. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Mexican state started privatizing the film industry as part of a broader set of neoliberal economic and political reforms begun in the early 1980s following the state's bankruptcy. These changes have resulted in a revival of Mexican cinema this time not as a nationalized industry, but an increasingly privatized one. The result has been a corpus of films that maps out Mexican neoliberalism and offers modifications emblematic of this transformation to the conventional tropes and narratives of their predecessors. This chapter explores films from this period and argues that depictions of violence point towards a new type of neoliberal sovereignty. I characterize this sovereignty as a variant of the contemporary version of what Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics" framed around what he terms "the economy of the massacre." In this configuration of sovereignty there are multiple, interwoven sovereign actors, as seen in *Sin dejar huella*, and killing becomes the principal means of deploying sovereign power. Rather than a precondition for seizing resources as in Chapter 2, violence in these films is represented as a productive economic activity in its own right. This switch from biopolitics to necropolitics

results in new gendered processes of subjectivization that are framed around a binary between aggressors and victims. The films, which critique this violence, serve both as a call to prioritize communal social reproduction in neoliberal Mexico and a struggle to conceptualize what such prioritization would actually look like in the absence of a developmentalist state. The inability and/or refusal of the films to lay out a more prescriptive politics is ultimately evidence that neoliberalism in the face of reconfigured sovereignty necessitates a new political imaginary that breaks away from the notion of the state as the focal point for such political discussions.

In what follows I look at the industrial changes that produced this body of films. I then turn to the films *Miss Bala* (Dir. Gerardo Naranjo, 2011), *Las elegidas* (Dir. David Pablos, 2015), and *Traspatio* (Dir. Carlos Carrera, 2009) to elaborate this conception of contemporary necropolitics in Mexico, to examine its framing of gendered subjectivities, and last to explore how they understand foregrounding social reproduction as part of a confrontation with neoliberalism.

### **Context: The 1990s and Industrial Reform**

Mexico's economic and political systems and institutions underwent neoliberal restructuring during the last two decades of the twentieth century. In 1982, following changes to US interest rates and a slump in oil prices, Mexico defaulted on its debt and declared bankruptcy. This was followed by a series of economic crises. The International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the United States (sometimes alongside commercial lenders and other states) aided Mexico on the condition that it undergo a series of drastic neoliberal reforms including the privatization of certain state-owned enterprises, the reorganization of its financial system to make it compatible with foreign businesses, the opening up of domestic markets to international businesses, the lowering of tariff barriers, the flexibilization of labor, and the reduction of social



programs (Bizberg 299-301; David Harvey *A Brief* 98-104; Giuria Treviño 34-38; Lustig 45-50; MacLeod 100-101).

These economic changes decreased the PRI's ability to function as a corporatist state that relied in part on being able to reward its supporters through jobs and social programs (Bizberg 301-315; Neil Harvey 17-19; MacLeod 70). In 2000 the PRI lost the presidency for the first time in 70 years when PAN candidate Vicente Fox won the election. With major seats of regional power, such as governorships, and the presidency in the hands of new parties, the Mexican state became increasingly decentralized and distinct from the PRI with which it was once synonymous.

These changes began to impact the film industry during the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration (1988-1994). In 1988, Salinas, in part to quash criticisms that free trade was detrimental to Mexican culture and facilitating US imperialism, founded the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA). CONACULTA, placed under the Secretaría de Educación Pública, was to administer the newly established Fondo Nacional de Cultura y las Artes (FONCA) (MacLaird 2-3; Volpi 151). In 1989, the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE), which had replaced the Banco Nacional Cinematográfico (BNC) as the primary funding mechanism for Mexican national cinema under Miguel de la Madrid (and its other functions related to the promotion and distribution of national cinema) was moved to CONACULTA. During this transition, IMCINE quit being the sole producer of films, requiring that filmmakers find funding for at least 40% of their budget, with the sometimes exception of first time filmmakers. IMCINE also began focusing on better promotion of Mexican cinema internationally and domestically, helping projects to secure distribution in art house theaters. Additionally, the state production companies CONACITE II and CONACINE were dissolved

and the theater chain COTSA (Compañía Operadora de Teatros), alongside the distribution company Películas Nacionales (PEL-NAL), the television station Imevisión, and TV Azteca were sold. The other major state owned distribution company, Películas Mexicanas (PEL-MEX) had already gone bankrupt during De la Madrid's presidency (de la Mora 138-140; Joskowicz 17-19; MacLaird 28). Notably, rather than frame itself as a protectionist measure for Mexican artists and cultural workers, CONACULTA sought to reframe the Mexican cultural industries as an exportable resource and a business opportunity (MacLaird 22).<sup>36</sup>

These changes to cultural policy were accompanied by new film legislation that deregulated the industry, fundamentally changing the composition of film viewing audiences, and further opening up the Mexican movie market to foreign interests. In 1992 the Ley Federal de Cinematografía (LFC) passed and deregulated ticket prices. As prices rose, film spectatorship became an upscale experience increasingly associated with the middle and upper classes. Luxurious cineplexes appeared and the number of screens nationally increased dramatically (more than tripling from 1,432 in 1994 to 4,818 in 2011) (Joskowicz 18; MacLaird 34; Sánchez Prado *Screening* 78-82). The LFC lowered the screen quote for national films (30% to 10% over the course of several years), meaning that Mexican directors had less guaranteed space (Joskowicz 18; MacLaird 27-28). Not surprisingly, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) increasingly dominated Mexican screens, no doubt further facilitated in 1994 when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) granted the United States and

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<sup>36</sup>In 2015 Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto led another restructuring of Mexico's culture industries, moving CONACULTA from the Secretaría de Educación Pública to a new cabinet position, Secretaría de Cultura. Leading up to the congressional vote to create the position and during the position's implementation, conversations about the change often included promises that it would not require additional spending and that the restructuring was also about consolidating redundancies within the cultural industries (Piñon and Aguilar; Talavera and Bautista; Torres). While the transition from CONACULTA to the Secretaría de Cultura was also framed as a means by which to better promote and protect Mexico's cultural patrimony, this rhetoric about spending suggests that cost containment was a priority. Notably the budget for 2017 included cuts to the budget for culture ("Reducen presupuesto"; Garduño y Méndez).

Canada unprecedented access to Mexican movie goers (notably Canada's cultural industries remained protected (MacLaird 25)).

The industry has secured some minimal trade protections. In 1998 the LFC was amended to include two new funds. The Fondo de Inversión y Estímulos al Cine (FIDECINE) focused on supporting commercial cinema. The Fondo para la Producción Cinematográfica de Calidad (FOPROCINE) focused on art and experimental cinema. In the Mexican 2004 congress passed income-tax legislation that, in Article 226, established a tax credit for individuals and/or businesses supporting film known as EFCINE (Joskowicz 19; MacLaird 32). In short, the Mexican state continues to finance projects, but it has ceased to be its main investor, producer, and distributor.

Last, state censorship and control over content also decreased during this period. While films receive a rating from the RTC (Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía) meant to convey their level of appropriateness for different ages and potentially warn viewers about objectionable content (MacLaird 86), most attempts to censor content or stop it from airing are either indirect or enacted by creating financial hurdles for filmmakers. For example, in 1998 when director Luis Estrada released *La ley de Herodes*, which was the first film to openly critique the PRI (and not give it a pseudonym or confine the critique to individuals framed as outliers by the film), the state attempted to impede its success by showing it in two theaters with no publicity and using poor copies. Estrada successfully renegotiated his terms with CONACULTA, repaid FOPROCINE's contribution to the original budget, and the film went on to be a major critical and commercial success (MacLaird 89). Importantly, as this example shows, unlike in the past, the state was only able to temporarily hinder its critics, not silence them indefinitely.

These changes have had a drastic impact on Mexico's film industry and the types of films it makes. Most films, including the four explored in this chapter, still receive some kind of government funding, but they depend on outside sources of money too. Their budgets are much larger than in the past and the number of films made each year has increased with a few minor dips (Sánchez Prado 210; IMCINE 43, 49). New production companies, such as Canana, Altavista, and Lemon films have all produced multiple films with commercial and critical success both domestically and internationally. As the *La ley de Herodes* example shows, filmmakers have a newfound access to themes and images they could only represent via euphemism and indirect critique in the past.

Last, there has been a revival Mexican art cinema characterized by its political content and circulation at international film festivals. In keeping the definition offered in Chapter 2 based on the work of David Andrews, art cinema should be understood as a high prestige marker whose exact definition depends on its historical and critical context. Neoliberal Mexican art cinema, like that of the 1970s, can be understood as offering extensive political commentary and not relying on genre conventions and simplistic morality to solve dilemmas onscreen. Similar to their predecessors from the Echeverría sexenio, these films draw on many genres (*Sin dejar huella* is a comedy, *Miss Bala* is a thriller). Art cinema also is in part defined by a film's participation at film festivals and international circulation.

### **Reading Neoliberal Film**

These changes raise the question of how to understand the relationship between Mexico's historically state-controlled national cinema and the tropes and narratives it produced, and this increasingly, but not completely, privatized and global cinema. In a close reading of Carlos Reygadas's *Japón* Ignacio Sánchez Prado offers a useful framework for reading neoliberal

cinema in relationship to its predecessors based on tracing changes in older tropes and the new interpretations and discussions they prompt. He argues that *Japón*, which transpires in a small, very remote Mexican village, a longtime favorite setting for Mexican filmmakers, can be read as:

a radical reconfiguration of existing discourses of the rural in Mexican cinema, rather than an altogether new representation. In contrast to the canonical representations of the interior as a place for backwardness or anti-modernity, *Japón* extricates it from the cinematic traditions of Mexicanism and reconfigure it as a space that confronts the modern individual with secular forms of the spiritual and the sublime. (*Screening* 199)

This is to say that the film takes a setting saturated with meaning in classic Mexican cinema (the countryside as anti-modernity) and imbues it with new meaning, evidencing both the transition away from the framework of the earlier films and their connection to the present. Thus while the signifier (the countryside) remains prominent in Mexican film, its use and the conversations it inaugurates are a drastic departure from their predecessors. These new concerns, in turn, offer insight into the privileged questions and categories being explored in neoliberal Mexican film. They mark spaces of change and transformation.

In what follows, I take a similar approach in reading the films *Miss Bala*, *Las elegidas* and *Traspatio*, each of which, similar to their Golden Age and 1970s predecessors use women characters to examine a relationship between sovereignty, capitalism, and gendered forms of social organization. However, different from their predecessors, women, rather than an emblem of social reproduction and its relationship to a broader biopolitical agenda, are used to think through the role of violence in a changing configuration of sovereignty that includes, but is not limited to the state. It is precisely through the de-eroticization of tropes previously used to define and police sexuality and gendered behavior, such as the naked female body and rape, that the film posits a new representation of state sovereignty and capitalist development. The film, in rewriting the significance of the female body as an emblem for sovereign violence initiates a

conversation about how it relates to other sources of power and what might be done to prioritize a population's well being over capitalist growth and the exercise of institutional power.

I begin this analysis with *Miss Bala*, which uses the female body to visualize this assemblage of sovereign powers and how that power is enacted on individual bodies.

### ***Miss Bala*, the War against Organized Crime and Necropolitics**

*Miss Bala* is the story of Laura (Stephanie Sigman) an aspiring Tijuana beauty queen who witnesses a shootout in a nightclub and unwittingly becomes involved in the activities of a local crime boss. It is very loosely inspired by the story of Laura Zuñiga, a former Sinaloa beauty queen who was later convicted for participating in organized crime and then sporadically and inexplicably released from prison (Caballero; Maldonado). In keeping with the industrial changes described, the film was made using a mixture of private and public funding, including support from IMCINE, FIDECINE, and EFCINE 226, and produced by Canana. It premiered to critical acclaim at Cannes as part of the Un Certain Regard section and enjoyed critical and commercial success both in Mexico and abroad (Maldonado; Sánchez). *Miss Bala* is the third feature length film written and directed by Gerardo Naranjo, and represents a significant departure from his earlier films in that it engages the politically charged violence triggered by Mexico's so-called War against Organized Crime. Naranjo has told interviewers that the idea for the film was prompted by his realization of his own growing and persistent worry and fear for his loved ones in Mexico and the desire to respond to this lingering threat of violence cinematically (Maldonado).

The War against Organized Crime began in 2006. Following his inauguration, newly and contentiously elected Mexican president Felipe Calderón of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) authorized the domestic use of the Mexican military with the vague mission of wiping out all

organized crime, which serves as an umbrella term for narco-trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, human smuggling, arms smuggling, forced prostitution, money laundering, and more.<sup>37</sup> The subsequent decade has been an extremely violent one in Mexico characterized by a staggering number of homicides, forced disappearances, and kidnapping.<sup>38</sup>

Official discursive framing for the War against Organized Crime has centered on war as a means by which to purge Mexico of criminals who stand in the way of a more prosperous future. In early 2007, shortly after the start of his administration and this “war,” Calderón spoke at an event honoring the military in Apatzingán, Michoacán. He told his military audience, ‘Si seguimos trabajando como hasta ahora, nuestras ciudades y nuestra tierra no quedará en manos de delincuentes, sino en manos de gente honesta que trabaja para sacar adelante a sus familias’.

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<sup>37</sup>I use the direct translation of *guerra contra el crimen organizado* here rather than War against Drugs because I understand the two to be fundamentally different (but intersecting) policies. The War against Organized Crime, in the context of this chapter, is the domestic policy of the Mexican state begun officially under Felipe Calderón in 2006. The War against Drugs is a phrase coined by US President Richard Nixon that in the context of this article should be understood to mean US policy that claims to be seeking the elimination of drug trafficking and drug use both domestically and abroad (for references to its domestic impact in the United States, particularly with regards to the African-American community, see Alexander 2011, 42-58, for more on its impact in Mexico, see Gibler 2011, 33-46 and for its broad impact on Latin America, see Paley 2014, 39-51). War in both cases is simultaneously literal and metaphorical. It is literal in that, as seen in both Mexico and the United States, it has meant the deployment of weaponry and militaries against domestic and sometimes foreign populations. It is metaphorical in that, rather than engaging a rival military, both claim to be fighting abstract, unquantifiable constructions (organized crime and drugs), which lack their own, official militaries. Subsequently victory and an endpoint are hard to imagine because there is no clear metric of success beyond the total elimination of crime and drugs respectively. Notably, the War against Organized Crime intersects with the policy of the War on Drugs through agreements such as that of the Mérida Initiative, which structures the partnership between Mexico and the United States in their supposed shared endeavor to fight narco-trafficking.

<sup>38</sup>In her 2014 monograph *Drug War Capitalism* Canadian journalist Dawn Paley puts the number of homicides in Mexico beginning in 2006 at close to 150,000 citing numbers from US defense secretary Leon Panetta and New Mexico State librarian Molly Molloy, who first became known for her work to keep accurate counts of homicides in Juarez. Molloy, in 2016, puts that number of homicides at 196,468. As Paley points out, these numbers are estimates rather than precise counts that could possibly be much higher. Many people never report crimes and the state investigates very few of those reported meaning that sometimes deaths are misclassified or go uncounted. Furthermore, these numbers fail to account for the refugees and immigrants who pass through Mexico on their way to the United States and are frequently subjected to lethal violence. The counts also may miss people whose bodies have been destroyed or hidden. Similarly, Paley cites the number of forced disappearances in 2012 to be around 42,300 based on the Mexican Attorney General’s own claims in a 2012 human rights report titled *Programa Nacional de Derechos Humanos 2014-2018* (citation available in my works cited list), but notes that these numbers too are likely inaccurate and low for many of the reasons listed above (Paley 2014, 25-26).

In the speech Calderón suggests that the criminal is a literal invader taking over land that should belong to hardworking individuals allied with the state and the military. War is an act of preservation and vitality that will ultimately lead to the vanquishing the individual criminal and the prosperity of those who remain behind. This discourse sets up both a two-sided conflict characterized by a temporality in which the present is characterized by invasive criminals and violence, and the future, which will begin after the violence cleanses Mexico.

Calderón's articulation of this conflict, which his successor, Enrique Peña Nieto, has maintained, has been widely challenged by activists, academics, journalists, and filmmakers alike. Many argue that the war began as a self-serving gesture not actually linked to a spike in crime or violence, but rather an attempt by the Calderón administration to distract from protests of his inauguration, political unrest in Oaxaca and elsewhere, and to legitimize violent attacks on opposition to his administration (Murphy Erfani 2014, 102-103; Aguilar y Castañeda 2009, 13; Osorno 2012, 31-32). The security measures put in place to protect Mexicans have been shown to be a means by which to seize historically protected land resources in the name of security and to then use those resources to the benefit of transnational corporations (for example, see Dawn Paley's work on soldiers and police facilitating the interests of Canadian companies through anti-drug policies, 2014, 132-135). It has been argued that the state is often working in collusion with specific criminal organizations to the benefit of both (e.g. Anabel Hernández and NPR reporters John Burnett, Marisa Peñaloza, and Robert Benincasa have documented a relationship between the federal government and Sinaloa cartel (Hernández 2013, 16-17; Burnett, Peñaloza, and Benincasa 2010)).

*Miss Bala*, in keeping with other texts decrying the high levels of violence in contemporary Mexico, has sought to represent these intersections as a complicated, dynamic



system rather than a two-sided conflict. In one scene, Laura is prepared by a crime boss to transport cash illegally to the United States and the image of this connects discourses of gender, US imperialism, and the violence of the drug trade, suggesting that they simultaneously undergird and foment each other. The scene begins with a close-up of Laura's naked torso, covered in oil being wrapped tightly with packing tape (51:33-55:15). While the youthful, lithe body of Laura clad only in underwear would be an indicator of eroticism and sex in most films, the increasingly tight packing tape distorts her shape, deforming it and making it increasingly far from ideal beauty.<sup>39</sup> The loss of her head suggests her dehumanization, her reduction to a mere body. The boss, Lino (Noé Hernández), then tapes massive stacks of bills around her abdomen (Image 3.1). Here her torso begins to look like that of a suicide bomber surrounded by dynamite and the cash becomes a visual link between the War against Organized Crime and the role of suicide bombers in the War on Terror, both connected to US foreign policy and the destruction of poor, non-U.S. citizens. Laura will be both a foot soldier and a casualty. A few scenes later, Laura delivers the money to an American associate of the narcos. The camera again focuses on Laura's abdomen as her clothes are ripped off and the man cuts into the tape carelessly, proceeding then to rip the money out of her belly while barking at her in English (Image 3.2, 59:20-1:02:01). It is a brutal C-section, the first world man cutting out capital from the belly of a Latin American woman. The image neatly encapsulates the flow of capital in a neoliberal economy while simultaneously gesturing towards the gendered and racial dynamics that facilitate this flow, as well as the brutality and vulgarity of this retrieval. The US, with new access to

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<sup>39</sup> Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues that *Miss Bala* overly sexualizes Laura's body and is too fixated on her beauty (*Screening* 218). My reading here seeks to counter his by arguing that while Stephanie Sigman (the actress who plays Laura) is indeed conventionally attractive, her body is routinely distorted and shown in awkward positions in moments that would normally be filmed to highlight her beauty and desirability. Through its cinematography, the film routinely subverts the audience's sexualized expectations of Laura by contorting her body and using it as a tool to register her pain, confusion, and fear rather than eroticism and sexual desire.



Image 3.1: Lino tapes cash to Laura's abdomen, *Miss Bala*.



Image 3.2: A man cuts the cash away from Laura's abdomen, *Miss Bala*.

Mexico, carelessly and greedily seizes resources. The image also reminds audiences of the links between narco violence in Mexico and drug markets in the United States. While neither scene fully elaborates the connection between the entities it invokes, the visual presence and prominence of these connections complicate the idea of the War against Organized Crime as a simple, two-sided conflict, turning it instead into the intersection of multiple conflicts and tensions including gender, US foreign policy, capitalist development, state violence, and organized crime. Laura's silence and the representation of these huge, macrological systems on her body is the reminder that she is passive in this process, a surface being acted upon and staged rather than an active subject choosing. Each has access to her body and the ability to harm it and mobilize to their own ends.

Notably, the film plays on past Mexican cinema's explorations of female sexuality in order to reorient the discussion away from questions of social reproduction and managing sexuality as biopolitics requires, towards death. Following her pageant win, Laura attempts to run away and Lino tracks her down and hauls her into the desert in the dead of night. He tells her to start walking and never to come back to Tijuana. Laura silently heads into the darkness, but then reappears seconds later in the headlights of Lino's truck, wordlessly asking to be taken back into his orbit. He tells her to disrobe and then proceeds to rape her. Most of the rape is filmed from outside of the cab of the truck, with the two characters facing the camera. Through the window, Laura looks pained and Lino, recently injured, struggles to find his balance, trying to use his hand to steady himself and repeatedly failing. His arrhythmic thrusting and grimaces make clear that he is physically struggling (1:17:36-1:23:01). Rape here is awkward and has no touch of eroticism. It is a punishment, a rite meant to humiliate Laura, inflict physical pain, and remind her of her powerlessness. This rape is represented as dangerous not because it degrades

the realm of the properly sexual and attendant norms related to family and social organization, but because it represents Laura's submission to jarring abuse under the recognition that the option to try and flee will likely result in something worse. This represents a major deviation from the films of both the 1940s, which emphasize the importance of managing sex correctly, and those of the 1970s which critique state attempts to control society through sexual morality. Instead sexual violence here is indicative of widespread violence and a disregard for the wellbeing and lives of the population as a whole.

Ultimately, the film suggests that the spectacle of the violence is a necessary part of these interconnected systems functioning. In one of the final scenes of the film, Laura is forced to stand in front of a pile of money and weapons with three other men, a row of masked, heavily armed police standing behind them (Image 3.3, 1:45:35-1:46:48). The spokesperson for the attorney general, who is off screen, reads a version of the events that have just transpired over the course of the film that totally contradicts what audiences have witnessed onscreen. In particular, the spokesperson states that the municipal and state police, along with the military have just had a fight with a criminal organization and that Lino was among the casualties. While there was a shootout, Laura and the audience both know that Lino and the General are working together and that Lino dressed another man's corpse in his own clothes as a decoy. Laura, the others on display, and the misidentified corpse become the end product of the War against Organized Crime, the bodies that prove to the press conference's audience that this course of action is going well. While the audience never learns exactly what Lino and the General are planning, the film's framing of the shootout suggests such an episode is not a means to an ends (i.e. the goal of the shootout is not to rid the country of organized crime and narcotrafficking),



Image 3.3: A press conference about military successes, *Miss Bala*.

but rather a spectacle and a ruse meant to perpetuate the wealth and power of crime bosses and generals alike. It is a product of their partnership and a condition of its continuity

### ***Miss Bala* and Necropolitical Sovereignty under a Neoliberal Regime**

*Miss Bala* represents sovereign power as exercised through physical violence. This is evocative of what Achille Mbembe calls “necropolitics,” especially in its contemporary form, which relies on the massacre as a tool to express sovereign power. Necropolitics is an addendum to the concept of biopolitics, which, according to Foucault’s elaboration in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, is the expression of sovereignty in modernity as “the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop life” (136). As described in Chapter 1, the biopolitical state expresses its sovereignty by instilling a series of norms aimed at cultivating a robust, healthy population that serves as a docile and obedient capitalist workforce. Mbembe points out that this model of sovereignty, while applicable in some contexts, is not universally relevant. Drawing on the examples of European colonies and American slavery, Mbembe argues that throughout history, including in the present, many people are legally subjectable to many forms of both systematic and arbitrary violence meant to terrorize and kill rather than cultivate norms as part of a broader biopolitical agenda. This violence is framed as a means by which to impose and/or or protect “civilization” elsewhere and not a violation of individual rights (24-25). Mbembe describes this as the “...subjugation of life to the power of death” (39), or necropolitics.

Mbembe argues that in some contemporary forms of necropolitics there are multiple sources of sovereign violence that coexist in the same space simultaneously. For example, in some postcolonial African states where governments operate alongside businesses, local strongmen, and criminal organizations, Mbembe writes that:

... military operations and the exercise of the right to kill are no longer the sole monopoly of states, and the “regular army” is no longer the unique modality of carrying out these

functions. The claim to ultimate or final authority in a particular political space is not easily made. Instead, a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule emerges, inextricably superimposed and tangled, in which different de facto juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound.” (31)

Just as *Miss Bala* suggests that criminal organizations, the state, transnational businesses, and the United States are all contributing to contemporary violence, Mbembe suggests that in present-day Africa sovereign violence is not exclusively in the hands of a state but a multiplicity of institutions with the ability to enact violence and kill with impunity. The images of Laura’s torso in *Miss Bala* suggest that a myriad of individuals and institutions, including, but not limited to the state, are able to kill with impunity in contemporary Mexico. As the scene with the press conference suggests, their ability to maintain power is linked to its continual use of violence to prove the need for such violence and thus legitimate the exercise of it. Rather than being always oppositional forces, these sources of violence may be compatible and mutually supportive. They may also be combative. The General and Lino work together, but both are against a DEA agent. All three of the men physically hurt Laura.

Distinguishing this contemporary necropolitics in Africa from its predecessors, is the fact that it is not concerned with stability and the inscription of bodies into “disciplinary apparatuses,” but rather “inscribing them, when the time comes, within the maximal economy now represented by the ‘massacre’”(34). Disciplinary apparatuses here can be thought of as the communal and institutional forms (schools, families, militaries, prisons, churches, etc.) used to organize social life and promote norms in a biopolitical system. Massacres on the other hand do not organize life, but rather end it and negate the need for a social organization rooted in managing life and lifestyles via biopolitics. This is evident in *Miss Bala* in the representation of rape as violence rather than sexual and linked to social reproduction. As mentioned the problem



with the rape in the film is that it is abusive, not that it is improper sexual behavior or desire. While Mbembe never elaborates what he means by the “maximal economy” of massacre, in present-day Mexico it could be understood as an economy in which the mass killing of and violence against certain groups benefits political and economic elites. In *Miss Bala*, for example, the story suggests that creating a violent public spectacle allows for the increased use of violence to access resources under the guise of security. The killing of several people during the hotel shootout and Laura’s display at the press conference facilitate Lino and the General’s interests. Massacre in this reading is not a temporally bounded event during which a mass slaughter takes place. It is instead ongoing violence that results in a continuous supply of corpses necessary to continue to legitimate a rhetoric about the need for militarization and securitization by the state and other sovereign entities and then subsequent use of violence. Ultimately contemporary violence in Mexico appears not a sign of disorder, but rather a structural necessity that sustains this necropolitical order.

This new form of decentralized, multilayered, and often highly unstable and necropolitical sovereignty in turn creates a vastly different understanding of populations, typically disaggregating people once collectively understood as the “population” or “people” of a state into new subjectivities and categorizations. Mbembe argues that in Africa, this disaggregation has resulted in a system of “rebels, child soldiers, victims or refugees, or civilians incapacitated by mutilation or simply massacred on the model of ancient sacrifices, while the ‘survivors,’ after a horrific exodus, are confined in camps and zones of exception” (34). This is to say that this type of economic and political system replaces the subjectivities associated with a state (e.g. citizen) with new forms of belonging and exclusion based on acts of violence and exposure to harm. As will be seen in the following analysis of the 2015 film *Las elegidas*, these

subjectivities are productive and rather than just being a necessary step by which to clear land or access resources in order to facilitate pre-existing capitalism as seen in Chapter 2, they perform work and generate capital within a necropolitical system. The aggressors, in killing the victims, actually produce corpses that become a commodity. This division is often cinematically articulated through gender, which, rather than organizing labor into productive and reproductive spheres, is used to represent who is consistently subjectable to violence (women) and who administers it (men). Critiques generated by these films tend not to focus on gender as relating to social reproduction, but rather focus on the violence itself and the ways in which it devalues life and produces vulnerabilities. Importantly, these critiques, as *Las elegidas* makes clear, explore how both victims and aggressors suffer in this system, shifting the conversation away from one about punishing aggressors in the name of protecting victims and towards one that eliminates this binary and the violence it engenders. The films advocate rethinking the possibility of a collective form of care and protection capable of stopping this literally divisive violence imposed by this form of necropolitics.

### ***Las elegidas* and the Production of Necropolitical Subjects**

*Las elegidas* follows a teenaged couple, Sofia and Ulises, who are torn apart after Ulises's family kidnaps Sofia and forces her to work in one of their brothels. The film charts the transformation of Sofia first into a trafficked sex worker and later into Ulises's wife and of Ulises into a pimp. Both initial transformations include extreme mental and physical abuse primarily in the form of threats and beatings. Ulises and Sofia's relationship goes from being a relatively horizontal, mutually rewarding one to one in which Ulises is an aggressor, and Sofia a victim.

Both of their subjectivities are represented as being adopted and maintained because of fear of being abused. Neither Sofia's transformation into a sex worker nor that of Ulises into a pimp depends on their adopting biopolitical and disciplinary norms in the belief that the norms are healthy or correct but rather the belief that deviance from the norms will result in severe physical harm. A person's own beliefs are subjugated to the desire to stay alive. Importantly, sex work and housewifery, contrasted in films from the 1940s and 1970s as dueling models for social reproduction and maintenance of a population, are here held up as in a symbiotic relationship meant to generate profits for the men in the film emblemizing institutions with access to sovereign power.

*Las elegidas* is loosely based on Jorge Volpi's novel of the same name, which itself is based on a true story of three brothers, Julio, Tomás, and Luciano Salazar Juárez, who ran a prostitution ring in the United States using women they trafficked from Mexico. Human trafficking is an important aspect of contemporary organized crime in Mexico. Recent research has suggested that it is an increasingly key source of revenue for criminal organizations that are also involved in the drug trade and seeking to expand beyond that crowded market (Balderas; Grillo; Kutner). Models for human trafficking vary, ranging from simply taxing preexisting prostitution rings and human smuggling routes (Grillo 2), to drug traffickers actively taking control of or starting the businesses themselves (Balderas). Notably, in Mexico, much of forced prostitution is linked to a town in Tlaxcala called Tenancingo where sex trafficking is famously a family business that spans generations. While the victims trafficked by these families come from all over Mexico, the pimps and the families who help run their businesses often maintain a home base in Tenancingo. Although *Las elegidas* is set in Tijuana, it was initially written as set in Tenancingo and appears to be modeled on the known tactics of Tenancingo families (e.g. pimps

seducing women before enslaving them, pimps impregnating the women and then using their children to blackmail them, families running the business, etc.) (de los Reyes; Hernández 67-68; Kutner).

The film was directed by David Pablos, who studied at the CCC in Mexico City where he directed his first feature film, *La Vida Después* (2013). *Las elegidas* stars previously unknown actors Nancy Talamantes (Sofia), Óscar Torres (Ulises), and Leidi Gutiérrez (Marta). Like *Miss Bala*, Canana produced it with some state funding and the film premiered at Cannes as part of the Certain Regard selection. The following year Netflix bought it and began streaming it globally, making it the first Mexican film available to 170 different countries simultaneously through this version of the streaming service (Hopewell; “‘Las elegidas’, primer filme”).

### **Sofia’s Subjectivization as a Victim**

Sofia’s initiation as an enslaved sex worker, consisting mainly of beatings and threats, depicts how subjectivization occurs for victims in a necropolitical system. When receiving her first client at the brothel, Sofia bolts after he grabs her violently. She attempts to escape and dashes through the front door of the brothel onscreen. While the camera does not follow her outside, the soundtrack catches the noises of her being beaten and in the following shot, she is shown seated silently, heavily made-up to work, and covered in bruises (33:01-34:30). The combination of the make-up and the bruises make visible that the coerced sex work at the brothel is always undergirded by violence. Unlike biopolitics, which depends on some sort of acceptance of social norms and roles, this necropolitics, which requires the exploitation and abuse of Sofia’s body, simply relies on her being afraid enough of a beating to continue to submit to being repeatedly raped.

Sofia's sex work and its economic value in the film become emblematic of Mbembe's economy of the massacre. Following her second failed attempt to flee and a series of threats to her family, the film includes a montage that serves as a visual representation of a massacre. The sequence begins with a portrait of a clothed, dead-eyed Sofia staring into the camera for an extended take, and then portraits of her clients, shirtless and likewise staring into the camera. They are all older, not the sex partners one would ordinarily imagine for a teenaged girl. Each man is paired with a short soundtrack of sex, the noises including belt buckles being removed, skin rubbing against skin, grunts, slaps, moans from a man ejaculating, gagging, the word "fuck" in English, Sofia whimpering, more slaps and cries (42:52-44:27). The sounds come across as stark and chilling, they reveal how the sexual encounters with the men onscreen sometimes devolve into violence, contrasting it with the portrait of the men who appear ordinary and unexceptional. The sequence is a continuous attack on Sofia's body, a reminder that she is being unceasingly raped and assaulted by seemingly ordinary men.

The commodification of this violence and its economic value is highlighted onscreen by discussions of money and the literal circulation of cash on screen. When Sofía is taken to the brothel to work for the first time another girl, seated next to her on a bed, rattles off a list of prices for her services, noting, "por cogida son 500 pesos, por sexo anal, son 100 pesos más, y si quieren mamada, igual, 100 pesos más. Al día mínimo, tienes que sacar 6,000 pesos y son mínimos, tienes que hacer todo para completarlos" (30:54-31:13). As the low prices and high total suggest, Sofia will be raped many times over the course of a day in order to earn enough. In contrast, in another scene, Héctor (José Santillán Cabuto), Ulises's brother, hands him a fat wad of cash from Sofia's work in the brothel. Héctor congratulates his brother, saying "Tu lo ganaste," implying that Ulises has worked hard (58:12-59:29). The film, in showing how this

system of slave labor leads to the wealth of those at the top at the cost of the abuse and exhaustion of those actually doing the work, draws a broader parallel between the brothel and how businesses in general exploit the bodies of the many to provide luxuries and comfort for the few. The brothel is critiqued not just because it relies on the sexual exploitation of women, but also because it generates immense wealth for those who do little of the work. In the same way that rape is wrong in *Miss Bala* because it is violent, pimping and rape here are wrong because they are violent and coercive exploitation, not because they are improperly sexual.

Over the course of the film there is a comparison between the women being prostituted and those married to the pimps that, unlike in *cabareteras*, films from the 1970s, and *sexicomedias*, suggests that the two serve complementary functions. In Ulises's parents' home, his mother (Raquel Presa) and sister-in-law (Yessenia Mezza) care for the children of women being trafficked, who are held as ransom to ensure that the trafficked women continue to work. Early in the film we see the mother feed a group of toddlers breakfast in an assembly line, each sits with a bowl of cereal and Ulises's mother pours milk into each bowl as she circles the table (23:04-24:02). The visual comparison of the home to a factory makes it clear that the home is not a site where workers are reproduced, but rather a productive space that manufactures an indirect threat of violence necessary to keep the brothel running. Importantly, when Sofia becomes Ulises's wife, she is told that if she misbehaves, she will be sent back to the brothel (1:36:00-1:36:56). The labor of the home is also sustained by the threat of violence against women, although here the configuration becomes more complex because women find themselves committing acts of indirect violence in order to avoid direct, physical violence being inflicted on them.

### **Ulises's Transformation into an Aggressor**

Parallel to Sofia's transformations into both enslaved sex worker and enslaved housewife is that of Ulises into a pimp/ husband, which is similarly grounded in violence and leads to the same question of whether or not people have any individual agency in this process of subjectivization and how that relates to guilt. At the beginning of the film viewers are introduced to Sofia and Ulises as a smitten, adolescent couple consummating their relationship for the first time (0:00:45-3:23). The encounter is sweet and tender, with the two often filmed sharing a frame, giggling and gently touching each other. At the end they embrace and are bathed in soft, yellow light, both happy (see Image 3.4). Ulises physically appears very young and fragile: he wears a school uniform, has acne, and when he takes his shirt off, his ribs protrude. Ulises at first resists pimping out Sofia and tries to flee with her to the United States. After they are found out, Héctor viciously beats him at the behest of their father (18:50-20:13). In these early scenes, Ulises and Sofia suffer in parallel, something shown both in the plotline (both try to flee and are brutally beaten) and in the cinematography, which offers mirror images of them sitting alone on the edge of the bed looking devastated (see images 3.5 and 3.6, 27:12-28:12). Notably these images mirror each other, the characters would face each other if they were not being held separately in their bedrooms (Sofia faces the camera, Ulises is turned away). The images emphasize their separation and total despair. Both are represented as victims forced into a brutal and abusive system of human trafficking.

However, following these parallel rites of initiation, their paths diverge. Whereas Sofia finds herself continually subjected to violence, Ulises finds himself increasingly the arbiter of violence. In order to get Sofia out of the brothel and marry her, Ulises's father tells him he must provide a replacement. Ulises eventually seduces another teenage girl, Marta, offering her to his father as a replacement for Sofia. When he and Héctor forcibly haul Marta into the brothel,



Image 3.4: Ulises and Sofia at the beginning of their relationship, *Las elegidas*.



Ulises savagely beats her, taking his brother's belt and whipping Marta as she cries and begs him to stop, finally going silent (1:31:33-1:33:02). The beating is a prolonged scene, the length of which makes it clear that there is no textually sustainable interpretation in which Ulises could be understood as “not really” hitting her or somehow less vicious than his father or brother. Indeed while he first appears hesitant to beat her, doing so slowly and primarily at his brother's behest, the motion becomes oddly mechanical and Héctor's encouragement stops long before Ulises does. It seems inexact to attribute all of Ulises's violence to free will, but it also is undeniable that Ulises is actively participating in the violence during this beating. Similar to the scene with the housewives, this scene both confirms Mbembe's idea that the world is divided into victims and aggressors, and complicates it by suggesting that this transformation is not exactly the choice of the aggressor.

### **Children and Young People as Counter-Victims**

The representation of Ulises as both a victim of violence and an aggressor speaks to a larger conversation about victims of contemporary violence in Mexico and how their experiences can be used to dismantle and confront rhetoric legitimizing and excusing that same violence. In her work on how victims of violent crimes in the War against Organized Crime articulate their experiences and use them as grounds to demand broader social change, Estelle Tarica elaborates a concept that she calls “counter-victimization.” As Tarica notes, the Mexican state often justifies violent crimes by implying that the victims were themselves criminals and subsequently deserving of the crimes committed against them. Counter-victimization is both the demand for public recognition that one has suffered a crime and the call for some kind of justice (3). It seeks to make sure that violence is not met with impunity, demanding that even if and when the judicial system fails to enforce its own code, the community find a way to arrive at some kind of



Image 3.5: Sofia cries on her bed, *Las elegidas*.



Image 3.6: Ulises sits on his bed, *Las elegidas*.

public accountability. Tarica identifies two rhetorical strategies often used in pursuing counter-victimization. “Universalism” argues that to be human is to have dignity and be inherently deserving of social protection and justice regardless of their past or identity. “Familiares” defines dignity in terms of social position (family, employment, friendship, etc.) and moral conduct (acts of service, temperance, courtesy, etc.) (4). It suggests that one is deserving of justice because of who one is in the community. As Tarica points out, the two are not mutually exclusive and often invoked within the same contexts. This recognition of victims often undermines narratives about state violence as a protective security measure, suggesting instead that it is actually inexcusable abuse against undeserving targets (4).

*Las elegidas*, through the parallel that it draws between Sofia and Ulises, offers a third strategy for counter-victimization that revolves around the idea that children and adolescents are to be protected from violence and coercion to do harm on the basis of their youth and vulnerability. Notably, Sofia, similar to Laura in *Miss Bala*, easily fits into both of the categories outlined by Tarica. She never commits any violence and is shown early in the film being a good sister and daughter who dotes on her toddler brother and rubs her mom’s feet after a long day at work. She is clearly a victim of a deliberate and well-organized plot and, even if her character were scrutinized, the film makes it hard to think of her as something other than sweet and kind. However, the film, in drawing a parallel between Sofia and Ulises and offering a sympathetic portrayal of Ulises, also appeals to audiences to view him as a victim. This is more complicated because, as noted, Ulises is also a victimizer. The film makes its intervention by suggesting that Ulises’s actions are the result of physical and mental abuse from his father and brother, the adults that he appears to want to trust and whom are coercing him. He is physically smaller than both, economically dependent on his family, and forbidden and stopped from leaving. He is a teenager

in an impossible situation and, despite his actions, appears vulnerable and in need of help. Subsequently Ulises's violence reads as the product of his own abuse. This in turn raises the question of who taught the father and brother and what structurally can be done to disrupt the cycle, not just to punish them individually. Similarly, it prompts one to wonder if Ulises's mother and sister-in-law were also forced into sex work and housewifery like Sofia. This representation of violence as the product of child abuse and a perverse apprenticeship within a family, rather than revealing a character's inherent evil, is framed in the film as proof of the need to dismantle sources of structural violence that result in everyone's abuse. It shifts the conversation away from one about impunity and towards a call for structural transformation on the basis of protecting young people and their future.

Notably the criminal initiation and involvement of young and teenaged boys in violent and illicit actions is becoming a frequent trope in films about contemporary violence in Mexican film. In *Heli* (Dir. Amat Escalante, 2013), elementary aged children participate in torture at the behest of adults and teenaged soldiers. In *El infierno* (Dir. Luis Estrada, 2011) the teenaged nephew of the protagonist, inspired by his father and uncle's accumulation of wealth and social standing as narcos becomes involved in the trade. Natalia Almada's 2011 documentary *El velador*, which is about a narco cemetery in Sinaloa, includes a sequence of shots of tombstones and banners that reveal most of the graves featured hold the bodies of teenagers and young men. These films suggest that these boys and young men are being raised in a culture that lauds the violence at hand as proof of strength and virility. It also suggests that they lack opportunities to financially sustain themselves in a non-criminalized manner as adults. Subsequently the violence displayed in the film becomes not just a question of protecting the female victims, but also how to disrupt this process of raising young boys and socializing them into violence. As the epigraph

from Natalia Almada suggests, these films highlight the moral ambiguity of this situation and the difficulties of both dismissing these boys and young men as criminals and fully responsible for what they do and understanding them only as victims. None of the films offers any resolution to this quandary and collectively seem to suggest that instead of figuring how to best assess guilt, the better solution would be to figure out a way to disrupt and end this process of subjectivization.

*Las elegidas*'s representation of Ulises's transformation into a purveyor of violence as the destruction of a good young person serves a representational function similar to Judith Butler's concept of public grieving. Mourning, according to Butler, illustrates that although individuals, people are also part of a larger community. When they die, their death is not only evidence of their own, physical vulnerability and frailty, but is also a literal loss to their community which is fundamentally changed by their absence. Butler argues that the absence of public mourning, be it by choice, prohibition, or censorship, suggests a person's exclusion from humanity because it appears that they were never actually part of the community. She writes: "if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburiable" (34). This is to say, someone who goes unmourned is read as an isolated individual. Images and acknowledgement of mourning families and friends serve as a means to affirm a shared humanity and a reminder of lost community. Mourning testifies to the humanity of the deceased, to their membership in a humanity beyond themselves.

In films that frame the integration of young people into violent criminal activities, viewers are encouraged to see the characters' transformations as a communal loss. The film represents Ulises as someone who has been deeply harmed by a physically violent process of subjectivization. The loving parts of him are beaten out of him onscreen. This representation

encourages viewers to see him mournfully, to experience his transformation as a loss of a shared humanity documented by the film. While still living, Ulises's cruelty creates a distance between the audience and his character. This in turn makes a pointed critique of the War on Organized Crime and similar policies, which rely on a clean break between the good and the bad, marking the latter not only as killable, but also implying that violence against them is the solution to problems at hand. The film suggests that Ulises's transformation is a loss of humanity and estrangement from the broader community. It implies that there is an obligation to find ways to protect not only the young women like Sofia, but the young men like Ulises. The film serves to refocus the problem of human trafficking towards one that emphasizes the ways in which it is structurally generated and upheld as opposed to the moral failings of the individuals perpetrating it by emblemizing them with a fragile, teenage boy. Teenaged boys, the film argues, are part of a just community, not violently excluded from it.

The film's ending chillingly makes clear that this process will repeat itself because the violence is structural and intentional. In the last scene Ulises and Sofia sit across from each other at a family picnic, unable to hold each other's gaze while they listen to Ulises's father holds court (1:39:03-1:41:55). It is a stark contrast with the beginning of the film when they are shown warmly embracing, talking, and spending time together. The blurry outline of the children fathered by the pimps is visible behind Sofia and audiences can hear them playing. The scene is a reminder that these children, just like Ulises and Sofia, will be forced to continue the family business and be subjected to the same vicious abuse. No solution or intervention is suggested or offered, just the assertion that the story onscreen is not an isolated incident and will continue for the foreseeable future.

This appears to be a common ending in neoliberal films about violence in Mexico. *Miss Bala* concludes with Laura, still handcuffed, being tossed out of a paddy wagon on a random Tijuana street with no explanation. The handcuffs make clear that there is no way to read her as actually free, despite the fact she is not going to be held in jail. The film then cuts to a brief note that 36,000 people were killed between 2006 and 2011 because of the War on Drugs and that in Mexico narcotrafficking is a \$25 billion a year industry (1:49:06-1:50:26). *Sin dejar huella* ends with a montage about what the characters do after the story ends that while the protagonists are safe, the political corruption, narcotrafficking, and privatization of Mexican oil all have continued (1:45:24-1:47:39). In short, all three films make clear that the problems the films have outlined have in no way been disrupted and remain problems. They imply the urgency of doing something but not one offers a plan for doing so.

### **Urgent and Unknown: Neoliberal Film, Calls to Change, and *Traspatio***

Indeed, very few films about violence in neoliberal Mexico imagine or represent some kind of attempt to stop that violence and offer any kind of commentary about what might be done. One of the few is Carlos Carrera's 2009 *Traspatio*, which explores the violent murders of women in Juarez in the 1990s. The film is structured around two plotlines that eventually intersect in a moment of violence. The first storyline follows two young immigrants of indigenous descent from Southern Mexico after they arrive in Juarez. Juana (Asur Zagada) is a young maquila worker who briefly dates Cutberto (Iván Cortes). This storyline offers an elaboration of the necropolitical subjectivities of victim and aggressor that emphasizes both subjectivities as rooted in a lack of infrastructure and societal commitment to social welfare. This story is used to suggest that necropower is not just lethal violence, but also the refusal to account for any form of communal well being and social reproduction more broadly. The second plot



follows Blanca (Ana de la Reguera), a policewoman charged with solving the murders, and Sara (Carolina Politi), a local activist who investigates and protests the murders (Sara is based on the real life activist Esther Chávez Cano). This plotline highlights the inability of the state to provide infrastructure and programs related to social reproduction within its contemporary necropolitical formation. The film ultimately raises the question of what kinds of alternate structures could be created to provide for both individual autonomy and collective well being.

*Traspatio* was written by feminist playwright Sabina Berman and her creative partner Isabelle Tardan. The project also involved TV Azteca producer Epigmenio Ibarra and director Carlos Carrera, both known for their overtly political television and films respectively (Redacción de Proceso). Unlike *Miss Bala* and *Las elegidas*, the cast of *Traspatio* includes several well known actors, most notably Ana de la Reguera, Joaquín Cosío as Victor Peralta, and Jimmy Smits as Mickey Santos. Like the other films, it was made by a private production company, Tardan/ Berman productions, with several other corporate partners and some state funds (this time from FOPROCINE). The film did well critically, becoming Mexico's submission for the foreign film category at the Academy Awards and winning Ariels for Director, Cinematography, Actress, and Sound.

*Traspatio* is a fictional account of the femicides that rocked Juarez in the 1990s and are remembered for their brutality and the state's refusal to meaningfully address them. Femicides here are understood as the murder of women in a way that is specifically linked to a gendered form of violence such as intimate partner violence, workplace discrimination, street harassment, etc..<sup>40</sup> The femicides are typically cited as beginning in 1993 when the city saw a precipitous and

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<sup>40</sup> Femicide is a term drawn from the work of Jill Radford and Diana Russell in *Femicide: The Politics of Killing Women*. Given that in Spanish *femicidio* means the killing of a woman regardless of circumstances, some activists, artists, and academics, starting with Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, have chosen to translate the term as *feminicidio*,

unexplained jump in the number of murders of women. While the murders have not fully stopped or been resolved in some kind of meaningful way, their global notoriety has been displaced and/or lost as activists and the media have become increasingly aware of even higher rates of femicide in other parts of Mexico and the rising tide of violence from the War on Drugs, and the War against Organized Crime (Amnesty 1-2; Inter-American 3; Staudt and Campbell 1-2).<sup>41</sup>

The Mexican state's response to the Juarez femicides in the 1990s was characterized by both apathy and antagonism towards victims. Police failed to solve the vast majority of the murders. They often failed to respond to requests for help when women disappeared. When women's bodies were found, they conducted shoddy investigations characterized by a lack of follow-up, mistreatment of evidence, and the use of torture to obtain confessions. Local politicians often blamed victims, suggesting that their deaths were the result of double lives as sex workers and libertines more generally. Others suggested that the murders proved that women should not be working outside of or leaving the home. Politicians and police often denied that these deaths were femicides that evidenced a broader culture of violence against women, suggesting that they were unrelated murders where the victims happened to be women (Amnesty 2-5; Inter-American 3; Lagarde y de los Ríos xiv-xv; Segato 73; Wright 713-715).

Activists, many affiliated with the fourteen groups belonging to *La Coordinadora de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales en Pro de la Mujer* formed in 1994, have organized in

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modifying it and using this version to reference murders rooted in gendered violence. Sometimes it is translated back into English as femicide (Lagarde y de los Ríos xv-xvi).

<sup>41</sup> Importantly, critics of the coverage of the Juarez femicides have charged that the femicide claims in Juarez are overstated and/or a myth because there are higher rates of femicide elsewhere, and because the murder rate for men is higher (see, for example, Christopher Hooks's interview with Molly Molloy). As the film suggests in its closing montage, the rebuttal to this claim is that femicide is a problem in most parts of the world and deserves to be publicly denounced anywhere and everywhere. Additionally, acknowledging gendered violence against women in no way suggests that homicide more broadly is not an extremely pressing problem in Juarez (it has been and is), but rather suggests that some of the violence in Juarez is related to gender and that addressing it requires addressing this construction of gender. In short, the film suggests that addressing violence is not a zero-sum game in which only one region or set of victims can be seen as pressing or worthy of concern.

response to the killings. Central to their work are demands for a legal response to the murders. Activists have spent considerable time demanding that victims be recognized as such and that their killers be punished in a court of law. Many, in keeping with Estelle Tarica's work on the rhetorical strategy of framing victims as valued family members, have contested the state's characterizations of the murdered women as licentious by representing victims as exemplary young women who used their wages to support their families (Wright 715).

Activists have also raised concerns about the ways the femicides relate to neoliberal economic development and domestic violence (Wright 711). Many of the victims had worked in the factories that dot the US-Mexico border. The factories, known as maquilas, are a hallmark of Mexican neoliberalism and offer a cheap source of labor to foreign businesses. The maquilas are often used for the assembly of goods for export to the US. Their workforce has been majority women (although in recent years has included more men than in the past). Activists have argued that the maquilas do not offer reasonable safety protections to women workers such as secure transportation to and from work, making them vulnerable to external violence (Staudt and Campbell 2-3; Wright 712). Last, activists, noting a high incidence of intimate partner violence in Juarez and a lack of social support for survivors, began to develop infrastructure to support women confronting domestic violence. For example, in 2005, feminist activist Esther Chávez Cano opened the city's first battered women's shelter. That a shelter had not previously existed, especially given considerable evidence that domestic abuse was a problem in Juarez long before, is seen as indicative of the state's lack of attention to the issue of violence against women (Staudt and Campbell 2-6).

### **Necropolitics and the Assessment of Human Worth**

*Traspatio*, similar to the representations of necropolitical violence in *Miss Bala* and *Las elegidas*, suggests that the femicides are the result of intersecting structural factors. The film builds this narrative using a series of characters emblemizing institutions and their interactions to model the broader power dynamics leading to femicide. In doing so it suggests that femicide has many different causes, but each shares a disregard for women and prioritizes making money over human lives. For example, in one scene, the governor of the state of Chihuahua (Enoc Leñaño), a Japanese owner of a maquila (Osami Kawano), and a US senator from Texas (Harry Frank Porter) meet in an elegant, lavishly decorated office to discuss the murders. When the three discuss what could be done, it becomes clear that any solution would require additional funds and that nobody is able and willing to pay. The governor of Chihuahua cites Mexico's empty coffers, the senator, the unwillingness of the US taxpayer to help, and the Japanese maquila owner, that the cost of doing business would outweigh profits. During the end of the scene, the maquila owner recites a list of women's wages in factories around the world, beginning with Mexico at \$1.05, then mentioning China, Bangladesh, and Thailand, each significantly lower, and subsequently, the men imply, a more desirable place for doing business. This part of the scene is interspliced with another one set in a courtroom in which members of a local gang testify at a murder trial of an Egyptian immigrant and sex offender. They claim the man paid them \$1200 for every woman they murdered while he was in prison. His goal, they say, was to throw off police (1:09:29-1:12:50). The juxtaposition of the scenes and prices suggests that for the Mexican state, Mexico's free trade partners, the United States, and organized crime, money is the common criteria for assessing someone's worth. By this criterion, the film suggests that the murdered women are worth more dead than alive. It is an "economy of the massacre" in which death becomes a source of profit and life is too expensive.

This is reiterated throughout the film: both the governor of Chihuahua and the Japanese maquila owner are upset when women's deaths appear in the news. The governor because, as he tells reporters at a press conference, it will give Juarez a bad reputation and disrupt its economic development (1:39:16-1:40:11), and the maquila owner because it looks bad for his brand when one of his employees is killed (6:12-7:45). The only reason the deaths become problematic for these men and the institutions they represent is when the deaths disrupt the men's ability to make money and garner power. The deaths themselves are not a problem, indeed they are part of doing business.

### **Juana and Cutberto: Necropolitics as a Crisis of Social Reproduction**

Similar to the aforementioned real life activists, *Traspatio* expands the critique of necropolitical violence to become a broader one about the absence of adequate labor protections and social services through the characters of Juana and Cut. The two have a similar victim/aggressor dynamic to Sofia and Ulises, but their relationship also serves as a call to understand this violence as undergirded by a crisis of social reproduction. Juana arrives from Chiapas early in the film to join her cousin, Margara (Amorita Rasgado), who already lives in the city and works in a maquila. Juana's introduction to the maquila is also that of the audience. Viewers accompany her on her first day at a maquila job when a doctor prescribes her birth control pills and warns her not to get pregnant (20:29-21:27). Viewers also learn that she only will have 10 minutes a day to use the restroom and 10 to eat (25:45-27:10). The condition of her employment, the film suggests, is handing over her body to the company's expectations, disciplining her biology to maximize the company's productivity and subsequent profits. Juana's ability to care for herself adequately is compromised by the demands of the job. The maquila treats her as unworthy of such care and subsequently not only suggests that she is disposable, but that her

disposability is necessary for profits. Thus while Juana works there to earn money, the broader cost to laborers of this kind of work is raised as an issue.

The disposability of women in the film is underscored by the constant discovery of women's corpses. In the middle of the film, around a dozen women's bodies are found on the outskirts of the city (see image 3.7, 32:30-33:50). The nude, mutilated women have been left lying out in the desert amid pieces of trash and discarded objects, rotting in the sun and discovered by happenstance by two little boys. They are so dirty that the camera barely catches them against the soil as it surveys the scene. In keeping with Butler's argument in *Precious Life* that the absence of mourning for a dead person signals a rejection of their humanity. This depiction of this total desecration of the bodies, their careless and shared disposal in the desert amid garbage, both pays testament to the idea that these women were never seen as fully human. Further, that there are so many victims suggests that these women are the product of something systemic, not an exception to the normal order of things. This is reiterated when, at the end of the film, Juana, having just been brutally gang raped and strangled to death on screen, is hurled out of a truck onto the side of a desert road (see image 3.8, 1:36:07-1:38:08). Her body, like those of the other dead women anonymously discarded, becomes further proof of a system of power that understands poor women as disposable.

Cut, in contrast, serves as an emblem for a surplus population not being integrated into the neoliberal workforce. His presence highlights the absolute lack of social services in Juarez and suggests a connection between this and femicide. As we find out from his conversations and dates with Juana, Cutberto is struggling to find a job and lives in an old school bus. There do not appear to be any sources of social or economic support for someone like him. Cutberto is peripheral to the rest of the city and cut off from the modernity that it supposedly enjoys under



Image 3.7: Corpses in the desert, *Traspatio*.



Image 3.8: Juana is thrown out of a van, *Traspatio*.



neoliberal reforms.

The film suggests that this leads to violence. Juana dumps him very publicly in front of a crowd after he becomes angry at her for dancing with another man in a bar. Publicly humiliated, Cutberto spends the night drinking and driving with a group of men who insist that women in modern life have displaced men. They suggest that Cutberto needs to reclaim his place as a man by punishing Juana for humiliating him (1:06:17-1:09:27). Their explanation of Cut's situation both acknowledges his suffering and frustration with life in Juarez, but simultaneously misattributes it to the women like Juana who are themselves being exploited. As with Ulises and Sofia, this transformation of the relationship between Juana and Cutberto illustrates how relationships are reduced to vertical hierarchies between victims and aggressors in a necropolitical system. One can humiliate or be humiliated. One can kill or be killed. While Cutberto is not physically beaten like Ulises, he is isolated from any sort of supportive community and told that he can reclaim his dignity through this violence.

Notably harming Juana does not result in Cutberto being integrated into society, but rather the exacerbation and intensification of his own exclusion. Cutberto and the other men eventually gang rape and murder Juana, disposing of her body in the desert. However, the other men do not like Cut's hesitancy to let them also rape her and his obvious regret when they force him to kill her by putting a gun to his head. The men toss him out of the van seconds after they toss Juana's corpse out (1:36:07-1:38:40). The mirroring images of Cutberto and Juana being tossed out of the van suggest the ways in which both are disposable for the society in which they live (see images 3.8 and 3.9). Juana's murder comes first, as seen in the plot and emphasized by the shot of the van driving towards the camera. Cutberto is tossed out after the violence has concluded, as seen by the fact the van drives away from the camera. Similar to *Las elegidas*,

*Traspatio* suggests that while Cut, like Ulises, does participate in this violence, structural factors push him towards this decision and after giving into it, he does not find himself in an improved situation in society, but rather in more trouble than when he started. Cutberto is arrested shortly after the murder, the implication being he will be held up as a proof of police success not only in Juana's case, but more broadly in fighting the femicides. Attributing femicide to a decontextualized Cutberto is a way to imply the femicides are being solved without confronting the excesses of capitalism, state violence, organized crime, and US foreign policy.

This is a departure from explanations of gendered violence such as the femicides as rooted primarily in machismo. For example, Rita Laura Segato has argued that the femicides should be read as men communicating their prowess with other men and asserting themselves spatially using women's bodies (80-89). *Traspatio* suggests that this violent machismo is compensatory for the impotency men experience in a system that totally devalues them. It also suggests that this violence produces culprits like Cutberto and allows sovereign powers (the state, businesses, the US) to attribute the violence to poor men without interrupting their own moneymaking and the violence it requires. While *Traspatio*, similar to *Las elegidas*, represents Cutberto's behavior as reprehensible, the disregard and neglect of people like Cutberto remains a legitimate concern and possibly even key to stopping violence against women in the world of the film. As in *Las elegidas*, stopping the violence will not simply mean punishing the culprits.

### **Balancing Empowerment and Protection: *Traspatio* and the Crisis of Social Reproduction**

In framing the Juarez femicides as the result of a necropolitical system that disavows any responsibility for social reproduction, *Traspatio* places itself in a broader conversation about how communities can sustain themselves in the face of neoliberalism. A useful framework for thinking this relationship is that proposed by Nancy Fraser in "Between Marketization and Social



Image 3.9: Cutberto is thrown out of a van, *Traspatio*.

Protection.” Fraser modifies Karl Polanyi’s concept of the embedded market to explore the relationship between individual autonomy and collective security in a neoliberal economy. Embedded markets for Polanyi are, as Fraser summarily puts it, those that are “enmeshed in non-economic institutions and subject to non-economic norms, such as ‘the just price’ and ‘the fair wage’ (231).” In contrast there are unembedded markets, which are not couched in these institutions and that do not include communal protections for those unable to provide for themselves for whatever reason (i.e. age, health, bad luck, weather patterns, etc.). For Polanyi this creates a tension between the forces of marketization and social protection, the former being the pursuit of an economy without moral or ethical regulation, the latter sheltering society from the excesses of the market.<sup>42</sup> As Fraser points out, this framework ignores that measures and institutions offering social protection still frequently include hierarchical systems of power. For example, the concept of the family wage historically both privileges a higher material standard of living for a population more broadly while making monogamous heterosexuality all but compulsory for women and excluding women from certain forms of participation in social life. Fraser, noting that feminists and other activists have often decried systems of domination in both the forces of marketization and protection, adds a third force to Polanyi’s formulation, which she calls emancipation. Emancipation seeks to dismantle domination and assert individual autonomy.

Fraser reads neoliberalism and the concurrent experiences of women as interplay between these three forces in which marketization and emancipation have been rhetorically, but not materially, aligned while protection disappears. She argues that following WWII first world

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<sup>42</sup> Neither formulation in Fraser’s work accounts for the state violence that typically accompanies the implementation of policies aimed at marketization (e.g. *accumulation by dispossession* as examined in Chapter 2). Subsequently marketization does not appear to preclude a state, but rather has different expectations of the state as an institution than does protection.

welfare states and third world developmentalist states were understood as sources of a form of protection whose primary functions included providing social services and welfare programs. Neoliberalism, through privatization and cuts to social welfare programs, has dismantled that protection. As she points out, much of this dismantling has been framed as a form of liberation from domination, or emancipation. For example, the integration of women into the workforce was described by some as women's emancipation from the patriarchal family through marketization. To be sure, such claims often neglected to ask if the jobs in this economy were precarious and/or lacking adequate pay and benefits. Similarly, cuts to welfare programs and new work requirements for welfare recipients have been framed as giving individuals the opportunity to help themselves rather than being dependent on the state. This has led to people being forced into highly exploitative working conditions and reduced to going without basic needs being met in the name of empowerment. The end result, Fraser argues, has been a crisis in social reproduction in which the dismantling of old sources of social protection, flawed as they were, have not been replaced by anything else. Marketization, while rhetorically paired with empowerment, has not yielded individual freedom from domination, but rather shifted the domination from protection to marketization.

This new neoliberal order has only exposed people to the market and ultimately to the hierarchies and domination that marketization itself produces. For example, *Traspatio* frames Juana's job as an exploitative one that does not offer her adequate compensation or rest. Early in the film, Juana describes to coworkers over lunch how hard her life was as a campesina in rural Chiapas and doing housework for her father (26:16-27:10). However, as becomes clear, being a maquila employee has not resulted in a life free from overwork or exposure to violence. Subsequently one can surmise that neither past nor present configuration of gendered labor

allows for emancipation for women, but one is more invested in protection and the other in marketization.

For Fraser the response to neoliberalism becomes to re-envision, the relationship between social protection and emancipation in a way that includes “arrangements for re-embedding markets that simultaneously serve to overcome domination” (237). The goal is to find a way to rhetorically and materially link individual emancipation and collective protection so as to promote individual and collective well being and participation in decision making. Part of this will include regulating marketization so as to provide for protection and emancipation.

It is unclear if Fraser is advocating for a retooling of the state or some new kind of social organization all together. As she notes, a return to the welfare state, which relied on domination of women and minorities is undesirable. In the essay preceding this one in her 2014 *Fortunes of Feminism*, “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” Fraser calls for feminists to reclaim “the mantle of participatory democracy” and to develop “...a new organization of political power, one that subordinates bureaucratic managerialism to citizen empowerment” (226). Part of this, according to Fraser, includes being less tied to the “territorial national state” and one that is “a new, post-Westphalian political order– a multiscalar order, democratic at every level and dedicated to overcoming injustice in every dimension, along every axis and on every scale” (226). These descriptions suggest both the persistence of some kind of state-based governance and the possibility of something much broader and international in scope. Horizontal participation and decision-making structures are clear key tenants of this reorganization. Beyond that though, Fraser’s descriptions are vague and open to a range of interpretive possibilities. In short, Fraser offers several key conditions for a political response, namely emphasizing empowerment and protection over marketization, but she does not prescribe a course of action.

## **The Failures of State-Based Reform in *Traspatio***

*Traspatio* raises a similar set of questions and points towards something equally inconclusive, although different from Fraser, it is less optimistic about reforming or transforming the state. As mentioned, the second plotline in *Traspatio* follows two women attempting to reform the legal system in Juarez in order to both stop the killings and find justice for the victims. This part of the story is explored through the characters of Blanca, an upright policewoman, and Sara, a local feminist organizer. Blanca has just arrived in Juarez when the film begins and appears to have a sincere desire to solve the murders and protect women in Juarez from future violence. She is shown teaming up with Sara, patrolling on her own at night, and trying to prioritize survivors in police work. However, with a boss who constantly prohibits her efforts and rebukes her trying to help survivors, a partner who cannot be trusted, and a lack of resources to pursue her ideas, she does not make any headway. Her only successes in keeping known predators at bay are planting evidence to convict a known abuser and fatally shooting a wealthy businessman when he is caught trying to rape a young girl. In short, Blanca has to resort to extrajudicial violence in order to protect other women. The law and those tasked with enforcing it, the film makes clear, do not protect citizens, but rather seeks to preserve the existing order of things, regardless of its merits and legality. In the end, Blanca is fired after the governor learns that she and Sara encouraged a pregnant rape survivor to have an abortion. He frames the incident as one of harm to children and disregard for the law, although the film implies that he has little actual interest in stopping the violence against women in Juarez (1:29:57-1:32:40). Above all, Blanca is represented as failing to solve the murders because the goal of the state is not to stop the violence against women, but to preserve the existing economic and political order.

The activists in the film spend much of their time demanding an end to impunity for those responsible for the femicides. Most of their protests are directed at the Mexican state, which the film suggests is a poor choice of target, both because of the state's own reliance on necropower and its relationship to other sovereign entities committing acts of violence. Halfway through the film Sara manages to get an article about the femicides of Juarez in the New York Times. The governor of Chihuahua is publicly embarrassed and finally decides to do something to address the murders. In one scene he meets with a council of advisers around a conference table. His one vocal demand is that the solutions be visible. His goal is not to end the violence or punish the culprits, but to reassure the public to continue living as they have, convinced, despite the femicides, that everything is all right (57:06-57:50). Among the responses generated by this meeting are a PSA campaign about women's bodily autonomy and self-defense classes for women at the maquilas. Notably Juana cites a PSA when Cutberto harasses her one night, quipping "Como dice la tele, mi cuerpo es mi cuerpo" and then walks away sassily into the arms of another man (1:02:51-1:04:15). She also attempts to use the self-defense moves on him after he drugs her at a bar, repeating the motions and words that audiences see her learn in the class before their meeting. Unfortunately, Juana is incapacitated by the laced beverage and physically unable to defend herself from Cut (1:21:36-1:22:32). Via Juana's brutal murder, the film suggests that the PSA and self-defense classes are woefully inadequate. Similar to what Fraser describes, such interventions frame the problem of gendered violence as a lack of individual empowerment rather than the absence of collective social protection that the film suggests is at the root of these femicides. State-based solutions attempt to prepare women to individually confront their attackers, not to dismantle the system producing the attacks. This is not surprising given that the state itself operates through necropower.



Ultimately, *Traspatio* suggests that the state is unable to end this violence and reorganize social reproduction and in doing so, like the other films analyzed here, prompts the question of what can be done, albeit after eliminating the possibility of internal, state-based reform. *Traspatio* concludes with a montage of images of people and communities in their everyday lives overlaid with a series of yearly totals related violence against women. The numbers begin with annual totals for femicides in Juarez over the course of several years, then other places in Mexico, and then around the Americas and in Spain. The montage makes clear that the problem of femicide persists not only in Juarez but also around the world. The rising numbers, climbing upward on screen, make clear that the problem is urgent and in need of a response. The images of people in their everyday lives communicates that this violence is not the result of extreme situations or a perceived war, but a daily and systematic reality. This is all underscored by the song “Esperanza” by Control Machete, which accompanies the montage. “Esperanza” combines symphonic swells suggesting the exhaustion and sorrow of the situation, a heavy, pulsating beat, underscoring its regularity and continuity, and gruff, aggressive rapping with lyrics about the need to move forward, evidencing both agitation and motivation (1:54:00-1:56:35).

The film, through its elaboration of the suffering caused by the Juarez femicides and critique of its causes implies that something must be done to stop them. Furthermore, by ending with numbers related to femicide and violence against women elsewhere, the film encourages audiences to recognize the problem in their own communities and do something there too. However, precisely what that something is never made clear. Just like the endings of the other three works, this one exposes necropolitical violence and suggests that it needs to be stopped, but gives no explanation as to how or what will follow.

**Conclusion: Necropolitics and the End to Neoliberalism?**

In what remains of this chapter, I will read these indeterminate endings alongside two recent theoretical frameworks for thinking about politics and textual analysis under neoliberalism, the first being Patrick Dove's interregnum, the second Verónica Gago's exploration of the role of theorizing in militant struggle against neoliberal policies. Put in conversation with Dove and Gago's work, the endings of these films become a call to move away from a prescriptive form of politics in which how to respond to sovereign violence is thought of as known and established praxis (e.g. demand that the state intervene). The films instead frame interrupting this violence as partially reliant on new forms of thinking and organizing, emphasizing, much as Gago does, that the intellectual work of theorizing neoliberalism and new responses go hand in hand with action.

According to Dove, interregnum is the exhaustion in the neoliberal present of the categories associated with modernity such as the sovereign nation-state. Central to Dove's theorization of interregnum is its absence of a clear alternative or known successive paradigm. Being in a period of interregnum is to both be aware of the inadequacy of modernity's political categories for describing present realities and to continue "persisting within the ruins of the modern in a way that illuminates their relation, albeit without being able to imagine or inaugurate a new order" (251). Similar to the films included here, Dove's reading of Bolaño's *2666* argues that the book offers an elaboration of contemporary violence in Mexico without a clear prescriptive politics to confront it. Dove reads this absence as the negation of the avant-garde's quest for a redemptive, aesthetic response to the failures of modernity. Art's importance in this interregnum, as exemplified by *2666*, is, rather than offering alternatives, a means by which to "bring the contradictions inherent in the global system to a head for us in a way" (259). As argued here, the films' highlighting of the absence of adequate attention to social reproduction

and insecurity generated by necropolitics would seem to be doing just this. They reframe the current moment and make clear that it will not lead to a more secure and prosperous Mexico for all.

However a key point of difference between Dove's reading of *2666* and the films included here is that Dove's interregnum depends on a relationship between nation, state, and economy that does not align with the one found in Mexican film. Dove argues that interregnum has followed the implementation of a "neoliberal-administered globalization" (1) in which a state's previous claim to sovereignty is rooted in the idea of a collective national subject's will (1) has been replaced by the subjugation of political sovereignty to transnational capital (8). In contrast, in Mexican cinema the state has not historically been represented as a manifestation of popular will and has long been coupled with business interests and capitalist development.<sup>43</sup> In Chapter 1, I argue that the Mexican state is depicted in Golden Age film as cultivating a citizenry that can serve as a modern workforce, placing the state in partnership with a capitalist economy. The state, imagined as a benevolent, overbearing father, is not the expression of the collective will of a national popular subject, but rather a well-intentioned guardian who frequently and altruistically exceeds his own legal authority to the benefit of all. In the critiques of the state that I write about in Chapter 2, Mexico's citizenry in 1970s film is represented as rebuking the state for its failures to care for the population of Mexico and sacrificing that population to a developmentalist program that only benefits economic and political elites. Here the patriarchal

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<sup>43</sup> My differences with Dove with regards to Mexico in part stem from our different understandings of the sources of contemporary violence outside of literature and film. Dove subscribes to the idea that the current War against Organized Crime in Mexico is a conflict between narcos and the state (234). As I argue in the section of this chapter "*Miss Bala*, the War against Organized Crime and Necropolitics," film and journalistic accounts of the violence have frequently refuted that two-sided structure and I am inclined to see the state and criminal organizations as at least some of the time being in partnership. Subsequently, while the war against organized crime indeed engenders violence against the population of Mexico, I disagree that it is evidence of the state's diminishing sovereign control or subjugation to other systems and institutions.

state venerated in Chapter 1 is depicted as tyrannical and in constant violation of its legal limits to the detriment of the population. In both cases the state is represented as operating far outside of its legally sanctioned authority and in collusion with business leaders. The main difference between the two periods is who is understood to be benefitting (everyone vs. elites). This continues into the neoliberal present, where the state, embodied by elected officials, police, and the military, is frequently represented as being in mutually beneficial relationships with business people, regardless of whether the business is technically licit or a form of organized crime, Mexican, foreign, or transnational (Notably none of these figures, including representatives of the state, appears to be adhering to the law, and their impunity is proof of their shared sovereignty). This is apparent in the relationship between Lino and the General, Ulises's family's agreements with the police, and the conversation between the Japanese maquila owner, the Mexican governor, and the US senator in the conference room in *Traspatio*. As mentioned, what mainly is novel about the representation of these relationships is that other institutions have access to sovereign violence, but it would be inaccurate to say they are portrayed as subjugating the state.

Subsequently the neoliberal films explored here, instead of documenting the exhaustion of these categories, are better read as the ways in which they have been adapted and modified to continue to exist in a neoliberal economy. Representations of the neoliberal state are quite different than those of its predecessor, with sovereign power depicted through visible, public violence that is profitable and articulated as a security measure, rather than sexual morality and developmentalist promises from the state of the earlier two periods. The population has been reconceptualized around this violence, sorted into victims and aggressors rather than breadwinners and housewives.

When state power in these films is read as a transformation of modern categories, the violence at hand becomes evidence of the need to break with them, not their exhaustion and a break that has already happened. *Traspatio* in particular, because of its representation of the state's refusal and perhaps inability to meaningfully intervene on behalf of victims because of its own interests and frameworks, serves as a call to turn away with the idea of the state as a meaningful site of political intervention in the service of its citizenry. This is underscored by the reality that neither Juana's life as a campesina in a traditional patriarchal family nor as a single maquila worker results in adequate protection (to use Polanyi's term) for her or others. The film is not a nostalgic turn back towards the corporatist state partnered with nuclear families (or a gesture to the welfare states that existed elsewhere), nor a celebration of the modern woman under neoliberalism, but a critique of forms of power that exploit people rather than provide for their collective well being. The film suggests that the dissolution of this necropolitical system of violence and attention to social reproduction in a way that does not require individual disempowerment are two key aspects for a meaningful response to this violence.

Thinking beyond the state and towards new ways of confronting structural violence becomes necessary in the world of the films because of how sovereignty has adapted to neoliberalism. In "Intellectuals, Experiences, and Militant Investigation" Verónica Gago asks the question "What is the role of militancy when faced with a series of experiences that challenge classical pedagogical models of politics?" She argues that in moments of rupture with an existing order, conventional organizing strategies and theorizations of power are put to the test. Predictably theories do not uniformly hold up in such moments, with some needing to be discarded and replaced, and others, revised and adapted in order to be applicable in these new contexts. Subsequently a radical and transformative politics must include not only action, but

also the intellectual work of retheorizing power and imagining new ways of organizing, confronting oppressive structures of power, and creating commons.<sup>44</sup> Gago suggests that part of this work is critical reading and subsequent dialogue that “...cannot be reduced to pre-established pedagogical models.” The goal in reading, and I would added watching, is to not simply memorize what are believed to be the correct strategies, but to generate understandings and theorizations of evolving situations while questioning, debating, and examining past work. Similar to Dove’s framing of the avant-garde, Gago’s theorization argues for a textual analysis that looks for inconsistencies and uses them as a point of departure for understanding and stopping violence in the present. Additionally, Gago’s work asserts that such inconsistencies can help theorize and envision a preferable future form of social organization.

The endings of the films in this chapter, especially given *Traspatio*’s rejection of several conventional organizing strategies, make a gesture towards the importance of this kind of intellectual work as part of confronting the necropolitical system. By simultaneously highlighting contemporary violence and refusing to prescribe solutions the films suggest that part of the condition for successful intervention will be the work of figuring out how to dismantle them and

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<sup>44</sup> As argued in the introduction, Gago makes these arguments as part of broader critique of a strain of anti-intellectualism in which doing and thinking are posed as distinct and opposing practices, with the former understood as authentic and actual politics, and the later as an elite practice tied up in the preservation of the status quo. Gago traces this line of anti-intellectualism in Argentina following the crisis in 2001 (although as she makes clear, it is present internationally and certainly not particular to Argentina). She describes 2001 as marked, using a concept theorized by Colectivo Situaciones, by destituent power, characterized as “...the capacity to overthrow and remove the hegemony of the political system based on parties and for opening up a temporality of radical indetermination based on the power of bodies in the street.” In this moment, Gago suggests that other ways of organizing people, labor, and communities became newly visible and required intellectual work for activists to adapt to a changing political terrain. Subsequent attempts to both repress and coopt the forms of destituent power that emerged, including this anti-intellectual current, argued against dynamic intellectual praxis as part of social change on the basis of its presumed elitism. As Gago makes clear, intellectuals are neither limited to nor exclusive of academics, but can best be understood as those who do not seek “symbolic capital or personal prestige, but rather take a risk in naming and valorizing modes of existence that denounce and combat forms of exploitation and domination.” The point is not to grant academics more authority over social movements, but to recognize the importance of theorizing and robust intellectual exchange in activism and building new political spaces and communities.

build something more just. The films at hand both make the case for what is at stake in this work and evidence, through their indeterminacy, how much remains to be done.

## **Conclusion**

### **Close Readings without Redemption**

A reading of the constructions of womanhood in Mexican film framed around biopolitics suggests that representations of femininity in Mexican film are, above all, bound up with the question of how social reproduction is organized. Golden Age films, as elaborated in Chapter 1, advocate for a model of social organization in which an enormous amount of work is assigned to women on the basis of gender and an attendant, compulsory form of heterosexuality. Film from the 1970s document both the high social cost and the frequent failures of this form of social organization with regards to social reproduction. It suggests the need for and possibility of different types of communities not anchored in gender. Last, the films in Chapter 3 suggest that in a neoliberal economy where social reproduction is decreasingly a shared social concern, women are subjected to violence generated by a system framed only around production. In these films women are emblems of the devastating impact of social reproduction's absence. Read together, films from these periods suggest the various ways in which capitalism and nation-states depend on gendered designations to function. They both potentially affirm this system and critique it through their representations of women. These later films don't offer clear solutions to the problems they highlight, but do suggest that part of a response to the violence in contemporary Mexico is rethinking social reproduction in a way that does not require and sustain this gender-based division of labor and attendant gendered subjectivities that it requires.

This idea of representations of women in Mexican film as initiating a conversation about how to organize reproductive labor is quite different from past studies that have tended to either



see these representations as the possibility of a different kind of female sexuality or evidence of the need to focus on how to change the industry to cultivate more inclusive filmmaking practices and dynamic onscreen representation of gender. For example, in her canonical “Tears and Desire,” Ana López argues that the *cabareteras* analyzed in Chapter 1, because they show women’s sexual desire as overt and outside of the home and marriage, mount a serious challenge to conservative Porfirian morality that emphasized the importance of chastity for women. López writes about Ninón Sevilla’s performance in *Aventurera* as characterized by the actress’s “...exaggeratedly sexual glance, overabundant figure, extraordinarily tight dresses, rolling hips, excessive laughter, and menacing smoking” (158). López argues that this embodiment of womanhood serves as an affront to conventional depictions of women and subsequently offers them a more dynamic potential subjectivity. Ninón Sevilla’s overt sexuality becomes proof of her complexity and fullness as a character despite the fact this behavior is, in the context of the film, coerced and ultimately corrected by marriage. As López herself admits, such a reading is only possible if the viewer sees Sevilla and her performance as overpowering the film’s morality. It is a latent politics predicated on Sevilla’s body and its physicality onscreen (158-159). This reading suggests that what is politically useful in a reading of a text like *Aventurera* is the possibility of uncovering or revealing where and how it exceeds conventional morality and reveals alternate possibilities for understanding gender roles. Notably, it still defines womanhood primarily in terms of sexual comportment, albeit less restricted than in the past.

Conversely, Ignacio Sánchez Prado focuses on gender as a question of women’s participation off-screen and broader industrial practices related to subject material and the objectification of women. For example, in *Screening Neoliberalism* he suggests that portrayals of women in contemporary Mexican film overly fixate on women’s beauty. He proceeds to suggest

that, “like most contemporary film industries, Mexican cinema faces a troubling absence of successful female directors, which in turn has been an obstacle for more progressive representation of women’s issues” (218).<sup>45</sup> Different from López, he focuses on the need to change production practices rather than subtextual readings in order to achieve this desired representation. Like López, Sánchez Prado appears to be seeking a change in how womanhood is represented to more closely align with a personally desirable set of criteria. Notably, neither critic goes so far as to question the legitimacy and/or utility of the system of gender that creates and sustains these formulations of womanhood.

The differences between my readings and those of López and Sánchez Prado regarding the representation of gender, particularly womanhood and its political implications are, by and large, a product of methodological choices and the ways in which we understand the role of the critic. In what follows, I want to think specifically about how the practice of textual interpretation engenders certain understandings of the political potential of texts and why the methodology that I am using is preferable. In order to do so, I will borrow literary critic Heather Love’s theorization of close reading in which she shows how a type of descriptive reading potentially destabilizes humanist assumptions in literary interpretations and opens up new space for thought and inquiry. I believe this type of reading allows for a productive destabilization of gender.

In “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn” Love examines the role of the practice of close reading, or extended textual analysis, in contemporary literary criticism.

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<sup>45</sup>I am not sure what Sánchez Prado means by “women’s issues.” The phrase is part of his analysis of *Miss Bala* and *Traspatio*, both films that include violence against women committed by men. One assumes that he is referring to gender-based violence. It should be pointed out that gender-based violence is a collective and societal concern and just because feminist scholarship has been more invested in researching and trying to stop it does not mean that it is somehow only the responsibility or the interest of women.

She argues that for many, close reading is linked to a belief in the “the opacity and ineffability of the text and the ethical demand to attend to it” (371). Critics using this approach generally divine a latent, moral message in the text that ultimately reveals some humanist value or truth.

Characteristic of this approach is a focus on the richness of a text and the belief that it contains a great amount of insight and meaning beyond its surface. One can see this in López’s approach as a film critic. “Tears and Desire” includes an extended discussion of the ways in which melodrama has historically been dismissed by critics as unimportant and politically empty and/or conservative. López frames her reading as a kind of revindication of the genre and its artistic significance. Her willingness to read Sevilla’s body as pointing to a truth beyond that allowed by the storyline testifies to the richness of the film *Aventurera* and its political potential.

According to Love, critics of this approach, who point to its shaky relationship to the text and reliance on values outside of the text to give the text itself meaning, have tended to advocate a turn towards sociology, eschewing close reading in favor of approaches emphasizing the materiality of books, reading as a practice, and bibliographies. Love points out that this often becomes a source of perceived legitimacy, a way to avoid charges of subjectivity and instead acquire scientific legitimacy. Notably, as elaborated in the introduction, Sánchez Prado has been critical of the practice of close reading. In *Screening Neoliberalism*, he critiques scholars of Mexican film based in the US for what he perceives as an inattention to the sociological work coming out of Mexico that focuses more on audience composition and industry practices rather than close textual analysis (*Screening* 9). As his emphasis on the need to increase the number of women successfully directing films, Sánchez Prado’s approach to cinematic analysis, especially given its emphasis on quantitative analysis, is quite similar to the sociological one that Love describes.

Love contends that critics need not abandon close reading in order to avoid the pitfalls of the first approach. She proceeds to detail a style of close reading inspired by the work of Bruno Latour and Erving Goffman, both, oddly enough, sociologists who frequently referenced literature and whose research seems to affirm close reading as a methodology. Love argues that both Latour and Goffman deployed a kind of description in their work that, rather than unmasking truths or revealing key human values, serves to explicate the intricate ways in which some aspect of the social functions. The goal in such a description is not to illuminate a text's hidden depths, but to trace out how it works on the surface.

Love contends that such an approach can be extended to literature and proceeds to apply it to parts of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. She argues that moments in the text that appear quite sparse, lacking elaboration into the interior lives of characters and ornate prose, name the material effects of dehumanization of slavery. Love suggests that in these moments Morrison disallows interpretations of the text that emphasize the idea of dehumanization as something "that can be exorcised through cultivating an inside view" (386). A highly descriptive reading of these parts of the book reveals a refusal to give the reader a facile, humanist solution to the horrors of slavery but instead a demand that they recognize both the loss and suffering it entails. Such a reading does not reduce the novel to the call to adopt the correct viewpoint. Rather, the novel is revelatory with regards to slavery "...not by voicing an explicit protest against it, but by describing its effects" (386). Morrison's intervention is its refusal to offer readers the cathartic experience of identifying with the good and distancing or rejecting the evil. Instead she asks them to behold that evil.

Such a reading, which demands that critics focus on the details of a text without seeking to add depth and richness, but rather to map out and dissect what is in front of them, shares much

with what I do here. My goal here has not been to redeem cinematic sex workers nor to criticize the industry in which these images are produced, but to understand how they are constructing women and if and how that construction is being discursively related to state power and economic development. The utility in such a reading is that it does not get caught up in trying to correct negative representations, but rather to understand what work those representations are doing in a society and how they produce, sustain, and sometimes disrupt discourses about gender. This work in turn potentially facilitates the undoing of these representations through dismantling them, not the production of a more desirable replacement.

This understanding of gender parallels Daniel Nemser's recent work on the construction of race. Nemser points out that while, by and large, it is uncontroversial to call race a social construct today as opposed to the manifestation of biological difference, conceptualizations of race, even as a construct, are still often presumed to be rooted in some kind of meaningful difference onto which "representations are, more or less accurately, grafted" (4). Such an understanding of race results in an anti-racist politics in which the goal is to correct "these representations, better aligning them with the objects that they seek to represent, and affirming these identities and the difference they embody" (4). Nemser instead proposes to look at race not as an underlying or preexisting identity but rather "the result of a process called racialization" which itself depends on a complex and extended infrastructure whose development, implementation, and continuation produce racial difference (4). Such an understanding of race leads to anti-racist politics framed not around correcting representation, but dismantling racism's structural anchors and subsequently their material and psychological consequences.

The examples from López and Sánchez Prado suggest that women are an assumed, pre-existing group and that changing the representation from narrow and repressive to something

more complex and dynamic is the desired outcome for filmmakers and critics interested in fighting gender-based oppression. My own intention here is to look at how cinematically the idea of gender is constructed and sustained, not as the flawed representation of a “true” identity seeking fuller expression, but a complicated discursive assemblage of acts, behaviors, appearances, bodies, work, and other discourses bound together in a concept that itself changes regularly as a result of political and economic processes. In tracing how certain practices, bodies, and behaviors are gendered, gender is revealed not to be the representation of an innate difference, but a tool used to organize a population and its work. Gender, much like Foucault’s description of sexuality, serves a clear, albeit often changing, social function related to the division of labor and social reproduction. What such a reading potentially does is open up space to question the existence and foundation of categories like man and woman. The question ceases to be how to best represent women and becomes a matter of what systems perpetuate and are perpetuated by gender, to what extent those systems are desirable, and what other possibilities exist for organized social life.

A reading that is not redemptive, but rather highly descriptive, becomes a means by which to trace out how gender works in a representational economy. It allows for analysis that seeks to understand how a system of representation functions and suggests that this knowledge is useful because it provides a point from which to begin thinking how to deconstruct it. In short, it is a necessary beginning.

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