

S(ex)pression: Sexuality and Gender Oppression in Dirty War Argentina

by

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Abstract

The period of conflict known as the Dirty War was a pointedly sexual oppression inflicted on the people of Argentina by their fledgling militant government. For these adolescent powers that lacked political legitimacy, fear served as the primary instrument to ensure the loyalty of the people. The means to achieving this fear was the kidnapping, torture, and subsequent death of 10,000-30,000 of Argentina's youthful, leftist sector during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This domination was particularly sexual, which leads my theory to rest on gender studies and more specifically, queer theory. Thus, I have created a Male-Female analogy wherein I posit that the male force in a patriarchal society represents the machista government, and the people are represented by the female side of this metaphor. This analogy is founded in the idea that a conflict like that seen during the Dirty War period is a direct result of the expansion of prescribed gender roles, wherein the male feels he is leader of his domain (on a smaller scale—the family, and on a larger scale—the nation of Argentina) and must protect and punish this domain as he sees fit. Through thorough analysis of three works of literature emerging from the conflict at hand, the country's cultural production reflects this gendered oppression and the effects that such a sexual repression have left upon Argentine society. I will examine the novel *El beso de la mujer araña* by Manuel Puig, Luisa Valenzuela's compilation of short stories entitled *Cambio de armas*, and Nela Rio's poetry from *En las noches que desvisten otras noches*. Each of these stories supports the Male-Female analogy as each gendered relationship chronicled therein depicts a sexual oppression on a microcosmic, personal

level, as well as on a global and political scale in which the female protagonist represents Argentine society, while the male force is symbolic for Argentine state institutions.

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Introduction

The social history of Argentina remains to be triangulated as historians, citizens of the world, and cultural torchbearers attempt to uncover the truth through the few accounts of victims, survivors and recently de-classified government documents. It can be accepted that much bias is included in the account of history's winners; thus I will undertake the task of peering into the experiences of the losers as well in order to approximate a hidden truth. I have titled my project *S(ex)pression* to draw attention to the sexual nature of the domination investigated here, and the consequential eroticism of the works that I will analyze. My use of parenthesis visualizes the marginalization of the victims during this time period. After I introduce the late 20th century Argentine political oppression, I will utilize literary accounts of what was produced (and destroyed) by this distinctly gendered oppression. True accounts of Dirty War torture will highlight the reasons why I will continually refer to this tyranny as gendered, and these accounts will ground my subsequent exploration of gender prescription as the root of the iniquity seen during this era. An examination of these testimonials will open the door for a theoretical discussion about gender and its role in this historical conflict. My interpretation of three cultural responses to the government-sponsored terror aims to bring their authors together in restoring power to the people, while asserting the culpability of traditional sex roles in this conflict.

I have carefully chosen three Argentine works –the novel *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) by Manuel Puig, stories from the compilation *Cambio de armas* (1982) by Luisa Valenzuela, and poet Nela Rio's *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* (1989).

The diversity of genre further substantiates my chosen theoretical approach as categorical nominations are cast off, and allows for adequate representation of the cultural production of the Dirty War. These artists are cohesive to this study as they challenge the actions of Argentina's then-militant government in a show of the ultimate power reversal. The authors convert what was shamefully intimate and private for the victims into something public as they expose the ways that control was exercised with a violently sexual overtone. In the wake of such oppression, the people use their knowledge and their art to serve as historians, denying the Argentine government's desire to ignore the past. Though their lofty goals only made them more susceptible to censorship, they are nonetheless able to serve as global whistle-blowers, thus recovering the stolen power of the people.

The period of history known as the Dirty War has gone largely unknown to the masses despite its far-reaching cruelty. Though it has produced remarkable cultural outcomes from the beginning of the oppression outlined here, scholars have only recently had the benefit of witness retellings of the torture and despair experienced by the Argentine people. When Jorge Rafael Videla was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of Argentina's government in 1975, he stated, "As many people as necessary must die in Argentina so that the country will again be secure" (Qtd. in Karlin 56). It is certainly not an accepted truth that death brings security; furthermore, Videla's ambiguous language surrounding his proposed tactics leads me to accuse him of faulty logic and intent to manipulate as he prescribes existing problems that he will in fact effect himself. For example, he characterizes Argentina before his rule saying, "The indiscriminate use of violence by all sides engulfed the inhabitants of the nation in an atmosphere of insecurity

and overwhelming fear” (Qtd. in Loveman 161). I characterize this in opposition to his plan to enact a discriminate use of violence directed toward a generally leftist sector (Amnesty International 3). Videla’s government lacked credibility and the people were dually reluctant to hand their loyalties over to a man who promised death. Thus, fear was his primary instrument. He orchestrated the creation of death squads whose members were the agents of his morbid plan. Then, with the support of the United States Government and global corporations like Ford, these death squads set out to quash all independent thought, consistently claiming the presence of dissent (Amnesty International 4). If a government lacks legitimacy in its own right, then fear is the quickest route to forcing domination. It is not clear however, what allows a government to justify mass slaughter of its own countrymen in a mindless quest for power.

Manuel Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña* tells the story of two men who have been imprisoned on charges considered threatening to a dictatorial government. Valentín has been imprisoned for revolutionary actions, and his cellmate, Molina, is convicted of “corruption of youths”. This offense is a euphemism for homosexual. Puig’s novel chronicles the interaction of the two men who rely on one another’s company in order to pass the time. Molina begins his journey with Valentín through the recounting of four films, and it is immediately noted that the revolutionary protagonist is afraid of a sexuality that he finds *other* than his own. Valentín is initially in agreement with the government about the despicability of a man living a feminine existence, and he tends to poke fun at Molina in a show of his ignorance about such a lifestyle. The reader sees a continued transformation in each man, as the government’s enslavement serves to evolve each man and eventually, one takes on bold characteristics of the other. It seems that the

theory would be based in a discussion of Molina's open homosexuality, but indeed it becomes clear that the theme is riddled with discourse on the queering of Valentín. Popular queer theory affirms the statement that queer is actually a thing quite different from feminine or masculine, and I will examine what it means to be each of the three characterizations. Goldman cites Elisabeth Daümer in the *Queer Studies* anthology compiled by Brett Beemyn, who asserts, "In the queer universe, to be queer implies that not everybody is queer in the same way. It implies a willingness to articulate their own queerness" (170). Goldman furthers this comment, stating that "'queer' emphasizes the blurring of identities" (170). In fact, Molina has found himself in love with a man not for his feminine qualities, but rather for his display of what Molina believes to be a true man (Puig 59). Though Molina constantly refers to himself as a woman, this serves mostly to blur the lines of identity rather than to claim that he is indeed female. Though he does seem to display many traditional feminine qualities, the reader also sees a poignant discussion of how Molina is in fact just as much of a man as the vigilant revolutionary, Valentín. Molina places himself in the traditional role of a woman with regards to relations, sexual and otherwise, and by the end of the novel Valentín is no longer scolding him for his homosexuality, but rather his facile acceptance of a subordinate role. It is obvious that in a technical gender classification, the protagonists are both biologically male, but this discussion is more concerned in moving beyond anatomy towards the expression of the individuals' shifting perception of gender.

Another celebrated Argentine author, Luisa Valenzuela, interprets the oppression of her native country in a similar yet quite distinct manner. She focuses on the specific hardship of women in this turbulent time. Valenzuela's stories are fictitious; however, the

plots mirror real-life events. She re-imagines stories that for many Argentine women were all too real, thus exercising creative control over what in reality seemed barbarically, out of the woman's control. In the short story "Cambio de armas", Valenzuela paints the picture of a woman in captivity, like so many of those from reality. She is being held for the sake of political security, but in reality her purpose is to serve as a sex slave to her unnamed captor. This role serves to underline the fact that her captor is not specific as an oppressor, but rather he represents all those who fell on civilian prey. Due to the torture involved, the protagonist begins the story with no previous memory of a life outside of captivity. Any previous life of innocence free from thoughts of pain and suffering has now been erased and in its place is only the memory of hardship. Thus, I will examine the ways in which this story's protagonist, and the protagonists of "Cuarta versión" and "Ceremonias de rechazo" transform from strictly gendered roles into finding their queer selves.

Finally, I will examine the ways in which Argentine author Nela Rio accomplishes the shared goal of reassociation. She engages her artistic license to lyrically create, while serving the dual purpose of realistically presenting her theme. She writes about the details of the torture that occurred in late-twentieth century Argentina as she mentions the pain of those "que luchan por la verdad / la justicia y el amor" (6-7). Her poetry highlights the masculine force of those responsible for the persecution of the Argentine people. Though she often writes from a female perspective, I will argue that her voice is not gendered as it represents the suffering experienced by all. This confirms my representation of the people as the female side of the conflict, while it allows for the ultimate breakdown of sexual classification.

Though I have related queer theory to each work seen here in a distinct way, each application demonstrates the ways in which strict gender expectations can be damaging to a society. This destruction occurs on a personal level as each work's protagonists display, as well as a national and political level, proven by the mere existence of the Dirty War. Though the female will often be analyzed due to her specific sexual exploitation during this conflict, she will become a representation of what I call the female sector of society: the people. The Dirty War tells of a machista misuse of power by the government, directed towards the constituents. Because of the dominating implications of this extension of male gender roles, the people are placed in a damaging subordinate position with relation to those in rule. As I strip away the fallacies found within the tradition of prescribed gender norms, I will make clear the reasons why a society that functions outside of such expectations could eliminate conflict like that seen during 1980s Argentina.

Chapter 1. The Dirty War: Fact and Theory

I. Historical Overview

The Dirty War is considered a state-sponsored period of terror whose time frame is debated, but is generally accepted to have lasted from 1976 to 1983. During this period in which Jorge Rafael Videla ruled the military dictatorship, it is believed that any number between 10,000 and 30,000 individuals were disappeared. Videla stepped up after a tumultuous period following the coup d'état on Juan Domingo Perón's controversial government, and he found his power to be lacking in legitimacy. Thus, he employed fear to take the place of actual authority, and destroyed the country's leftist sector (Loveman 161).

Raul Alfonsín himself—the man that ultimately restored a democratic environment to post-Dirty War Argentina—brings light to the danger in ignoring such events. He states, “One cannot decree the amnesia of an entire society because every time anyone tried to sweep the past under the carpet, the past returned with a vengeance” (Robben 93). This holocaustic event of torture in twentieth-century Argentina must also be analyzed, ignoring no small detail. This task promises to be a difficult one, as the torture that is herein chronicled is particularly devastating due to its physical and mental implications—not only on the tortured, but also on the society of Argentina as a whole. These implications have manifested themselves in such a way that has produced a cultural richness which serves a purpose that the oppressors of Argentina could have hardly desired or predicted. Countless Argentine writers have turned the first hand accounts of devastation and pain into literary record, and they recount the events in a way that moves beyond the mere facts. In the ensuing discussion, one must first decide what

constitutes torture in order to fully understand its impact on the lives of those that experienced it first hand, as well as those that lived in constant fear of its manifestation in their own lives. Next, I will tell of the physical and mental experiences of such torture in all their detail, in order that such events may be recognized for their existence and possibility of reoccurrence. Finally, one must explore the effects of these events on Argentine culture, honing in on the literary response to the government's desperate tactics.

Webster's New World College Dictionary defines "torture" in multiple, telling ways. It labels the word in question as "1 the inflicting of severe pain to force information of confession, get revenge, etc. 2 any method by which such pain is inflicted 3 any severe physical or mental pain; agony; anguish 4 a cause of such pain or agony" (1512). Dictionary.com adds an interesting clause onto the end of the first definition given by Webster's; one that has much more meaning than the above mentioned "etc.". It adds that this infliction can be comprised of the above facets, "or for sheer cruelty" (Dictionary.com). This specification will be of great importance in this analysis, as we come to see that many of the torturers recognized the apparent innocence of their victims. In addition, one shall see that the tortured possessed an acute understanding of the maliciousness involved in their anguish, and even the oppressors will admit to their perverse joy founded in the act, though they will not describe it under such terms.

In the events leading up to the committal of the targeted into the torture camps, the Argentine government followed exact protocol under which they kidnapped their victims. It was very important for those in control to ensure that their targets were *disappeared* rather than arrested and executed, and in the mind of any cognizant person,

the reasons for this seem quite obvious. Arrests and executions require documentation, and documentation would need to be thorough in order that justification for such actions may be easily explained. It would not be a mere assertion to say that those conducting the disappearances, tortures, and subsequent deaths refused to document their actions because they lacked the explanation that would necessarily follow. Not only this, but it was widely felt even by the torturers that many of those being captured were not in fact the guilty. This fact, as one shall shortly understand, was of little or no concern to the powers that were. Raul Vilariño, a previous junior officer on the team that kidnapped supposed subversives for torture in the Argentine Mechanics School freely offers his input about his knowledge of the captives' innocence. He claims, "I was probably responsible for the kidnapping of about 200 people. Let's say that half were guilty. Of the 50 percent who weren't, a quarter had a certain ideology, although just because they have certain ideas doesn't mean they'll do terrible things.... I don't deny that we made five hundred thousand mistakes" (Qtd. in Actis ix-x). Furthermore, the purpose goes much deeper than mere punishment of those suspected of wrongdoing. The militant government desired to instill a sharp and deep fear in Argentine society, beginning with the individuals. Only here would it reach the doorstep of every Argentine home. The author of "Disappearance and Reburial in Argentina" Antonius C. G. M. Robben outlines the process that was followed for such undertakings:

Typically, [the intelligence/armed forces] would first ask for a "green light" from the local police station to prevent the police from responding to distress calls from any concerned neighbor. Next, the assault gang would force its way into a home under the cover of darkness, threaten and

beat the inhabitants into submission, blindfold their victim, and leave in unmarked private cars. (94)

In such an instance, those you would rely upon for help in situations of danger—the police—are no longer an option for protection. The people are left to their own devices, and those captured are as good as gone, left with no means of habeas corpus or due process (Robben 94). Robben expresses the state of panic that characterized Argentina after these events became recognized as possible and commonplace when he states, “Argentine society became terror-stricken. The terror was intended to debilitate people politically and emotionally without them ever fathoming the magnitude of the force that hit them.... They converted the torture of detainees into the anguish of friends, colleagues, relatives, and family members” (94-95). This torture began even before the unmarked cars arrived at the houses of their targets. It manifested itself as a web of fear, purposefully woven into the lives of the people that remained free.

Sadly, once liberty was no longer a reality for the prisoners, the torture became their new way of life. It took the place of all previous realities until that time in which they would be transferred—a euphemism for death. Whether or not the victims of such events were culpable of their convictions is also no longer a reality, for its relevance has no place in the torture camps so ironically labeled such things as “Olympus, the Hotel Sheraton, and the Little Schoolhouse” (Actis xv). Among the many ghoulish devices used on the victims in these camps were the *picana*—an electric prod; the *parrilla* [grill]; electrodes applied to the teeth, inner body, genitals, mouths, and wombs of women; starvation; suffocation; near drowning; the “helmet of death”; a police truncheon that was

often applied to the vagina; and beatings (Actis 442). In one telling account of such torture tactics, an individual named Miriam recounts her experience:

The torturers seem determined to let you know that they enjoy what they are doing to you.... It was a truly demonic scene.... [One of the torturers] brought his penis close to me, while the others threatened, ‘We’re going to go at you one by one, bitch.’ The truth is that I would have preferred an actual rape. I would have taken it as something more human, more comprehensible than the torture.... I was lying on a wooden table, and later they took me somewhere else, where there was an elastic belt and a metal cot, and they also wet me down to help conduct the electricity. And after the *electric prod* in my womb, in my vagina, in my eyes, on my gums, one of my most vivid memories is of how afraid I was that they would torture me again. (Qtd. in Actis 61-62)

Raul Vilariño, the junior officer mentioned previously, was also anxious to inform about the details of the torture in which he served as an onlooker or even an inflictor:

There was a door where someone has written “The Path to Happiness.” Behind that door was the torture chamber: electric shock machine, and iron band of a bed connected to a 220-volt machine, an electrode that went from zero to 70 volts, chairs, presses, and all kinds of instruments.... Have you ever been shocked by a refrigerator or another electric appliance? Add a hundred and multiply it by a thousand. That is what a person feels when he is tortured, a person who might be guilty or might not.... (Qtd. in Actis x)

Vilariño goes on to tell a particularly poignant story of torture, performed on a girl who was no older than seventeen years old. He describes her as a “sad-looking girl”, and states that at first, the torture tactics were business as usual: “cigarette butts, poking her, pulling her hair, beatings, pinchings.” She was not producing the desired results, and thus the severity increased:

They started with electricity. After a half hour of receiving blows and electric shocks, the girl fainted. Then they took her very delicately by the hair and legs and heaved her into a cell, into a pool of water so she’d swell up. Four or five hours later she was in terrible shape from swelling and they brought her back to the torture chamber. Then she’d sign anything—that she killed Kennedy or she fought in the Battle of Waterloo. That’s why I saw the facts gotten from torture weren’t real most of the time; they were just used to justify arresting the person.... (Qtd. in *Actis x*)

The author continues with a commentary, saying that “[Torture] produces confessions, certainly—but too many confessions. The torture victim is not a reliable source” (xi). For this reason, one can clearly see why the addendum to Webster’s definition of torture is necessary, adding “or for sheer cruelty” as a purpose for such actions. One can never rely on the truth of a statement made under such extreme circumstances, yet somehow, an estimated 30,000 lives were staked on such “truths” (Osiel 25-28). In the compilation of first hand accounts, “That Inferno”, Vilariño continues with his descriptions of the ghastly devices conceived for such horrible events:

One of the lively systems [that the camp doctor] invented to torture a pregnant woman was with a spoon. They put a spoon or a metallic

instrument in the vagina until it touched the fetus. Then they gave it 220. They shocked the fetus. [Interviewer]: What did you do, watching that? [Vilariño]: I vomited. What else could I have done? [Interviewer]: Were there people who enjoyed it? [Vilariño]: Of course. (Qtd. in Actis x)

Of the many first-hand accounts that exist recounting the horrific happenings behind the disappearances of so many of Argentina's young, boisterous community, these are only a few. However, they clearly depict the inhumanity inherent in such actions, and they serve to heighten awareness about the goings on in this turbulent political environment.

Unfortunately for the victims, the torture does not end with physical pain. It extends into the very fabric of the survivors future lives, though these survivors are only a select few.

The torture that existed during this turbulent and fear-stricken time in Argentina was multi-faceted. Physical pain does not constrain itself to the moment of affliction, but rather it infiltrates itself into the psyche of the sufferer. In one particular torture camp, the Mechanics School of the Argentine Navy, the victims were in a setting in which only chains and objects of torture separated them from their oppressors. While this may seem positive, as if the sufferer somehow had more freedom because of this, in actuality it had an adverse effect. The lines between *us* and *them* were inexplicably blurred, for both sides of the party. One testifier mentioned above, Miriam, speaks of how her captors would occasionally take her and others to dinner, or perhaps dancing. She recalls one reporter suggesting to her that because of these outings, she must have had it well off, at least in comparison to those who suffered in other camps, where jail bars separated the two worlds. Miriam responded curtly, quickly dissipating any thought that an outing with such animals would have been welcome:

Once they took a group of girls out dancing, but I'm going to give you the context: they had just murdered the husband of one of the girls.... You tell me that wasn't psychological torture at its most sophisticated—that your husband's murderers, who had beaten you and tortured you with an *electric prod*, should then take you out dancing. (Qtd. in Actis 90)

One can only imagine being forced to consort with those who have been the object of your pain and suffering for what must have felt like an interminable amount of time. Yet these women had no choice. In order to preserve their own lives, they were forced to oblige. Miriam also speaks of a time they were brought out with their oppressors to celebrate the World Cup. She recalls having seen all of those who were free, celebrating and cheering for the victory. But Miriam was not free, and after the celebration was over, she would not go home to her family. She was kidnapped, and would go home to face only more physical and psychological torture like that suffering outlined here (Actis 90-91). Part of this aspect of the torment came from the basic knowledge that others were suffering just as you were. Often times this twisted bond was felt between complete strangers, but more often it was fellow comrades or even family members. Miriam remembers the horror again: "... each torture process was unique. What happened to that guy who watched while they applied the *electric prod* to his twenty-day-old baby? What happened if they tortured a relative right in front of you?" (Qtd. in Actis 67). For these reasons, the pain brought from such torture is not isolated, but rather it works its way into every care and every hope that the tortured possesses.

The testimonies of mental pain continue, as the women who suffered tell of their lives after they became reintroduced to society. Simple tasks brought back vivid

memories, and the women outlined in “That Inferno” were only able to rehash their experiences after twenty years of recovery. Even still, the women had much difficulty in relating their experiences, over a period of time that lasted no less than three and a half years. They tell of the discomfort experienced, and of how the strongest of the women was forced to abandon the project due to continued mental anguish and the pain that resurfaced due to their determined documentation. They relay to the world the difficulties that they must encounter in every day life, as they attempt to re-integrate themselves into society:

After surviving a concentration camp, it is possible to live a seemingly normal life. You work, take the kids to school, travel, shop, go to the movies. Until—sometimes forcibly, destructively, searing like a lightening bolt or else softly, stealthily, enveloping like a fog—the concentration camp resurfaces. And you become paralyzed: you distinguish the smells; you see darkness; you hear the chains dragging, the metallic clanging of the doors, the sparks from the electric prod; you feel the fear, the weight of the disappearances. And above all, you feel the void left behind by the disappearances. (Qtd. in Actis 21)

This is a suffering that is felt for a lifetime, which for most of the disappeared promised to be a long time if they were so lucky to come out alive. The targets were predominantly of the younger generation, meaning that if indeed they were to survive, their anguish would not die with removal of their fetters. Instead, they continue living in pain, with little respite from the memory of fear that was ingrained into their being. The testifiers speak of the many difficulties of every day life such as the following: hearing a baby cry,

going to the dentist office, having routine medical procedures, child birth, healthy sexual encounters, and the like. This list is certainly not exhaustive, yet it serves to demonstrate the impossibility of reconciling normalcy after one has been the object of such events. For this reason, it is of paramount relevance to look into Argentine culture for the lasting effects of such great turbulence, as authors use their art to express the pain experienced within the borders of their native country.

II. Theoretical Overview

I propose that the Dirty War was catalyzed by continued social engenderment as a way of fulfilling stipulated masculine and feminine roles. In effect, I reject the patriarchal order as it applies to society, and with regards to the relation between a government and its people. This model ignores any feminine involvement and effect in the political and social realms. The feminine role in these realms is particularly crucial to this study, as the heightened sexual implications of every form of torture become quickly clear. I suggest that Videla's militant government acted out of a need for masculine power, expanding the expected patriarchal role that a male would fulfill in his own household, thus repressing the feminine sector of society represented by the people as a body. Thus, my argument that violence of this nature could be avoided with continued mitigation of gender expectations rests on the axis of a Male-Female relationship. Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus J. Stam echo French philosopher Michel Foucault as they lay groundwork that will serve to uphold my stance about the relationship between the power play during the Dirty War and gender roles. The above-mentioned theorists state, "Power, like an entity, may be ceded from one person to another and may be acquired by virtue of one's position within a social hierarchy or through sheer brute force" (2). I assert that one facet

of this social hierarchy, beyond caste distinctions, is gender. Even in the most elite of sectors, the traditional model would place male on a higher societal plane than female. This viewpoint is faulty on many accounts, for society builds itself on this patriarchal model without justification (Radtke 9). Physical capability is not synonymous with ultimate power, and male is not synonymous with ultimate physical capability. The final sub-argument to this syllogism is, naturally, that male is not synonymous with ultimate power. Therefore, I pinpoint distinct reasons why society has unquestioningly accepted male superiority for the ultimate goal of showing that in a vacuum, gender should not function outside of mere anatomy and that when it does, oppression necessarily follows. I will present the opinions of theorists like gender studies pioneer Marilyn French, who ascribes reasons why a masculine society necessitates female subjugation for reasons such as the ultimate reproductive power of the female, before technology (Radtke 19-22). Additionally, this study calls for the blending of many theories –regarding violence, sex, power, gender–in order that the complex Male-Female relationship be understood amongst the legacy of trauma that was born from this connection. Queer theory allows and even encourages this amalgamation, given that it recognizes the elimination of gender roles in their entirety. It calls for an examination of what patriarchal civilization views as masculine and feminine in order that it might subsequently prove why these prescriptions are arbitrary and unfounded. Queer theory elasticizes the binary gender construct and suggests a third category known as queer, that moves beyond anatomy in suggestion of a flexible anti-gender that would facilitate equality and the mitigation of gendered oppression. The term *queer* re-appropriates what was previously a homophobic slur in order to underscore the novelty of a flexible gender notion. Queer theorist Ruth

Goldman states that the theory's ongoing goal is "a strong commitment to creating/maintaining a theoretical space for polyphonic and diverse discourses that challenge hetero-normativity" (Qtd. in Beemyn 170). To name a few, my interpretation of these creative s(ex)pressions will be rooted in the philosophies of Michel Foucault and his exploration of gender, sexual pleasure, discipline, and torture; Judith Butler's examination of power and its subsequent relation to gender; and Radtke and Stam's compilation of theoretical works that also tightly link gender to power and the reasons for their exploitations. This critical study sets the framework for my discussions on the literature emerging from the Dirty War era and will be woven into its analysis. I have selected these authors based on their common goal of putting the power back into the hands of the people by presenting to the world the actions of the militant Argentine government. Documentation is the key to unraveling the mystery as to why humankind continues to enslave one another, making fellow humans prey to masochism at the hands of their very own government. When government is no longer a source for protection, Argentine writers turn to their pen (Kuhnheim 90-91). The pen is without discrimination, and though censorship reared its ugly head to these chroniclers, writers used their art as a fountain of knowledge and a statement of protest.

III. Queer Theory

Before delving into the ways that physical trauma acts to put into question a person's own being, we must outline what I assert queer theory to be, and how it will be used in the current thesis. This theory is quite indefinable in concrete terms, and what one agrees upon as queer theory, the next will refute. Queer has been born to mean many things, and it has even been called a blank slate of sorts that can take on the flavor of

whatever sort of gender argument you wish to apply to the theory: “Unless we strive to elaborate its meaning whenever we use it in our theories, it becomes like theoretical tofu: it will simply absorb the meaning of whatever particular aspect or aspects of queerness we are addressing” (Qtd. in Beemyn 172). The theory could be considered a branch of post-modernism, and it expands the role of feminism to include all those individuals who would step outside of their prescribed societal role, females and males alike. I do intend to specify what I posit as queer, and though I sense that Ruth Goldman uses the term “theoretical tofu” in a pejorative way, I assert that this is indeed a positive facet, and in fact the only appropriate usage for the theory when its own philosophy is examined. If queer (as I apply it) denotes the absence of a defined norm or identity, then it seems fit that queer itself would wander through theoretical discourse sans normative identity as well. That is just how I use queer: it serves as the casting off of what is masculine and what is feminine in order to adopt a third possible category. This third category defies categorization, as it accepts the entire spectrum of gender as possible and rather inconsequential. The end to which gender becomes an issue is the means by which it is used to maim and destroy, as it was used during the Dirty War period. Queer serves my purposes as it supports my claim that such binary gender prescriptions are damaging, and especially destructive when they are expanded to a political environment as they were during the 1980s in Argentina. Singer quotes Foucault in a phrase that will materialize just what I mean by expansion of gender roles to a political sphere: “Foucault’s analysis emphasizes the flexibility and diversity of power deployments with respect to constructing sexuality as a site for intervention into the lives of bodies and populations” (Qtd. in Beemyn 149). Thus, those in a position of power are able to use sexuality, a

point of vulnerability, in order to intervene into the personal lives of their constituents or of the population as a whole. Queer theory queers this normally vulnerable sexuality by making it a much less constricted idea: “One important aspect of queer theory is that it allows us to view the world from perspectives other than those which are generally validated by the dominant society” (Beemyn 165). This is precisely why the term queer is so hard to define—it is as yet undefined, for it has not been recognized by the dominant patriarchal order as an acceptable categorization. One quite glaring problem with the theory in general is that each academic tends to want to use it just as described above, as “theoretical tofu”. This cannot be deemed unacceptable for, as we have stated, one cannot be wrong for applying any set of gender characteristics to something that is already so amorphous. Goldman affirms this:

The fact that such very different approaches to scholarship are often lumped into the same category indicates that queer theory has many, sometimes conflicting, interpretations. To some people, queer theory represents simply another nebulous, abstract form of academic discourse, understood only through the signifier of “queer”: a complex term which itself allows for many, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. (Qtd. in Beemyn 169-170)

Since the idea is indeed so inclusive (a characteristic I believe is quite complementary and reaffirming of its true philosophy), I must be a bit narrower in order that my application of the broad terminology may be understood throughout the course of my thesis. I will apply the term queer whenever the identity of the person in question is brought away from those binary prescriptions given under a patriarchy (masculine,

feminine, and yes, even homosexual, for this marginalizes the bearer). In my discussion of *El beso de la mujer araña* we will see the queering of both protagonists and also of the reader. Valentín, a revolutionary, will soon adopt many characteristics of his regally effeminate cellmate, Molina, who will equally adopt characteristics of his counterpart. This is truly a quintessential example of queer for my purposes, for it supports the idea that each person actually has all of this capability living inside of them, yet they are repressed into choosing one that would fit nicely into a societal structure even if it causes them to be marginalized. For example, before his queering Molina identifies himself as a woman—an acceptable nomination under a patriarchal order. I will additionally discuss the un-queering of the protagonist Laura in Valenzuela’s “Cambio de armas”. This seems quite convoluted until one recognizes the way in which her oppressor tries to re-mold a subversive woman back into her female role and prescribed set of norms. She regains her queer self by rejecting this option set forth by society. In the poetry of Nela Rio, the torturers indeed queer themselves through their inhumanity, as “se deshacen como hombres”. They have undone themselves as men by rejecting humanity as a benevolent idea, and they can no longer fit into this order whilst they are no longer men. They are “ángeles negros”, as the poet states, and must be judged on a different plane entirely for even the most patriarchal of males could not commit such horrific crimes (from Rio’s perspective).

Now that the overarching term queer has been narrowed down to the extent that it will allow, I must clarify the reasons why I deem these binary nominations as harmful in the first place. I blame these norms for destruction like that seen during the Dirty War for, as mentioned above, they only allow for acceptance of those who fit into their stingy

categories. Sex is a thing to be considered, and I posit that it is merely constituted of anatomy (which would also include the hormonal factor). I propose that gender is a thing quite different from sex, and that it is culturally prescribed. Judith Butler agrees with the notion that sex and gender are not linked beyond anatomy: “Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Butler in *Gender Trouble* 6). And when sex and gender are deemed one and the same, violence can often be the result. For, as Butler furthers in *Precarious Life*, violence is the elected way to avert a body of people away from a nomination found to be undesirable to one that can be accepted by those in power:

Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another.... Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions... (28-29)

So, the raw vulnerability exposed by violent tactics employed to sway a people to the wishes of their government is a thing to be avoided, and it can be accepted that this is the Argentine situation during the Dirty War.

Furthermore, Jill Vickers and Marilyn French set forth the motivation for a society to construct itself in a patriarchal manner (and why patriarchy must be synonymous with female repression). They posit that reproductive power is at the heart of

the problems that have been consistently seen between gender and political and social power. French is steadfast in her position that throughout history males have been socially challenged to create their own identity due to nature's seeming favor for the female sex. Besides the statistics that state that, given equal treatment from birth, 105-106 females will survive to every 100 males, nature has endowed the female with the ultimate power. This power is reproduction, in which a male is needed initially, but carries no equal role in the nurturing and creation of a child:

Females conceive, bear children and feed them from their bodies, and have always taken responsibility for maintaining them—that is, maintaining the entire human race. The male contribution to procreation not being obvious, no male role beyond sexual drive seems 'given' by nature. For these reasons, males far more than females have been driven to *create* an identity.... To feel equal to women, men needed an equal power. Learning that they participated in procreation gave them such a power, but in an indirect, unprovable way: as the old saying advises, it is a wise child who knows his father. (Qtd. in Radtke and Stam 16-20)

French suggests that this lack of the power of reproductive knowledge historically made the male feel inadequate and duped, and that this species of sex constructed society around women in a way that defies nature's true allocation of power. She further states, "However males defined themselves during the first millions of years of human occupation of Earth, within the past ten thousand years they redefined themselves in a way that contradicted natural fact: men call themselves powerful, indeed dominant. But this definition is flung in the face of nature, not given by it" (Qtd. in Radtke and Stam

16). She goes on to list a number of animal societies in which the male is not even a part of the active society and roams alone while the women group together in care for the young. Animals named by French that follow this pattern include lions, elephants, and chimpanzees, and she further reflects upon our human society's peculiar habit of categorization of these groups. French continues, "Among some mammal species, females allow a single male to live in their otherwise all-female communities. Male ethologists often call such groups *harems*, using language to suggest that males control and have authority over females, which they do not" (Qtd. in Radtke and Stam 16). Thus, this example perfectly reinforces the theoretical basis upon which the current thesis lies, demonstrating the reasons why a female faction (the Argentine people as a whole) would threaten the power of the self-proclaimed dominant male group (the militant Argentine government of the Dirty War). To set the tone for this relationship, I emphasize the fact that this can be viewed from a narrower perspective as well, looking at the relationship between the actual male and female in society. Initially, this may seem to support a feminist approach, however it evolves with the implication of queer theory. This is so because here, I am not limiting who can be perceived as *female* simply due to anatomy, for I call to do away with such strict definitions. For my purposes, the female is that person who challenged the established patriarchal structure. This classification applies to the revolutionary, the homosexual, and even the female who elects to aim a gun in defense of her nature-given power—to name a few examples chronicled in the chapters to follow.

IV. Conclusion

The historical facts of the Dirty War make clear the undeniable oppression that occurred during the 1980s in Argentina, and the sexual nature of this dictatorship is highlighted. Men, women, and children alike suffered torture and death at the hands of their new militant government, and they were accused for the mere tactic of instilling fear in a people that had no other reason to trust the fledgling government. Due process was a foreign concept during this period, and mere existence could land one in a torture camp adorned with a lofty name to conceal its true purpose. The concrete facts that are now available to the public, although much valuable information is continually withheld to this day, open the door for a theoretical discussion of the structure of the torture and fear that was employed upon an innocent people. The highly sexual nature of the oppression causes me to adopt a Male-Female relationship between the government and the people, using queer theory to re-structure society's rigid gender norms in order to open the opportunity that *female* and *male* be defined in a looser, more all-encompassing manner. This redefinition is necessary in order that we may consider the oppressed people of Argentina a feminine faction, including any individual who dared to dissent against the machista militants. Additionally, queer theory examines the reasons why strict gender prescriptions allow for oppression like that seen during the Dirty War, as it denies viability to any individual who does not fit into these two tightly defined categories. The coming chapters will analyze three authors whose works emerged from the devastation caused during 1980s Argentina. I will frequently return to the Male-Female model presented here, and its backbone will consistently find solidarity in the ideas of queer theory.

Chapter 2. “When people ask me, ‘Are you gay?’ I say, ‘I’m a person.’”*: Manuel Puig and *El beso de la mujer araña*

I. Introduction

Manuel Puig’s intricate novel, *El beso de la mujer araña*, confirms my notion of queer on its many levels. The story line depicts two men, dangers to society for two distinct reasons, who are marginalized for this perceived threat and thus shut off in a cell where they can seemingly no longer be of harm to the machista regime. Throughout the course of the novel they queer each other into this new identity that needs not cling to one set of notions on how a man (or woman) should behave, but the military powers are the true catalyst for this change, as they shut the two dangerous men away so as not to let their poison reach other parts of the proverbial body. Furthermore, the detailed structure of the work queers the reader, as one finds themselves frequently confused with the difficult task of identifying the speaker. This technique sends the message that who speaks which lines is indeed not the question of consequence; rather, this is the point of such a diversion. The reader is queered by means of this technique through a slow realization that to identify the speaker is often to judge him, applying existing characteristics or stereotypes to two ever-evolving beings. Puig’s work supports just this sort of identity shift with every written word of *Beso de la mujer araña*, beginning with his early life in Argentina.

II. A Queer Beginning

The literary creations of Manuel Puig seem to take on the retrospective form of his life experiences, namely those of his early childhood. Puig’s notion of *total sexuality*

* *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions* by Suzanne Jill Levine; pg 261

as the only natural sexuality seems to be born out of a cornucopia of contradictory gender plays he watched performed by his family and other Argentines that surrounded him (Levine 261). The young boy, nicknamed Coco to represent the male family line, was born in the province of Buenos Aires, in the rural town of General Villegas on December 28, 1932. This name proved ironic, as Puig associated himself much more closely with his mother and the matriarchal line of his family. Every part of Puig's interior and exterior life seems to present a conundrum of identity, beginning from the very basis of his family life in patriarchal Argentina (Levine 13). Though religion plays a role in my analysis only to the point that it traditionally encourages male superiority, leadership, and a heterogynous sexuality, a certain importance lies in the fact that Coco's mother raised him in distaste for Catholic fanaticism and the hypocrisy that seemed to follow (Levine 20). From the very start, the author lived in an environment that opposed this religious tradition. The natural spirits of his mother and father additionally opposed gender roles prescribed by Argentine society, and Manuel often sensed a falsity inherent when his daydreaming father would play "strange authority games" in an effort to exude the machismo that was characteristic of Puig men. Coco felt that traditional male-female expectations kept his parents from recognizing the strengths that would allow them to have a meaningful relationship –his passive father always yearned to be the overbearing male provider, while his mother was the true provider, strong and pragmatic, striving to fit into society's perception of how a wife and mother should comport herself (Levine 27).

It is clear that Manuel related closely to his mother, and I will later visit her contribution to *El beso de la mujer araña* (heretofore referred to as *Beso*) as well as the

importance of the mother-son relationship in Puig's own gender theory as expressed in the footnotes of the novel. Puig's cousin Ernesto recalls his first memory of Manuel as a toddler, "wearing his mother's nightgown, much too long for him, and a pair of her high-heeled shoes, and he was walking and dancing on top of the bed" (Levine 42). From a very early age and throughout his lifetime, the author possessed a strong affinity for cinema and became infatuated with the notion of the powerful, traditional female role as Hollywood often depicted it. Levine states, "...Manuel tended to frame his life's episodes as revivals of classic women's pictures, with himself in the leading role" (Levine 253). This love for movies also bleeds through in *Beso*, as it defines the structural integrity of the novel. I cannot assert that the influence of the female actress or the confusion of gender identity at an early age is the catalyst for Puig's homosexuality, for, as *Beso* itself makes painstakingly clear, there is no absolute truth regarding its origin. I would like to go even further in identifying the author's own sexuality due to Puig's personal definition of the same. Though he clearly possessed the strongest affinity for men, he had affairs with several women and believed his own orientation to be that which is mentioned in the title to this chapter, that of a person. Levine calls this androgyny *feminism*, but I beg to differ in the belief that Puig was a living representation of queer theory before it was penned. The feelings that he expresses about homosexuality mirror my prescription for how queer theory queers the homosexual and the heterosexual alike. Puig echoes Theodor Roszak when he states, "...the woman most desperately in need of liberation is the woman every man has locked up in the dungeons of his own psyche" (261). Thus, each person possesses a male and a female spirit, or just one spirit that Puig defines as *total sexuality*. This term suggests that a person's genitalia should not define their

sexuality and even further, that sexuality does not define the individual. Puig even further aids me in defining what I submit as queer:

For me [homosexuality] doesn't exist. Heterosexuality doesn't exist either. Sex isn't transcendental.... What's transcendental for me is affection.... I don't think there's a difference between men and women, except for what they have between their legs. The distinction between masculinity and femininity, the whole notion of role playing, isn't natural.... It's terrible that, to enjoy sex, people have to assume a role that would give them and their partners a kick. (Qtd. in Levine 261)

This notion, as spoken by Puig, shapes the very argument of *Beso*, although in his early life he was also a subjected to society's binary nominations.

Though his first sexual encounter was at a very young age and with a girl, his adolescence was marked by his obvious magnetism towards men. Puig was a highly sexual child, perhaps due to the encouragements of those around him and classmates who would masturbate together and play "making love" in which the boys would take turns touching one other. Per the author's own confessions, he was the one most willing to lower his pants first, making himself the object of enjoyment (Levine 44). This seems to characterize Manuel from an early age, causing him to systematically become the male lover of schoolboys throughout his preparatory education, and he was forced to change schools upon a questionable encounter in a bathroom at his first school in which an older boy unsuccessfully raped the young Puig (53). His attraction for male lovers continued, though in the fashion of his own sexual theory, he also felt stimulation from female lovers. The similarity of Puig's own notion of sex with that which I will maintain using

Queer Theory is almost uncanny, and it is further upheld by the manner in which Puig crafts the sexual individual in *Beso*. Additionally, I sustain that the author's self-identification was queered through the androgyny of his life's external factors such as the gender roles played by his parents, enjoyment of his homosexual tendencies by other males, as well as the ever-changing political environment of Argentina during his life.

III. Two distinct identities

In *Beso*, Manuel Puig places two distinct characters in opposition, both imprisoned by their own culture as punishment for their own, personal beliefs apart from societal traditions. Matthew Teorey comments that in creating the literary web that is *Beso*, Puig “responded to Western society’s rigid social mores and conventional literary style with an Arachnean tapestry of words, a polyphonic mixture of oral and written storytelling that guides the reader to a more harmonious, integrated self” (2). Molina, the homosexual protagonist, is imprisoned for corruption of youths while Valentín serves time for disruptive acts related to revolutionary activity (Puig 17). Per Puig’s design, to serve as characters the reader is first given two contrasting identities—gay and revolutionary—and at the start they necessarily fulfill each respective archetype in the reader’s mind without extending meaning beyond this initial stereotype. This element will quickly change, as everything shall in this novel, but I stress the importance of the two men, at first glance, strongly representing their perceived social identity alone. Each initial identity is exactly why its bearer merits a place in the jail. Both Molina and Valentín are dangers to the rigid machista government—one for being a man, yet not fulfilling the gender expectations that go along with his anatomy, and the other for challenging the regime all together.

The structure of the novel immediately seems simple—a dialogue—but will soon become quite intricate, mirroring the quality of the message Puig sends. Teorey furthers, “The novel disrupts conventional masculine narrative style and explores the complexity of identity by intertwining various storytelling methods...” (3). For much of the work the dialogue exists only between Molina and Valentín, and is rather fast paced due to lack of narrative voice and structure. We know only as much as is spoken between the two men, and later on between secondary characters, in contrast with the frequent omniscience that comes with narration. This places the reader in the same marginalized, ignorant position in which both protagonists begin, as they see one another for no more than society sees them (Teorey 3). Furthermore, the speaker is not identified, in a technique that structurally queers the protagonists. As the reader gets lost in the dialogue, he or she also is frequently confused, searching for the source of the dialogue in order to discern who is speaking which words. This is no accident, for Puig desires this, internally showing the reader that it actually is of no consequence. They will become one another in any case, and the reader is unable to arbitrarily judge or assign prescribed characteristics to a man he cannot identify. Thus, the reader is also queered as he or she slowly realizes the unimportance of such rigid classifications and begins to see each man for his quality and not for a set of assigned stereotypes that fit within the nominations *gay* and *revolutionary*.

Molina is a lover of the cinema just as Puig himself was, and thus recounts to Valentín plot lines of his favorite films to pass the time in the jail cell. I will later analyze this feature of the novel in and of itself, but a brief introduction further demonstrates the identities in which each man begins the novel, and the trajectory they follow in order to finally each encompass the other’s grand defining characteristic while maintaining their

own (gay or revolutionary). These stories serve as microcosms to the larger change happening in each man, and their protagonists and plots support the overall framework of the novel. Through the telling of films and the general interaction of the cellmates, the reader looks on as one man eventually becomes the other without losing the man he was at the start. Puig confirms this event saying, “In that cell there are only two men, but that’s just on the surface. There are really two men and two women” (Levine 260). Valentín, at first frightened by Molina’s sexuality, develops sentiment towards his cellmate and eventually the two men become lovers. Herein lies the crux of Puig’s message—throughout the love affair, Valentín does not become homosexual; rather, for our discussion he is queered in much the same way Molina is queered toward subversion.

I must impart my discussion of the queering of Molina and Valentín with a discussion of their self-notions. Valentín, though a proclaimed heterosexual, almost immediately asexualizes himself, placing himself and his cause above physical desires in importance. He is a staunch follower of Marxist ideals, which he interprets as the abandonment of all that is not social revolution, even sexual pleasure. He states, “Mientras dure la lucha, que durará tal vez toda mi vida, no me conviene cultivar los placeres de los sentidos, ¿te das cuenta?, porque son, de verdad, secundarios para mí” (Puig 33). Sifuentes-Jáuregui confirms the Marxist effect on sexuality by saying, “The totalizing impulse of the Marxist-signifier—that is, claiming that ‘I am a Marxist’—perversely erases sexuality.... homosexuality is an excess that in its own supplementarity challenges the perversion of ‘compulsory asexuality’ articulated by the Marxist. I say ‘perversion’ because it is an ‘unhealthy’ heterosexuality...barren of pleasure” (158-159). This Marxist-signifier places Valentín already outside of sexual classification; thus,

through the course of the novel he is queered back into an erotic lifestyle. In the beginning, Valentín exhibits uneasiness towards Molina's outward expression of homosexuality, and he mirrors society in his chastisement and misunderstanding of the classification. By existing in the cell with Molina, he grows accustomed to his counterpart's feminine tendencies in what Sifuentes-Juaregui calls the homosexual space "par excellence" (155). The prison environment is jokingly accepted in the modern world as a place where homosexual encounters often occur, in modernisms such as, "Don't drop the soap!". This is a colloquialism that conveys the homophobia that exists in today's society and a definite fear of such unions. In a theoretical discourse, humans have a natural need for sexual fulfillment and thus, in an enclosed space with another human, it seems to necessarily follow that sex acts will occur. Teorey affirms, saying, "Patriarchy's attempt to reassert its authority over these social transgressors, in addition to their own rejection of their assigned male identity, propels them into an ungendered liminal space where they become nonselfes" (4). What Teorey calls the nonself, I would posit is much closer to queer, or the existence of only one self made up of a conjunction of characteristics traditionally limited to any given male or female individual.

Molina conversely fulfills the immediate stereotype of the "queen"—basically, he considers himself more woman than man. Furthermore, it is not simply that he considers himself a woman, but a regal woman, or, the highest and most pure form of woman. This perception is buried deep in his psyche due to a lifetime of societal feedback. Molina himself confirms the stereotypes that he has constantly faced:

Todos igual, me viene con lo mismo, ¡siempre!.... Qué de chico me mimaron demasiado, y por eso soy así, que me quedé pegado a las polleras

de mi mamá y soy así, pero que siempre se puede uno enderezar, y que lo que me conviene es una mujer, porque la mujer es lo mejor que hay.... Sí, y eso les contesto... ¡regio!, ¡de acuerdo!, ya que las mujeres son lo mejor que hay... yo quiero ser mujer. (Puig 25)

Gay is accepted as a feminine classification. Society continues to grudge, ignoring the obvious observation that if a gay man were actually feminine, the act of uniting himself, or herself, with another man would be a heterosexual act. Due to this conundrum, homosexuals are marginalized just as Valentín initially marginalizes Molina in his mind in the pattern of their political contemporaries by imprisoning the flamboyant window dresser. Molina indeed has a fantasy of enjoying so-called straight men—a relationship he fancied in the past and one he will soon fulfill in his jail cell. Says Molina of the man he desired in the outside world, "...él es un hombre normal. Fui yo quien empezó todo, él no tuvo la culpa de nada" (Puig 65). This fact, along with his affinity for female stars, cinema, and a highlighted relationship with his mother will cause Molina to be a representation of Puig himself as he mirrors many of his defining characteristics (Levine 63). Furthermore, Molina clings to the female notion as outlined by patriarchy, and he feels that in order to fully represent this role, he must be pointedly feminine and possess a desire to be reigned over by a man. It is, after all, a man that Molina truly desires. He identifies himself with the female sex to the point of confusion when he repeatedly refers to himself using the feminine gender. He treats himself in a degrading way, causing the impression that he is merely a parrot, repeating the slurs that society has hurled at him due to a life of femininity. He classifies those of his inclination saying, "Yo y mis amigas somos mu-jer. Esos jueguitos no nos gustan, esas son cosas de homosexuales. Nosotras

somos mujeres normales que nos acostamos con hombres” (207). Speaking of a friend, he says, “No, él que vino es una amiga, es tan hombre como yo” (Puig 64-65). He goes even further, using demeaning nicknames to refer to himself and others “de [sus] inclinaciones” (66). He says, “Yo estaba con otros amigos, dos loquitas jóvenes insoportables. Pero preciosas, y muy vivas.... cuando yo digo loca es que quiero decir puto” (67). When he says “putos”, he means homosexuals. In Spanish slang, the word *puto* is a derogatory term used to refer to a male prostitute, but it is also often used to denote homosexuality much in the same way as the offensive English slang *fag*. Describing himself and the man he longed for, a waiter, he causes constant confusion due to his purposeful habit of calling himself a “she” in relation to his love. He states, “Sí, perdoname, pero cuando hablo de él yo no puedo hablar como hombre, porque no me siento hombre” (69). Thus, I must ask, what does a man feel like? Molina certainly has his own idea about what masculinity might feel like, for he is able to classify his handsome waiter as “un hombre de veras” (68).

After calling him thus, Valentín feels curiosity at just what constitutes a real man. Though the reader is not explicitly told, Molina’s rare beliefs cause Valentín to question the validity of the queen’s male definition as well, inciting him to challenge what he has previously considered masculine. He thought *he* was masculine, fulfilling the necessary Marxist prescription. Valentín asks, “Qué es ser hombre, para vos?” (61). His answer is the perfect reproduction of society’s misgivings: “Es muchas cosas, pero para mí... bueno, lo más lindo del hombre es eso, ser lindo, fuerte, pero sin hacer alharaca de fuerza, y que va avanzando seguro. Que camine seguro... que sepa lo que quiere, adonde va, sin miedo de nada” (69). Here, Valentín queers Molina, calling his bluff and saying

that his notion is no more than a little girl's fantasy. Of equal importance is knowing how Valentín defines a man, to which he answers, "...[Lo que hace un hombre es] no dejarme basurear...por nadie, ni por el poder... Y no, es más todavía. Eso de no dejarme basurear es otra cosa, no es eso lo más importante. Ser hombre es mucho más todavía, es no rebajar a nadie, con una orden, con una propina. Es más, es...no permitir que nadie al lado tuyo se sienta menos, que nadie al lado tuyo se sienta mal" (70). Here, I must draw the reader's attention to the quality of each man's response regarding the make-up of a man. Neither classification is gender specific. Both are recreated ideas of what society has told each man that one of his gender should be, but I could substitute the discussion with the word "woman", and still the dialogue would be believable. Thus, each individual unknowingly confirms that his idea of gender roles are oxymoronic, and are indeed not restricted to any one anatomical make-up.

Even more than just classifying himself as a woman, Molina desires to fulfill the prescribed patriarchal notion of female subordination. After several sexual encounters between the two men, Valentín recognizes a pattern in Molina's sexuality. He not only feels genetically female, but he has taken on a role identical to that expected of a woman in a patriarchal structure. He plays the bottom role, the *catcher*, as colloquially addressed in modern society. This slang term denotes submissiveness in a category of homosexual, which is already looked down upon for male femininity. Michel Foucault confirms this stereotype saying that those who performed acts deemed "'contrary to nature' were stamped as especially abominable...perceived simply as an extreme form of acts 'against the law'" (Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* 38). Thus, the *catcher* is the receiver, and he is further chastised for his role as the woman in a yet marginalized classification.

Valentín is now more queer than Marxist male, and one good turn deserves another. He questions Molina's tendencies:

--¿Por qué entonces, no se te ocurre ser... actuar como hombre? No te digo con mujeres, si no te atraen. Pero con otro hombre....—Pero si un hombre... es mi marido, él tiene que mandar, para que se sienta bien. Eso es lo natural, porque él entonces... es el hombre de la casa. —No, el hombre de la casa y la mujer de la casa tienen que estar a la par. Si no, es una explotación.... —La gracia está en que cuando un hombre te abraza... le tengas un poco de miedo. —Vos no lo sentís así, te hicieron el cuento del tío los que te llenaron la cabeza con esas macanas. Para ser mujer no hay que ser... que sé yo... mártir. Mirá... si no fuera porque debe doler mucho te pediría que me lo hicieras vos a mí, para demostrarte que eso, ser macho, no da derecho a nada. (246-247)

Here, Molina expresses exactly the conundrum that is produced when males and females feel the need to express their gender outwardly in traditional ways. This moment serves as the queering of Molina, for in Valentín's court the hard work has been accomplished. But as any sentient being must recognize, Molina's state as a gay male does not make him necessarily progressive. Here, he has demonstrated that he is equally imprisoned by gender norms as Valentín was prior to his mind's evolution. He sees himself as a woman, and lives out those societal requirements down to the specific details, perhaps even more intensely than an average anatomical woman might. For instance, the notion that sexual climax is the man's right, and the woman's duty to bring her man to that level is a quite archaic notion, ignoring that the woman derives pleasure from the sex act outside of the

pleasure she brings her man (Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* 37). In Molina's mind, this is the woman's role in an intimate encounter, and he finds gratification in the supplying.

IV. Storytelling

On another level, the film plot lines recounted by Molina all depict the act of queering in their own unique forms. The novel opens as the first film is already being told, and the reader immediately senses Valentín's uneasiness and distaste for Molina's style, presumably due to the discomfort it produces in his mind, also a product of societal conditioning. He criticizes Molina for his emotions saying, "Pero no seas así, sos demasiado sensible.... Eso es cosa.... —Decílo, que soy como una mujer ibas a decir. --Sí" (Puig 34). He fears, just as those who imprisoned Molina in the first place feared, corruption of his staunch revolutionary, masculine ideals. However, entertainment wins over and the acceptance of Molina's companionship, even if not explicitly stated, begins the process of queering his mind. Teorey comments upon the films' recounting: "A transgendered homosexual who loves romantic films, Molina uses storytelling and sexuality to help 'her' troubled cellmate escape his hypermasculine identity, which Valentín subconsciously finds untenable, and rediscover his femininity" (5). Molina paints a secondhand account of the story of a woman, Irena, natural of a small village at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains. She clings to the notion of a myth from her land that certain women, recognizable by their cat-like features, are slaves to the folklore and are literally sexual jaguars. That is to say, in the moment of intimacy, the woman turns into a jaguar and rips her lover to shreds. Irena represents a danger to society in the same way that Molina and Valentín threaten the Argentine powers of the Dirty War. This fear

of transforming keeps Irena away from any such encounter, but love does not wait for an invitation. Consequently, the woman becomes enamored and even marries, but she cannot bring herself to consummate the marriage, for she is frightened she will destroy her lover. This act of devouring her lover parallels the similar fear that Molina will affect the minds of the young Argentineans towards casting off a masculine identity, or that Valentín will sway future subversives. After much counseling, she is (not entirely) convinced that she is harmless and will remain a woman, rendering her able to fulfill her traditional purpose as a vehicle for her man's phallus. Her therapist, in his attempt to woo Irena, is the first to find out the reality of the myth. Alas, she allows passion to overcome her and animorphs into a jaguar, destroying the therapist. This is quite an extreme representation of the change that occurs in Valentín, as Molina influences him in such a way through his kindness that the two eventually engage in erotic acts. At the close of the film's telling, Irena visits the zoo where she has been visiting the resident jaguar in order to paint the cat in real-life. Here, she "descorre la barra y abre la puerta, le deja paso libre a la pantera. Irena está como transportada a otro mundo, tiene una expresión rara, entre trágica y de placer, los ojos húmedos" (40). I view this episode as, not the modern notion of coming out of the closet, rather a modified version of this vision. Instead, it is setting the queer individual free, releasing the caged inner being that has been suppressed by society's restricted notions of how a person of a specific anatomy should behave.

Metaphorically, Molina is a jaguar as well, just waiting to rip Valentín to shreds. This film mirrors the initial fear exhibited by Valentín; he, like the rest of society, fears destruction of his tightly packaged, heterosexual norms. Molina is a creature and he must be encaged before his condition becomes contagious. However, putting the jaguar in a

cage does not make it cease to be a jaguar. Thus, enclosing the supposed problem will only make it grow from within, spreading its message of socially considered *perverse* love and coital enjoyment. The argument here is not that the sex that occurs between the cellmates is destructive; rather it serves to mirror the outside world's impression of possible destruction. At this point in the novel, Valentín has yet to be queered or possibly, his queering begins here with acceptance of Molina's good will. In one telling moment, Valentín asks Molina with which of the characters he identifies: "—¿Con quién te identificas?, ¿con Irena o la arquitecta?—Con Irena, qué te creés. Es la protagonista, pedazo de pavo. Yo siempre con la heroína" (31). This confirms what we already know about Molina, but foreshadowing lies in Valentín's response to the same query: "—¿Y vos Valentín, con quién?... —Reíte. Con el psicoanalista." (31). Now, with the knowledge that Molina will *destroy* Valentín's staunch a-heterosexuality, an informed connection can be made that the telling of this film is intended to begin the reader with a notion of two distinct sexualities enclosed in a cell, mirroring society's opinion of what will later happen sexually between the two inmates. Sifuentes-Jáuregui comments on the end-result of the sexual encounter saying, "...ideology—in this case, oppositional revolutionary politics—signals a particular performance that is transvestitic, and, that this ideological transvestism necessarily sublimates the homoerotics of any heterosexual male encounter (154). Thus, the reader is dually queered as the telling of the films take the reader on a journey of declassification, reflecting different aspects of the queering process which is additionally occurring in the protagonists.

V. The Footnotes

Finally, Puig's footnotes to the novel carry a thematic and visual implication that further reinforces the queer structure. At their first appearance, they contain only a few lines per insertion, yet they grow as the novel progresses. They expand to such a great amount that by the end of the novel, the footnotes have consumed the page and it seems that in many instances, they have taken over the discourse. Balderston comments on this phenomenon: "...there is an interesting inversion of roles [due to this structure]: if the active figure (male, top, 'lector cómplice') normally subjects the passive one (female, bottom, 'lector hembra'), then Puig uses the footnotes, and invents the authority of Dr. Taube, to destabilize this schema" (223-224). Thus Puig structurally and graphically produces a manifestation of the queering that is happening within each protagonist as well as within the mind of the reader. These footnotes have been called distracting, as they are inserted haphazardly, their content having no rhetorical or meaningful connection with the dialogue in which it is inserted (Balderston 217). They cause the reader to take a break from the discourse between Molina and Valentín in order to complete the reading of a single footnote, which normally spans a few pages. Thus, the audience must flip back and forth between the two discourses, feeling confused at the end for the lack of connection between the two. I posit that this, like each artistic choice made by Puig in *Beso*, is a deliberate technique for Puig down to a confusion of even the novel's identity. When the reader is forced to play proverbial hopscotch throughout the pages of the novel, he or she faces a dual question of identity as they struggle to remember what was happening where they left off and foremost, what exactly is the purpose of these seemingly pointless comments and observations on the origin of

sexuality. Additionally, to create this feeling of identity confusion in the reader's mind, the footnotes are riddled with a mixture of fact and fiction, including illustrious works by Dr. Sigmund Freud in the same thought as those by Dr. Anneli Taube, a doctor created by Puig to transmit a message not found in actual books.

The footnotes take the place of narrative structure. Their presence is indeed the manifestation of the narrator's voice and opinion and they guide the reader to a deeper understanding of what is coming to pass between Molina and Valentín, as well as the author's own view on sexuality. Balderston states, "This extensive treatise on sexual repression and liberation is noteworthy for the seeming diversity of its sources and for its strong final thesis: that sexual liberation in general and gay liberation in particular are essential parts of the widely desired social change..." (219). In *Beso*, the narrative voice within the main structure of the novel is nonexistent, containing only dialogue between the two men and various secondary characters. Thus, Puig utilizes this unique technique in order to stress his underlying purpose for the novel while it additionally serves as a tool to express his personal ideas on the issue of gender and the origin of sexuality. Additionally, the footnotes grant authority and legitimacy to *queer*—it seems like non-fiction, which most of it is, and results as fiction in *drag*. Daniel Balderston agrees, and he posits that the footnotes indeed attack the most pertinent political and social issues that are at stake in the novel, allowing me to show the strong connection between Puig's vision for a sexual society and my proposition of the Dirty War as a result of the expansion of male gender roles (216). Puig, through his analysis of sexual origins, attempts to queer his readers out of the notion that an identity such as homosexuality would be born from disease, genetics, or any other external force, and into the belief that

we are all humans and sexuality is secondary and indeed, not deserving of such harsh treatment shown by the Argentine government towards individuals like Molina or Puig himself.

The footnotes begin with a synopsis of 3 theories to the possible conception of homosexuality, and the subsequent refutation of each one by English researcher D.J. West. The first of these three ideas propose that homosexuality could stem from an imbalance in male/female hormones: “La primera de ellas intenta establecer que la conducta sexual anormal proviene de un desequilibrio de la proporción de hormonas masculinas y femeninas, presentes ambas en la sangre de los dos sexos” (Puig 66). This notion is quickly turned on its head when pointing out that pure science has not upheld this belief. Moreover, if this were the case, then hormonal injections should be able to cure the individual. Upon conducting such tests, it was proved that an injection of supplementary male hormones has only served to heighten the homosexual male’s appetite for his natural inclination—men. This calls to mind my theoretical discussion on the true conundrum of homosexuality. If indeed this classification were of the feminine kind, then it necessarily follows that male hormones, making the person more of a man so to speak, should indeed *cure* the individual of his imbalance. The second and third propositions are quite similarly easily refuted, calling homosexuality either a trait of intersexuality that has failed to also change the male’s sex organs or simply that the state is hereditary. The second idea states, “Puesto que ha sido imposible comprobar una anomalía hormonal en los homosexuales, se ha intentado rastrear otros determinantes físicos, alguna anomalía desconocida, y determinados investigadores entonces se dieron a la tarea de encuadrar la homosexualidad como una forma de intersexualidad” (Puig 67).

As to the second, a necessary addendum states that this state of intersexuality would stem from the presence of an excess of one gender in the individuals household; for instance, a male homosexual would come from a family with many sisters, or a lesbian would be a product of having many brothers. It is not difficult to see why this is a faulty observation. The third notion goes on: “La tercera y última teoría sobre el origen físico de la homosexualidad, de que se ocupa West, es la que propone el factor hereditario. West señala que pese a la seriedad de los estudios efectuados...la vaguedad de las evidencias presentadas no permite establecer que la homosexualidad sea una característica constitucional de tipo hereditario” (Puig 68). The third is unreliable simply because there is no genetic data to prove the presence of a homosexual gene or chromosome that could be passed through generations. The mere examination of this third proposition proves that society would like to think of the classification as a disease or birth defect, but we must begin again after striking these notions from the record in a search for what may be the true origin. Though the subject is far from exhausted, by now the reader has gleaned a sense of confusion as to why, if these ideas are so easily disproved or conversely so very unproved, it seems simply masochistic to operate any society based on these faulty notions. Furthermore, society’s sexual laymen propagate these myths throughout society, only further concreting the fallacy in the minds of humans alike (Puig 59-65).

Moving beyond scientific testing, Puig continues to cite West in his analysis of designations for non-scientific explanations of the sinful state of homosexuality. With regards to psychological discourse, it is proposed that, under the theory of perversion, the homosexual is merely a miscreant, choosing whichever pattern of deviant behavior that most appeals to him. Posits the narrator to the footnotes, “...el error fundamental estriba

en que...el homosexual no puede desarrollar una conducta sexual normal aunque se lo proponga, puesto que aún logrando realizar actos heterosexuales difícilmente eliminará sus más profundos deseos homosexuales” (Puig 102). Additionally proposed is the idea that a homosexual is thus due to first having been seduced by a person of the same sex, but also easily turned down, this theory fails to account for an individual’s continuing desire for homoerotic sex.

The footnotes to *Beso* continue to propose possible catalysts for homosexual behavior, only to prove the futility of such arguments. Calling to Freud and his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, the topic of repression brings me to my discussion of that marginalization experienced by Molina as a manifestation of a patriarchal society’s mitigation of female sexuality. Puig interprets Freud’s theory as an affirmation that all repression can be traced back to the domination of the male over the female or, namely the father over his domestic domain. As this role continues to expand, we can see a mirror image of this power being extended within the country of Argentina as masculine forces (the militant government) continue to forcibly control the feminine faction. Here, I do not use feminine to mean females only, or a male that may be interpreted as a female such as Molina, but rather each person that is placed in this position of inferiority in the patriarchal pattern. This would include Valentín as well, and any constituent being stifled by the powers of the Argentine government:

Frued asocia su tesis de la autoridad patriarcal con el auge de la religion, y en particular con el triunfo del monoteísmo en Occidente. Por otra parte, Freud se preocupa especialmente por la repression sexual, puesto que considera los impulsos naturales del ser humano como mucho más

complejos de lo que la sociedad patriarcal admite: dada la capacidad indiferenciada de los bebés para obtener placer sexual de todas las partes de su cuerpo, Freud los califica de “perversos polimorfos”. Como parte de este concepto, Freud también cree en la naturaleza esencialmente bisexual de nuestro impulso sexual original. (154)

This is in line with my application of queer theory as it pertains to prescribed gender roles and, moreover the analogy of the Argentine government as the masculine patriarchal force and the people taking the place of the female needing to be repressed under such a structure. The footnotes furthermore observe that this male-run system begins as a “dominación paterna [hasta] un poderoso sistema estatal administrado por el hombre, como una prolongación de dicha represión primera, cuyo propósito es la cada vez mayor exclusión de la mujer” (154). We see this in *Beso* with the imprisonment of the woman, Molina, and also of anyone who would challenge the dominant male. This challenger is a danger to the patriarchy, and it could consist of the revolutionary character or certainly also the flamboyant queen who refuses to stand by his prescribed characteristics. Additionally, this male could be challenged by any woman who fails to fit neatly into her traditionally expected norms. When a sexuality that is perceived to be *other* than that prescribed in a paternally run society, this behavioral pattern is often referred to as outside of human nature. To this reaction, Puig also has an answer: “...lo que concebimos como ‘naturaleza humana’ es tan solo lo que ha resultado de ella después de siglos de represión, razonamiento que implica, y en ello concuerdan Marcuse y Brown, la mutabilidad esencial de la naturaleza humana” (155). Thus, if we can recondition our minds to this argument, then what is perceived to be human nature is actually a

conjoining of learned behaviors due to constant repression by the dominant sex. Furthermore, any sexuality that does not support a patriarchal order (supported by religion) therefore challenges it, and would be coupled along with any orientation or preference that this paternal order would deem as *other* and thus, a danger to be shunned (Puig 200).

Finally, Puig fictitiously creates a philosophical character for himself, and argues in favor of his equally fictitious work entitled *Sexuality and Revolution*. This technique serves to trick the unsuspecting reader into believing in the existence of one female Danish doctor, Anneli Taube, when in truth this represents the beliefs of Puig himself. Daniel Balderston identifies Taube's purpose: "Dr. Taube says that the homosexual child is a future revolutionary" (223). In other words, Molina is a future Valentín, bringing their transformations full circle. He first proposes a most pragmatic reason why a boy might reject the patriarchal model, and as we recall from Puig's own life story, many similarities are present with relation to his own experience. He suggests that a boy simply decides to reject the option of characteristics that a father might present –that of weapons, violence, competitive sports, disdain for emotion –for those characteristics that the matriarchal figure offers –those of the artistic world, tenderness, and tolerance for sensitivity. In this occurrence, the boy, like Molina, may also accept submission as part of his role. As he would go adopting these roles, it seems to Taube that he would take an all-or-nothing stance, desiring femininity and accepting submission as a sub-characteristic. Similarly, a girl child can make this choice, rejecting the submissive role that she perceives her mother to fill. Thus, Taube calls this phenomenon "inconformismo revolucionario", in that it shows certain strength of the individual to reject norms that are

impressed upon them from an early age. He concludes that, though this is indeed in revolutionary spirit, it only serves to propagate marginality, with the male serving as the submissive, and the female homosexual taking on the role of masculine male. Though there are certainly exceptions to the rule, Puig disguised as Taube presents reasoning for the masculine repression of any sexual classification that would challenge the patriarchal order (209-211). The more specific repression of the anatomical woman shall be discussed next, as I explore the poetry of Nela Rio and her representation of the suffering experienced due to such an illogical, though longstanding, tradition of male superiority.*

With the close of *Beso*, the full transformation has taken place. Molina is killed working as a tool for the revolution, while Valentín remains trapped in the “homosexual space *par excellence*” (Sifuentes-Juaregui 155). He has now faced his fears of same-sex eroticism and has not rejected. On the contrary, he is now the female being repressed by the macho powers in charge. We have seen Molina and Valentín cross two opposite trajectories just as would two ships passing in the night, and they have each arrived at the quintessential bisexual space. As mentioned above, there are indeed a male and a female alive inside of each man, and each must give each other a piece of themselves in order that the other may achieve the complete queer status. Each man has been queered, moving away from the harmful societal necessity of one gender role per human, with each man fitting inside his nicely packaged role as the male dominant, and each woman taking her silent role as the “catcher”, there to be protected, reigned over, and to provide pleasure and not receive.

* *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* by Nela Rio

VI. Conclusion

Beso employs a multi-faceted approach, which demonstrates the queering of the protagonists and of the reader on many complex levels. Its message is one of casting of binary classifications that only serve to maim the individual definition, internally and externally. As we have seen through the stories of Valentín and Molina, societal gender expectations can only serve to disappoint when one clings tightly to them, and they cause destruction in a world in which segregation of this kind is no longer pertinent. Though this long-standing tradition was doubtlessly created in an attempt to create longevity of order, in a new world, it has created *disorder* in expecting rigid patterns of behavior in an ever-changing society. As Manuel Puig posited, one should not be defined by their sexuality. Sexuality is a feature of a person, but it does not create the individual. Throughout *Beso*, the protagonists are punished by a macho government for any action seemingly threatening to this supposed order, and nothing but subversiveness can be born from such unrealistic exectations.

Chapter 3. A Changing of Arms: From Violence to the Written Word

I. Introduction

Luisa Valenzuela's compilation of short stories entitled *Cambio de armas* is undeniably a production that surged from the Dirty War period of Argentina. With this title, she suggests a transfer from destructive instruments like those used during this turbulent period, to her own weapon of choice—the pen. Through censorship efforts, the pen proves to be a worthy opponent for modern weapons of war, though their battle is fought on a different field. Argentina's Dirty War government was surely afraid of the pen, for they refused to record names and facts of those disappeared and have only recently declassified many insightful documents about the events of torture and the strategies of the government that was then in existence. This contributes in a large part to the confusion that was caused and is still being felt by those who lost loved ones during this period. There were no answers and for most, there still are none.

Stories like those written by Valenzuela take the place of that information that was denied to the people and they can combat the fear created by the government by, if not providing concrete answers, making it staunchly known upon whom the guilt falls. The short stories that I will analyze here from the compilation entitled *Cambio de armas* (“Cambio de armas”, “Cuarta versión”, and “Ceremonias de rechazo”) chronicle stories of female suffering and loss. The act of writing of this loss acts conversely, attempting to restore the lost memory to the people and arming them with the weapons they need that they may avoid such oppression in the future. I chose this selection of stories for the poignant telling of each female protagonist's entrapment inside of her prescribed definition as ‘woman’. Though each protagonist that I will analyze is anatomically

female, she also represents the female faction for my gendered metaphor—the Argentine people. The alienation within a strict gender norm is only initial, as each woman finds her liberation through physically arming herself with the theoretical weapons to break away from what holds her back. In some instances, this freedom is only found through death, a facet that mirrors the plight of those Argentines who suffered in reality. These fictional accounts are mere imaginings of what happened behind closed doors between captor and captive, since the Dirty War government took painstaking measures to conceal actual facts, with the certainty that this data would implicate their actions. Valenzuela’s pen re-associates society with what was once buried and hidden, as we see the mental and physical anguish inflicted upon the disappeared.

II. Valenzuela: Disarming Prescribed Identity

Luisa Valenzuela is one additional Argentine writer who has brought to the forefront the question of identity and how the same is defined. She was raised in a literary family, and this could be one reason why she is so naturally charged towards raising important sociological and political issues with her work (Magnarelli 1). She avoids *telling* the reader what to believe and instead paints a scenario that could be realistically imagined, allowing the audience to arrive at a multiplicity of understanding. Julio Cortázar once commented on the significance of Valenzuela’s literature:

To read her is to enter our reality fully, where plurality surpasses the limitations of the past; to read her is to participate in a search for Latin American identity, which offers its rewards beforehand. Luisa Valenzuela’s books are our present but they also contain much of our

future; there is true resplendence, true love, true freedom on each of her pages. (Qtd. in Magnarelli 1)

Sharon Magnarelli adds her own assessment of Valenzuela's goals saying, "What Valenzuela tells us, what her prose shows us, has universal implications which ignore national borders, gender, and age" (1). This addition sheds new light and expands her influence beyond the borders of Cortázar's Latin American prescription. Though a Latin American core is evident, her work functions in much the same way as my current analysis, as we will both use the Latin American predicament to propose a grander, more global solution to a problem that ails society as a whole. Valenzuela suggests a changing of arms, implying that society has been using a faulty tool as a solution to the problem of gender inequality and the necessary repression that follows. Perhaps, there has been no answer previously, but within the pages of her compilation, *Cambio de armas*, the reader will find the freedom to individually construct one's identity. The author's natural aim merits her inclusion in my analysis, for she calls to restructure identity or rather, disarm it and leave it undone. Magnarelli states, "Her work continually undermines our social and political myths...[and] steadfastly refuses to replace the old mythic structures with new but equally arbitrary and potentially equally authoritative substitutions" (3). In this chapter, this classification is what will be recognized as queer. It is unnecessary to define gender under authoritative terms, and I will show how the protagonist repeatedly combats a defined identity. Valenzuela's firearm of choice is the written word, and like each author examined here, she expresses her subversive message through her art. Magnarelli agrees: "As the title indicates, there has been a change of weapons, a changing of the guard.... As Valenzuela informs us in her novel 'Cola de lagartija', written almost

simultaneously with these stories, now ‘nuestra arma es la letra’ (187). Thus, Valenzuela writes to combat the effects of the aptly named Dirty War and re-associate society with the devastation that was caused, enjoining society as a whole to change tactics by de-structuring identity as it has heretofore been known.

Though Valenzuela’s work is not seen to follow her life with such parallelism as does the work of Puig, she has been extensively criticized, and her works are translated in English and French. The author’s work is internationally celebrated, and she has been recognized with awards such as the “Machado de Assis” medal in 1997 and most recently with the Premio Astralba in 2004. Valenzuela has written seven novels, three essays, and a large number of short stories (Martínez 56). Until this point, no author has penned her biography. Valenzuela is still living, and she has taught at prestigious universities like New York and Colombia Universities.

Valenzuela is accepted as a feminist author, and critics such as Adriana Martínez-Fernández and Diana Niebylski have taken turns interpreting and analyzing her works—and more specifically *Cambio de armas*—beneath this light. Many have done just what seems natural: to thematically tie the short stories found therein to characteristics of feminism, and to analyze the work thus. *Cambio de armas* seems to naturally lend itself to a discussion of the female condition in society as it re-arms the female in general by giving her power and a voice, and a discussion of the stories’ pertinence with relation to the Dirty War. Some feminist writers like Elisa Larraín Masson have gone so far as to call the story after which the compilation was named, “Cambio de armas”, a metaphor to the female’s standing in the intellectual world. While these are all quite valid standpoints, my analysis takes the above effort one step further in presenting a theoretical view that

seeks to propose a reason for the destruction seen during the Dirty War, while providing a possible sociological solution. I do this by logically combining the factual characteristics of this oppression, which pointedly targeted the female sexuality. Though females were not solely targeted, Valenzuela's focus on the woman as the victim allows for the analogy that fuels the current thesis. This analogy contains the smaller picture of a woman being oppressed by a man, which expands to allow this woman to symbolize the people of Argentina, while the man represents the militant government that catalyzed the Dirty War. "Cambio de armas" presents just one such scenario of female victim to male oppressor, which furthermore allows my theoretical discussion of queer theory to find pertinence. As yet none have applied queer theory to this story, which end my thesis fulfills. In its manifestation, it would suggest that the violence to which Laura is subjected is an expansion of prescribed gender roles. Her oppressor, Roque, initially found her to lie outside of these traditional norms; thus, the process of her torture is an experiment for how to break the unruly individual. To go further, it is precedence for how to tame the woman who refuses to accept her role as subordinate to a patriarchal structure.

III. Shifting Identities in "Cambio de armas"

The story's protagonist, Laura, has, in some moment before the opening of the story, come from a place of queerness where she attempted to assassinate the man that now imprisons her. It can be inferred that she is a previous subversive, having failed at killing the raucous military officer. When applied to the context of the Dirty War, she is now disappeared and is facing severe punishment for her acts. I posit that Laura was formerly queer due to her assassination attempt, which serves as uncharacteristic in a

traditional female role. She had found a state of non-identity in which male-female did not define her struggle. Laura is equally as powerful as a man with a gun in her hand, however; she is apprehended and stripped of her memory. While in her state of amnesia, her captor has taken every pain to force her back into her feminine box by taking her as his supposed wife, forcing her to stay indoors and enjoy only those material things that are inconsequential and defining of what a woman should be (a plant, a pretty new dress, etc.). Added to these structures, she serves as a sort of sex slave to the man, for it is clear that she either became his wife unknowingly or that he has only made her to believe that she is such. Each one of these impositions forces Laura back into her traditional gender role. She is now subservient to a man, in complete reliance on his resources for her every need. The woman is unable to recall anything from her former life and often cannot even express her desires for lack of the language with which to do so. The captive expresses her feelings at the physical and mental torture just as so many have done in reality. She defines these feelings when she states, “Extraña es como se siente. Extranjera, distinta. ¿Distinta de quiénes, de las demás mujeres, de sí misma?” (160). This question reveals the turn that her identity has taken and she no longer knows how to define herself. It is clear that she is being forced to fill a prescribed gender role, but she is increasingly discontented with her current lot. She continues saying, “La llamada angustia es otra cosa: la llamada angustia le oprime a veces la boca del estómago y le da ganas de gritar a *bocca chiusa*, como si estuviera gimiendo” (158). Laura’s body is violently opposing a torturous lifestyle to which she feels *other*. Her role as a militant female immediately earned her this alienating classification from a patriarchal standpoint upon her attempt at

assassinating the man who now imprisons her, and the game of identity shuffling begins as he repeatedly forces her into a position out of which she systematically tries to climb.

IV. Demasiados Nombres

Within the confines of the game of cat-and-mouse played back and forth between Laura and her captor, Laura's memory loss causes a queering of the signifier. She knows the signified, but knows not how to identify the same. Laura is being re-taught human language in the same instance as she is forced to re-learn herself. These two experiences run parallel to one another, and one symbolizes the other. We see this question of personal identity manifested in her attempt to master the signifier-signified relationship of mundane objects in her limited world as well as her arbitrary signification of the man who enslaves her. This queered signifier causes Laura to begin to re-identify herself through her vision of the world. The reader looks on as Laura's world moves from the general unknown to a more microcosmic world where she can signify herself and harness her own power despite the degrading slavery in which she is immersed.

This process begins through Laura's attempt at attaching signifier with signified to the mundane objects that surround her. We see Laura's realization of how she has been stripped of her previous gender power through her initial awareness that she must master the signifier in order to fulfill her own immediate survival needs. The narrator begins the story saying, "No le asombra para nada el hecho de estar sin memoria, de sentirse totalmente desnuda de recuerdos" (113). There is now a void where Laura's queer identity once was and in its place is a photograph of herself on a wedding day of which she has no recollection. She is the make-believe wife of a man who oppresses her daily, of whom she also has no memory. This relationship can be expanded to connect

Argentina's government and their right-less constituents during the Dirty War, as Laura's story shows the discerning reader the devastation caused when gender identity is forced and used in a likewise repressive manner. The speaker continues: "Quizá ni siquiera se dé cuenta de que vive en cero absoluto. Lo que sí la tiene bastante preocupada es lo otro, esa capacidad suya para aplicarle el nombre exacto a cada cosa y recibir una taza de té cuando dice quiero (y ese quiero también la desconcierta, ese acto de voluntad), cuando dice quiero una taza de té" (113). She has been stripped of her former identity and voluntary power to such an extent that she feels uneasy for simply having a want, a need. She has been stolen from her once-queer existence, in a place where her will was strong enough to attempt the assassination of a man, and now she is forced to be the most abused form of female as punishment. She has stepped outside of the traditionally prescribed gender norms and as a representation of the people of Argentina and also one who contributes to this faction, her macho government strikes back in order to re-grow her consciousness in the manner of patriarchy. Her confusion of the word to object relationship continues: "Y después están los objetos cotidianos: esos llamados plato, baño, libro, cama, taza, mesa, puerta. Resulta desesperante, por ejemplo, enfrentarse con la llamada puerta y preguntarse qué hacer.... Ella, la llamada Laura, de este lado de la llamada puerta, con sus llamados cerrojos y su llamada llave pidiéndole a gritos que transgreda el límite. Sólo que ella no, todavía no..." (114). The adjective *llamada* is repeated before each signifier, describing the thing but not defining it. The name is only a characteristic of each object. Without the signification of each name, they would be useless in providing information on each thing's utility. This seemingly small detail is in fact crucial, as it concretizes my position that *woman* and *man* are also only so-called, and

that without any previous knowledge of what each signifier indicates, neither would provide any information regarding how one is to behave simply for being called such. This adjective is repeated again and again in order that this point does not go unnoticed. As Laura goes about unraveling the mystery of her true identity beneath the *female* one prescribed to her by Roque, she slowly realizes that her role in his realm is also only so-called, and it is only one possibility for how she might define herself. However, her main issue at this point is the identification of the objects around her, such that she is unable to possibly begin to find herself through such confusion. The time is not yet right.

Another aspect of Laura's quest to relocate her own identity is the question of her captor. At first she knows not his name, nor does she seem to care. Though she is quite particular about relearning the meaning of objects, she arbitrarily assigns multiple signifiers to the man who enslaves her. The narrator observes, "Después está el hombre: ése, él, el sinnombre al que le puede poner cualquier nombre que se le pase por la cabeza, total, todos son igualmente eficaces y el tipo, cuando anda por la casa le contesta aunque lo llame Hugo, Sebastián, Ignacio, Alfredo o lo que sea" (114). The fact that he answers when called any number of names signifies once again the true non-relationship between signifier and signified. The man does not feel that being called a name that is not his own would cause him to act in a differently than he does when called him own name; thus, calling him *man* should equally attach no behavioral characteristics. The arbitrary nomination can be interpreted in two different ways. On one hand, the use of multiple names for he who is actually called Roque places him in the position to represent the Argentine government as a whole, or simply any man who uses the patriarchal order to oppress the feminine counterpart. The text itself confirms this view: "Como si estuviera

recitando una letanía: José, Francisco, Adolfo, Armando, Eduardo, y él puede dejarse deslizar en el sueño sintiendo que es todos esos para ella, que cumple todas las funciones” (117-118). A second interpretation calls to queer theory, repaying him for the unkindness he has shown Laura. Her refusal to use his true name in turn strips him of the masculine identity and queers him out of what his name, Roque, suggests. Such a name speaks for itself, as it symbolizes the cold and unforgiving nature of his character (role in the short story as well as moral character) and that of the militant government during the Dirty War. The name Roque can be translated as *Rock* or *Rocky* in English (Meaning-of-Names.com). This meaning gives further insight into the character’s disposition, as it gives the impression that he is hard of spirit as well. She must adhere to every sexual fetish that he wishes upon her, fulfilling a good wife’s duty under the patriarchal order and he forces her to look on as he ravages her. So begins the episode subtitled “Los espejos” which chronicles the moment in which Laura begins to relocate her lost identity. Under the mirror positioned above the bed, beneath the tongue of her captor, Laura finally recognizes herself:

—Abrí los ojos—ordena él que la ha estado observando observarse allá arriba. —Abrí los ojos y mirá bien lo que te voy a hacer porque es algo que merece ser visto. Y con la lengua empieza a trepársele por la pierna izquierda, la va dibujando y ella allá arriba se va reconociendo, va sabiendo que esa pierna es suya porque la siente viva bajo la lengua y de golpe esa rodilla que está observando en el espejo también es suya... (163)

Now, only under the unwanted tongue of her oppressor does she begin to realize once again her identity. This experience sends flashbacks to Laura’s memory of a subversive

lifestyle, and through her recognition of the man she calls Ignacio, Fernando, Alfredo, or any other such name, she can finally recognize her own self for who she once was. His abuse continues:

¡Abrí los ojos, puta! y es como si la destrozara, como si la mordiera por dentro –y quizá la mordió—ese grito como si él le estuviera retorciendo el brazo hasta romperselo, como si le estuviera pateando la cabeza. Abrí los ojos, cantá, decime quién te manda, quién dio la orden, y ella grita un *no* tan intenso, tan profundo que no resuena para nada en el ámbito donde se encuentran y él no alcanza a oírlo, un *no* que parece hacer estallar el espejo del techo, que multiplica y mutila y destroza la imagen de él, casi como un balazo aunque él no lo perciba y tanto su imagen como el espejo sigan allí, intactos, imperturbables, y ella al exhalar el aire retenido sople Roque, por primera vez el verdadero nombre de él... (123-124)

When Laura assigns arbitrary signifiers to Roque, he is unchanged and does not feel that this characteristic defines his behavior. However, when he calls Laura the expletive *puta*, she feels destroyed, as if he has bitten her from the inside. From a feminist perspective this fact shows how the male is not held to the same standards as the female within society, and how a name like *puta* or *woman* would contain coded information about the individual to which it is attached. The queer theorist would jump a step further, showing how the names *woman*, *man*, *Roque*, *Laura*, or *puta* essentially do not define any of their signifieds, and Laura cannot regain her queer self until she can also detach herself in the way that Roque has done. Laura's true name is derived from *laurel*, a reference to the crown placed on the head of victors in ancient times, and she represents the victorious

woman. Additionally, this passage serves as a prophecy for what is to come, and it allows the reader to experience the change in Laura. Her silent protest shatters the mirror that contains the image of Roque violently pleasuring himself with Laura's captive body. This Laura can be passive to the abuse no longer, and here she secretly reconstructs herself through his grotesque advances. She calls him his proper name finally in an act that holds him to the same standards for which Laura feels responsible. He does not hear her refusal to comply, a component that keeps the male in the place he has prescribed for himself, now unable to influence Laura who has regained her queer self. His image is destroyed from Laura's perspective, for she can now place him and understand the meaning behind her presence there. He however, distracted by the unwelcome throes of pleasure, now remains this one specific man, believing himself to be achieving his goal of breaking this unruly mare. Truly, Laura has now passed outside of the role of incognizant wife and has re-entered her previous state in which she created her own identity impertinent to his patriarchal universe.

This transformation occurs throughout the entirety of the narrative, and the reader watches Laura change from a blank slate in which her memories were yet mysteries to her, to a woman who has relocated her lost power. At the start, her identity is at the mercy of those around her for, as we recall, she has no sense of the meaning behind her presence in Roque's world. Valenzuela writes, "En cuanto a ella, le han dicho que se llama Laura pero eso también forma parte de la nebulosa en la que transcurre su vida" (113). As her mind adapts to her new world, issues more pertinent than the name for *cup* or *door* enter her consciousness. She has no precedence with which to compare herself: "Extraña es como se siente. Extranjera, distinta. ¿Distinta de quiénes, de las demás

mujeres, de sí misma? Por eso corre de vuelta al dormitorio a mirarse en el gran espejo del ropero” (118). Once again, the mirror serves to give her some sort of identity and to reflect the new role of subservient woman. Previously, beneath the mirror she was being raped, a mere *puta*. Now, the mirror reflects the actual self behind the signifier, and Laura begins to remember. As a sign of the slow regaining of herself, Laura notices a large scar down her back. The scar is tender, barely healed, and can only be seen when viewed through the mirror. This scar is symbolic of the oppression experienced in Argentina during the Dirty War period. Without the reflection, Laura’s deep scar would have gone unnoticed, just as the Dirty War conflict would go unanswered without the poignancy of the pen. I posit that Valenzuela sends the message of re-association with the conflict of this period, a wound that is also still healing for those affected by it. Only when Argentina—society as a whole on a larger scale—can come to terms with the issues that plague it, can identity begin to be reconstructed and wounds healed. When the language of this episode is analyzed, the scar’s association with Argentina is further confirmed: “Esa larga, inexplicable cicatriz que le cruza la espalda y que solo alcanza a ver en el espejo. Una cicatriz espesa, muy notable al tacto, como fresca aunque ya esté bien cerrada y no le duela” (119). The scar runs horizontally down Laura’s spine, in much the same way that Argentina maps the continent of South America, furthering Valenzuela’s call to face the tragedy of the Dirty War in order that healing may ensue.

Finally, though Laura knows not why, Roque hastens to explain the truth to Laura, and she is faced with her enslavement and her role as a social experiment for the government. He shows her the gun with which she tried to assassinate him: “No muerde, no pica ni nada. Es un objeto sin vida. Sólo puede darle vida uno, si quiere. Y vos ya no

querés ¿no es cierto que no querés?” (143). The gun does not bite, as his insult *puta* did, and it “no pica”, in a reference to the instrument of torture previously mentioned, the *picana*. It is her means of freedom from these oppressive forces. He confesses her purpose there as an experimental test subject before he continues his plan to abandon her in that apartment where they shared a falsified existence. Her identity is no longer defined only in relation to Roque, to the *man*. To Laura, everything becomes clear and it is as if no time has passed between this moment and the past one in which she had intentions to kill Roque: “Ella ve esa espalda que se aleja y es como si por dentro se le disipara un poco la niebla. Empieza a entender algunas cosas, entiende sobre todo la función de este instrumento negro que él llama revolver. Entonces lo levanta y apunta.” (135). This object, signified by *revolver*, triggers the memory in Laura. The active verb, *llama*, that previously in its adjective form, *llamada*, only served to signal which object carried which meaning to Laura now signals her freedom. For Laura *revolver* better signifies *freedom* than the physical object that represents this liberation. In the moment in which Laura aims the gun, she has an epiphany of realization. She now remembers who she is. However for Valenzuela, the *cambio de armas* has multiple meanings. Her weapon is the written word and remains the key in re-association for future prevention. This interpretation varies from its similar feminist counterpart when Laura’s role expands to encompass that role of the Argentine people in general, male and female alike.

The war that Valenzuela wages by means of her writing does not begin nor does it end with the story “Cambio de armas”. Throughout the compilation the reader is faced repeatedly with a depiction of the female representing the Argentine people, sometimes oppressed by a man, often in love with a man, but always subject to man in any case. As

my analogy goes, this connection becomes quite circular as the man also represents the Argentine government. This relationship must also be considered for the simple message that lies therein, all metaphor aside. It has already been established that the people were greatly traumatized during the Dirty War period of Argentina, but the affiliation created by Valenzuela between the masculine and the feminine must also be seen as a cry against patriarchy in itself. According to Valenzuela, it would seem that woman is ever defining herself against the backdrop of a man, and whether this found identity is forced or not, it systematically has negative consequences as depicted in *Cambio de armas*. The compilation bears a thread of identical characteristics throughout and each story is thematically linked to the others, but each must be read for its individual, defining characteristics. In keeping with the queer philosophy, the title *Cambio de armas* carries little consequence for what is individually found therein. The signifier does not define the words that it contains, and even the specific title carries more than one meaning, referring both to the entire compilation as well as the individual story. On an even deeper level, although there is a weapon present within the short story, the title indeed refers to the broader idea of the changing of weapons in favor of the written word, and tells little about what goes on in Laura's transformation. Thus, queer is evident in many layers throughout this work of art.

The conundrum in which each female in *Cambio de armas* defines herself in relation to a man finds its solution within queer theory. It does not call for an a-sexual existence, and must not be confused with such. It rather suggests a redefining of oneself in which the woman may love the man (or the woman, or both) and her identity is unaltered. Conversely, the man should not see himself as ultimate leader of household, of

woman, and especially not of society, in order to have a self-definition. When one clings to such notions unmaleably, order cannot be kept, for some are bound to stray. If order be the ultimate goal of such sexual segregation, then this division becomes utterly meaningless when order fails as it did during the Dirty War and, better yet, is the cause of *disorder*. This is seen throughout *Cambio de armas*, and examining a few remaining stories from the compilation allows for a clearer understanding of Valenzuela's project and the circular nature behind society's rigid order structures, which are ultimately the causes of disorder.

V. Cuarta versión

In the short story *Cuarta versión*, the author offers her feminine response to the oppressive powers of the government. The *fourth version* is the first story in the compilation, and its title draws attention to the fact that there are many versions of what happened in Argentina in the 1980s. The truth is difficult to arrive at, and even Valenzuela's story serves as only one version of what may have occurred in real time. The current individual has little access to true accounts, and many still have no answers as to what happened to their loved ones. Thus, Valenzuela's re-associative story can take the place of the truth, offering one possible version of events. One ultimate narrative does not exist, just as there is not one single truth regarding the Dirty War. The reader sees an inversion of that which is the true thesis, as the story seems to focus on the romantic relationship between the protagonist, Bella, and a prolific ambassador through a series of diary entries mixed in with a prose narrative. The romantic relationship is always defined by the male counterpart, serving as Valenzuela's own commentary on the machista nature of the powers that be. This romance can also be doubled into the perverse sexual

relationships maintained in captivity by those imprisoned by the Dirty War government. The ambassador, Pedro, attempts to get Bella out of the dangerous political environment in Argentina, enjoining her to flee. Throughout the chronicle of the mutual love life, the astute reader catches small allusions to the fact that indeed, the message is political rather than romantic. One can conclude that Bella was in fact a covert political dissenter and, at the very least, heavily involved in the clandestine escape and hiding of individuals wanted by the Argentine government. Finally, Bella is killed at the close of the story by the hand of the government. She is not the intended receiver of the bullet: tragic irony used to show the unjust nature with which the victims of such torture were chosen. Valenzuela writes, “Quizá fue la única que lo oyó a Pedro decir –De aquí no sale nadie – porque en ese preciso instante sonó el silbato y los guardias armados que seguramente estaban agazapados tras las puertas irrumpieron en la sala desde distintos ángulos, en tropel, y en la confusion las inmunidades diplomáticas fueron desatendidas y se oyó un único disparo. Bella comenzó su lentísima caída...” (63). Death was not intended to be Bella’s destiny, but those in power sought to destroy that which emitted truth and beauty. Bella’s hand in subverting the oppressive leaders shows her quest for truth, and her name, a direct translation of *beautiful one*, is symbolic of her attempt at re-creating beauty within the confines of her country.

Here, one must turn to the significance of the title. The reader receives the story through various mediums: the diary of Bella; the narrative; and quips from the ambassador’s invented “tío Ramón”, which serve as the main source of political commentary. Upon the slaughter of Bella, the reader receives the final quip from tío Ramón which is the seeming beginning to yet another story: “—Cuando mi tío Ramón

conoció a una actriz llamada Bella...” (247). Now Bella is achieving her goal of truth, for she is immortalized as her story is retold time and again. By beginning her story as she dies, Pedro is assuring Bella that her struggle was not for naught, and that through her death she in fact achieves her quest for emission of truth. This element of storytelling reminds the reader of Molina, immortalizing the struggle of the queer through oral propagation. Molina reveals truth to Valentín in much the same way that Bella’s death merits re-telling and thus permanence in history. To structurally demonstrate this fact, Valenzuela ends the story with an ellipsis, indicating that it is yet incomplete, with no final period. Her story will be retold again and again, and Valenzuela’s materializing with her intimidating pen solidifies the significance of Bella’s death. Thus, truth and beauty cannot be materially done away with. They will exist even if not readily seen, and they will persist through death. This version of what happened to those implicated by the Dirty War is certainly fiction, created by the pen of Valenzuela. Thus, the written word is the means by which beauty and truth can live on, and fiction proves a worth opponent of weapons of war.

This would serve as the fourth version, the *Cuarta versión*, the version that the reader receives. One can designate a number to each version, saying that the first is actuality, the second is the version of Bella—her diary, and the third is that of the narrator—the person who compiled the many versions. A designation of this type is not beyond debate, but truth be told, these specifics are unimportant. Luisa Valenzuela is sending a message to her reader that all of these details are not those with which one should be concerned. The true concern is that this is the story of many women, oppressed by the macho government and by their macho torturers who would control them. She

sends the message that Bella is indeed Every Woman, whether her fear was instilled from behind bars or under the auspices of freedom (Valenzuela 3-63).

VI. Ceremonias de rechazo

This short story, also found in the compilation *Cambio de armas*, depicts the microcosmic cycle of identity experienced by a woman who initially defines herself in terms of a man. Not unlike the other male characters found throughout the work, Coyote is deeply involved in the counter-insurgency, living a life of complete mystery to his lover. Coyote is most probably a code name—evidence that he is a subversive, but also it is a commentary on Valenzuela's part. She frequently compares her male characters with beasts as she also does in "La palabra asesino", tying the man to this primal instinct to destroy and devour. What she depicts is the devouring of the woman's spirit and autonomous identity as she tries to find herself within the man. This is not possible, for the woman does not exist therein and thus, destruction occurs. Just like the gendered relationships found in all additional stories analyzed in this chapter, this is a far-reaching allegory subtly depicting the political situation of Argentina. The female, Amanda, begins the story with a certainty that Coyote's identity consumes her own, and she is unsatisfied. This is only a feigned self-definition. Thus, the protagonist is certainly not made up of her man, and she only finds freedom apart from his torturous games. Defending the shortcomings in their relationship he says, "No son misterios. Son problemas políticos, ya te lo dije mil veces.... –No. Basta ya. Ya basta de torturas..." (Valenzuela 93). This interaction between Coyote and his undefined mistress proves the complexity of the relationship created by Valenzuela. This, like each male to female liaison seen in *Cambio*

de armas expands to symbolize the connection between the machista government of Argentina and its feminine people, searching for an identity within a torturous regime.

As the story opens, Amanda sits waiting for a call from her lover. This call is also a dual idea, like many of Valenzuela's concepts. As she waits for the telephone to ring with Coyote on the other end of the line, she also imagines a call from the wild from her coyote—a call that would summon her desire and, wishfully thinking, would awaken her identity which currently is found only within the caresses of her lover. She imagines how to attract such a call: “Para provocar la llamada lo mayor es bailar con ganas moviendo las caderas, despojando de rigideces la cintura” (Valenzuela 89). She must flaunt her female attractiveness in order to entice his wild call, in an effort to ultimately satisfy her confusion between feeling an identity in his presence and feeling uneasiness in his absence. His company seems to tame her, in the way the male influence should in a functioning patriarchal order, but when he is away she senses a wildness yet running through her being that has not been dominated: “Hay caballos sueltos dentro de la naturaleza de Amanda y no todos han sido domados. Pero en presencia del Coyote los potros suelen no manifestarse, los potros aparecerán después cuando él haya partido” (91). This indicates that the male presence does create a certain order within the female. This order however, is dishonest, as it causes the woman to compromise the autonomy that she naturally possesses. The man's autonomy is encouraged and invited to expand itself to overcome that of the woman. Thus, it seems quite unbalanced that a patriarchal order would place societal power in the realm of the beastly, according to Valenzuela, and the tamable would be broken by the beast. In his presence, her mind even warns her of her compromise but her skin betrays all logic: “Trasmitiendo eso sí a través de sus

dedos todos los mensajes que Amanda quiere recibir y recibe sin preocuparse si allá arriba, en las remotas regions cerebrales, los mensajes que parecen tan sabios en la piel pierden toda consistencia” (Valenzuela 91-92). In this instance, after he has called, she has answered, and they have both fulfilled their carnal desires, he tortures her yet again by leaving her in his absence. Thus, Amanda slowly goes recognizing her own power that is present when not encompassed by his influence and she considers what it would be like to “lavarse del Coyote, lavarse de ella misma” (94). In cleansing herself of him she must also rid her of herself for until this point, her self-definition lay within him.

The journey for reclaiming her own lost power begins as she sends Coyote away with an “Adiós (para siempre)” (94). She is strong enough to know that this goodbye is definitive, and she goes to pamper herself in an act of finally cultivating her own spirit apart from Coyote. She must revisit these feminine rituals before becoming strong enough to reject them. These rituals characteristic of a woman’s grooming process stand in stark opposition to the man she nearly worships. The narrator is very clear about his animalistic characteristics—primal even. This creates a juxtaposition that causes the reader to ask just what catalyzes such a connection between pristine female and wild, unkempt male. She begins applying a cosmetic mask, which dually serves to highlight the mask that covers her true self while in the presence of Coyote, as well as a cleansing ritual that strips away the impurities that cause her to stray from her autonomous self. Before she bathes herself, an act that will soon become synonymous with finding her own identity, she must perform “tantas actividades previas, propiciatorias. Digamos la máscara” (95). These rituals are steps in cleansing herself of the Coyote and the mask is necessary “para entrar en escena o para salir de escena y meter la patita en otra vida

donde no hay coyotes, coyones, vampiros de sus más secretos líquidos” (Valenzuela 95). As she goes on to perform these rites, a period of time passes in which her hot bath water has gone cold. She is not quite ready to cleanse herself of her former identity founded in her male lover. She runs the water hot again, but before she can submerge herself she notices her ghastly leg hair and she cannot reconcile herself with the idea of polluting the pristine water with her unsightly, unwomanly body hair. The narrator mirrors her thoughts as she muses, “¿cómo contaminar el agua con los pelos? Protégenos, oh Aura, de los pelos de las piernas que en las noches sin luna se convierten en moscas para envenenar el sexo. Bueno, sin exagerar: protégenos, Señor, de los pelos de las piernas que en momentos de verdadera dicha entorpecen la mano que nos acaricia” (Valenzuela 97). She is still clinging to this insular idea of how a woman should be in order to please her man; thus, she is not yet prepared to wash herself clean of these notions entirely. She waxes herself, ripping the hair out of her legs in the same way that she ripped the mask from her face in preparation for finding her true identity.

The bath water has gone cold again in its weary wait for her to submerge her identity and she must again run it hot. These periods of hot to cold water represent the stages of change occurring within her newly sprouting self. She fills the water with pine salts and as she finally enters the warm bath, she enters a new world full of her own characteristics, represented by a jungle and all of its inhabitants, once watered by the hose of Coyote but now nourished in the pool of her own pristine water (101). She imagines a toad and her thoughts go to this toad having urinated on her for defense:

Y para comprobarlo del pis de los sapitos pasa al propio, manando con toda calidez de su cuerpo a la menos cálida tibieza del agua en la bañera y

ella suntuosamente sumergida en ese mar contaminado por sus propias aguas, rodeada de sí misma. Extática. Su privado calor interno ahora rodeándola en el bosque de pinos con raos de sol que se filtran entre las ramas y le confieren una especie de halo. Un aura dorada entre la espuma blanca. (98)

As she allows her own bodily fluids to infiltrate the water in which she bathes, she allows her identity apart from Coyote to also overcome her previous self. Her urine represents that which is purely *her*, not woman defined by man, but her total self full of total sexuality. This urine represents that which strays outside of what can be called masculine or feminine. It is a product of every human being, and it is produced by Amanda's body alone. This act of urinating in the water in which she sits proves to be quite animalistic, as Amanda's actions cast off the pristine female façade she previously upheld through her rituals. Her urine is proof that her very essence does not fit within the feminine prescription, and the rituals allow her to dig deep enough to find this self that still exists beneath the mask. She only finds this pure form of herself when she allows herself to be submerged in the water, casting off the grooming rituals that are themselves societal constructs. Amanda is now free from a patriarchal designation in which she must find herself only within a man. She represents the freedom of the Argentine people when their national identity can escape the definition of a repressive regime.

VII. Conclusion

Valenzuela's arm of choice proves to be a worthy one as her words send intricately charged messages. They fight against female subordination, and they can certainly be analyzed from a feminist perspective with great success. For my purposes,

Cambio de armas is also functional under application of queer theory, as the theory's characteristics work in tandem with the stories to confirm the circular pattern of the patriarchal order, or the insistence upon tightly prescribed male-female norms. This is most damaging from a female perspective, as we see throughout the compilation, but the extension of traditional male expectations is just what makes this female role so destructive to she who bears it. Valenzuela utilizes many different narrative structures and plot lines throughout the work in question, but there are also many constants. The political environment of the Dirty War is always present, as is this uneasy male-female affiliation. Valenzuela continually suggests a problem in this connection, as the liaison is never completely at peace. Placidity is found only when the female can regain her lost self and begin to redefine her identity based on none but herself. Thus, to reiterate the analogy upon which my thesis finds a truth yet unmentioned in an academic environment, a move away from such strict gender norms expands to allow for a re-allotment of the identity of a repressed feminine force much like the Argentine people.

Chapter 4. Nela Rio: Oppression Undressed

I. Introduction

Nela Rio uses frank language and a candid tempo in this compilation, as she publicizes the suffering of the Argentine woman during the Dirty War oppression. Rio's poetry allows us to see clearly the masculine domination of the woman, as it chronicles her suffering throughout the period. When speaking of the male-female relationship between the militant government and the Argentine people, I have not limited the female to people analogy to anatomical women alone; I only support this analogy in order to demonstrate the emasculating effect that such a domination has on the people as a whole. In the pattern of patriarchy, here the people take on the role of the dominated. This compilation materializes the suffering of the woman in specific, for their sexual anguish was particularly targeted. However, we see the torment of the Argentine people as a whole manifested in these women's stories, and coupled with Molina's account, it becomes clear that, at least brought forth in cultural production, those of femininity posed a threat to the solidarity of the violent, fledgling tyrants in control.

II. Poetry for Remembrance

The dedication to the work reads "*yo te recuerdo*" (6), stating Rio's purpose in composing this particular work of poetry. In this volume of twenty-four poems, each one is dedicated to a woman: "Nela Rio dedica cada poema a una mujer, cuya única identificación es un nombre: Josefa Manuela, María, Nenina, se omite los apellidos, signos de la estructura paternalista de la cultura y se actualiza el dolor de cada una de las presas políticas" (Echeverría 185). While each woman bearing a dedication is a true person, this act of dedication dually represents those who have suffered tyranny at the

hands of an oppressive dictatorship in general (Miller in *Noches* 69). Supporting my assertion that the Dirty War was born out of an extension of patriarchal roles, Nela Rio omits the given family name of each female to whom she dedicates a work. This *apellido* is a symbol of the masculine force in each life; it is a symbol that she is the product of a man. Rio's aim here is to erase this masculine force or rather, to invert it. In *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* (heretofore referred to as *Noches*), the man is not life giving as the tradition of family names would suggest; rather, he robs the woman of her existence.

III. Noted Work on Nela Rio

Before entering into an analytical discussion of the poetry found in Rio's compilation, it must be noted how little this work has been commented upon in an academic environment. It is rather surprising due to the power set forth by the poet, and my analysis paves the way for re-associating the trauma through recognition of the events of the Dirty War as well as the resulting literature such as that produced by Nela Rio. Those most noted for their studies on the author are Elizabeth Gamble Miller, who has extensively translated and propagated the work of Rio, as well as Miriam Balboa Echeverría, whose book review is considered here. Another critic who has studied and written about her work is Dr. Silvia Nagy-Zekmi, and as the list ends here, it can be seen that Rio is rather under-criticized, yet not under recognized. Nela Rio is currently self-exiled to Canada where she continues to write and serve as a professor at St. Thomas University. The author has been recognized for her work in twelve international literary contests; she has also been published internationally in Spain, Argentina, Chile, Puerto Rico, Poland, the United States, and Canada; and she is member to several writers'

organizations throughout the Americas. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for a lack of criticism on the author, but I propose that production of this sort comes at an influx posthumously, and Rio's exile causes her to be geographically removed from the center of interest in Argentina. Furthermore, poetry stands alone as a literary genre that is often shied away from, as it appeals to a smaller, more isolated group of critics. The literary subgroup is made up of poetry alone, and it stands in opposition to the majority of literature that can be grouped under the blanket term of prose (novel, short story, etc.). Nela Rio's art of choice is often avoided by readers due to the often-ambiguous nature of poetry; it frequently requires deep interpretation and refuses to present its ideas in terms of black and white. Additionally, it is certain that censorship has hindered the spread of her message, as the Argentine powers have until quite recently systematically hidden works that would condemn them even if only retrospectively. The poet has dedicated this work to remembrance, and her very own words support her inclusion in the present thesis, grouping her along with the other authors presented here that have directed their work towards re-association with the pain that was caused through this oppression:

Y entonces deviene significativa la elección de lo que se quiere recordar.
La construcción de la memoria es también individual y colectiva.... Con todo siento que mi compromiso es recordar y que la manera que toma es el lenguaje poético, el narrativo, el artístico.... La lectura tiene un gesto muy preciso: es capaz de evocar las vidas que la escritura ha abrazado. Estos poemas son para la paz. (Epilogue to *Noches 76*)

For Rio, just like Valenzuela, the written word is the weapon of choice, combating the violence of the Dirty War period. Echeverría confirms this common interest that Rio

shares: “La palabra sirve para recrear el dolor y convertirse en arma de celebración de la mujer al testificar y escribir su historia” (185). She writes to remember the lives of those who suffered, and her message is one of peace.

Once more I apply Queer Theory to my analysis, understanding the blatant masculine display included in Rio’s poetry. The female suffers under the macho prowess, and each poem and dedication serves as a small representation of the much larger picture. She has chosen to designate each poem with a roman numeral instead of wordy titles. This characteristic of *Noches* causes the compilation to read as one whole work, and each poem is only one of twenty-four related components. This technique deems *Noches* one long narration, made up of many small ones that, coupled with the consecutive and related themes, transmits Rio’s desired message of remembrance of those who suffered and a dream for future peace. Each poem is the story of an individual woman who symbolizes the pain of the Argentine people in general. Miller writes, “The structure of the poems follows a chronologically ordered series of experiences: the attempt to escape, the surprise at being pursued and the lack of comprehension at being captured, the nightmarish atmosphere of fear and of imprisonment, multiple tortures, the waiting filled with anguish, and the agony associated with death” (69). All of these experiences serve to jolt the perspective of identity, and we will see how the torture skews the vision of the self.

Until this point, my thesis has focused on works of prose (novel and short story) that tell stories of those who, like the women recognized here, suffered at the hands of the Dirty War government. With Puig and Valenzuela’s works, it seems as if the reader constitutes the third person, looking in from the outside on those suffering, but the reader

is excluded from the experience. He or she has the benefit of the re-association provided through these prose narratives; however, Rio's poetry breaks down this wall and allows the audience to live inside the mind of the sufferer. The words often read like stream-of-consciousness, revealing the most inner feelings of the prisoners, and it often digs so deep into the psyche that the verses seem surreal, subconscious. In *Noches*, Nela Rio employs artful lyricism to create a long epic poem that traverses Argentina's dirty struggle.

Before an analysis of the poems included in the compilation, the astute reader will benefit from a synopsis of literary devices that Rio uses in order to structurally send her message. For any author, the ability to manage such techniques adds another dimension to the work, and, as we saw with Manuel Puig, the structure can transmit a message in its own right. A message of this sort functions rhetorically beyond the actual meaning of the words. Elizabeth Gamble Miller agrees: "We discover in the text techniques that enable [*Noches*] to transcend the purely personal anguish in the content and avoid the expression's being prosaic" (Commentary to *Noches* 69). One such device that she employs is simply to allow for a chronological ordering of the sentiments felt by those who suffered. Beginning with the first poem, she follows through the fear of imprisonment, lack of understanding, reconciliation of anguish, sadness felt for the *pueblo*—among many other sentiments—and she continues thematically thus (Miller on *Noches* 69). Though each woman depicted and each woman to whom a poem is dedicated was undeniably a victim of this repression, her innocence is highlighted by the fact that she never views herself as such. She is steadfast in her queer self, a self that is defined by her staunch ideals and refusal to succumb to the tyranny of those in power though she be tortured, maimed, and killed. Miller agrees: "In no poem does the woman see herself as a

victim. Nothing and no one can stain her sense of integrity and self, not even rape” (Commentary to *Noches* 69). Miller calls this the “philosophical unity and strength” of the volume, and I concur, as the fact of the woman’s selflessness causes the reader to feel that much more anger at the unjust acts that were inflicted upon her. Furthermore, Rio elects to abandon any semblance of traditional rhyme scheme; her usage of free verse denotes liberation and a queered structure. By ignoring traditional rhyming patterns, Rio rejects tradition in itself. This poetic characteristic supports my theoretical basis in queer theory, as it structurally parallels the queer phenomenon. In rejecting poetic norms, Rio mirrors the queer’s denial of solidarity found in social prescriptions as well. Finally, the reader perceives a theme in which the victim distances herself from her physical and mental pain and takes herself to a place far from where she suffers at the hands of men. This is an act of dissociation that aids the prisoner in dealing with the moment of anguish, which couples with Rio’s writing to re-associate the pain in order that the trauma may serve her self-stated goal of remembrance. Thus, the work that allows society to see the pain and suffering is also the same that chronicles the victims’ attempt to remove themselves from their torment.

IV. Poem I

The opening poem to the compilation bears no dedication, but the poem itself seems to memorialize all those sufferers as a whole. This poem states the purpose of the compilation in using words as the weapon of choice, just like Valenzuela has done:

Tengo estas palabras ahogándose
apretujadas en mi pecho
llenándome los ojos de imágenes y vidas

quisiera que las palabras resonaran como truenos

que resonaran como las cuerdas vitales

de una guitarra universal

de la boca redonda abierta como un grito

ha de surgir el lamento la exigencia de vidas que no quieren morir... (1-8)

One technique that can be perceived in many of the poems in *Noches* functions much like Rio's re-association of what the sufferers have managed to dissociate. She uses vocabulary and ideas that tell of specific torture experienced by the women. As you see in the above passage, Rio reverses the intent of the word in order to change a thing that was intended for trauma into a concept that serves to free the pain and tell the victims' stories. With the first verb seen here, "ahogándose", one is reminded of one of the many torture tactics used to force information from the prisoners, or merely for cruelty. Water was often used to conduct electricity across the body, and many were subjected to this agony almost to the point of drowning. The narrator of *I* feels the words drowning in her chest, dying to get out in order that they may tell their story. Furthermore, the mention of thunder calls attention to the electric lightning that seared through the bodies of the disappeared, and the words fly from the mouth, rounded to allow the scream of anguish to escape. Here though, it is not a scream of pain; rather, it is the forceful emission of the words that must spew forth the message of suffering. The words also represent those that would reveal a secret desired by the torturers—the information that they would attempt to coerce from the mouth of their victim. Even more so, they "quieren celebrar vivir la vida en la vida viviendo" (20). We must remember those who were subjected to such anguish so that we may celebrate their lives.

V. Poem II

The poem entitled *II* introduces the reader to that initial moment of fear when lives were changed forever by the heavy hand of the Dirty War. Once again, Rio artfully chooses her vocabulary in an act that visually and thematically associates the moment in which suffering arrives with the actual torture experienced:

Enferma de contradicciones
enfiebrece por la lucha y el poder
pisotea y destroza
los campos del país. (6-9)

Rio materializes the sickness, the feverishness, using the general fight as the cause for such debilitation. This technique serves, as it did in *I*, to call attention to the specific suffering experienced in the moment of torture while telling of a different event entirely.

Rio personifies the ominous powers:

Por el camino
lodo sangre odio
avanza
absurda confundida
la fuerza de la Represión. (1-5)

It is not the troops that advance, but the mud, the blood, and the hate. The Repression is capitalized as in a proper name, and this causes the effect that it is a united force of one, not made up of many singular individuals. It is not the individuals who have caused the destruction, but the hate that now advances upon the people. Those who do comprise this force are “ángeles negros” (13)—they are not of this Earth for, as Nela later mentions in

poems *X* and *XI*, they un-do themselves as men through their ghastly actions, and they have left their humanity behind. The speaker continues with starkly contrasting imagery that once again brings the mind to the torture chamber: “El silencio / oculta ahora / el grito ahogado de la sorpresa” (17-19). Once again Rio employs the verb “ahogar” to express the effect that silence has on the surprise of a change in political environment, but it additionally pinpoints the suffering felt by the victims. Freedom is now personified, as it lies mangled just like those who would pursue it:

La Libertad
queda enroscada en los fusiles mudos
en el olor a pólvora
gimoteando entre sus muertos. (22-25)

Liberty is maimed in much the same way the guerrilla fighters experienced death, and she is found whimpering among the dead. Thus, she is not yet dead—though badly altered—and hope can remain alive that through the suffering freedom may yet regain its power.

VI. Poem V

The poem entitled *V* is charged with colorful imagery as it depicts a scene much like that seen in *II*. It begins with a lament:

Es la una de la tarde
de un día cualquiera
de un día que hace historia
de esa que nunca cuentan. (1-4)

This history is untold, but *Noches* serves to remedy this void that must be filled in order that remembrance may be achieved. Even nature has turned against this poem's protagonist, and all those who fought for freedom from enslavement:

El sol pica hoy con la fuerza
de las balas
y no hay árbol que dé sombra
que me cubra
que me tape
que no mate. (5-10)

The sun's heat is heat from the bullets that rain down and even the trees deny shade or comfort. On the contrary, they give death. Valenzuela once again employs charged vocabulary in order to bring attention to the destructive torture tactics. Her usage of the active verb *pica* is reminiscent of the *picana*, the electric prod used to literally and figuratively grill the victim. In the third stanza of *V*, the reader sees the afore-mentioned dissociation as the speaker attempts to bury herself in herself: "yo me encojo / en mi piel, en mis zapatos" (14-15). The speaker tries to remove herself from this horrific situation, if not in body, then at the very least in her mind. The soldiers enter like a cloud of blood and everything becomes this blood and is covered in it:

y cuando miro mis manos
las veo llenas de sangre
y cuando miro mis piernas
las veo llenas de sangre
y aferro mi corazón con los dientes

para que no me lo quiten
y la sangre que me cubre
es la sangre de mis gritos
y a mi sangre se la llevan
los soldados
que cargan una nube llena de muertos. (16-26)

This passage is quite surreal, as what comes to pass is hard to imagine on realistic terms. But one can infer that the bloodshed and destruction has infiltrated the speaker's thoughts in such a way that all she can perceive is death and gore. Her mind has been turned over to these oppressive forces, and even her body is full of the blood that they have shed. She clenches her teeth into her own heart in an effort to save it from also being overcome by the oppression. The very words are a clue that all the rest of her has been captured by them, and they even carry away her own blood. But her heart, the source of this blood and the literary source of love and emotion, she manages to cling to. Now the cloud of blood in which the soldiers entered is filled with the dead, and they carry it away along with the blood of the poem's speaker.

VII. Poem X

In the poem numbered *X*, Nela Rio creates a character for those who inflicted torture upon the *desaparecidos*, and this character unquestioningly once filled the patriarchal role. She speaks from the mouth of the woman who suffers as she does in each poem included here. The speaker vacillates between two poetic spaces—the first presumably being the space in which she is being held prisoner, and the second imagining the world from which her oppressor might have come. He is undoubtedly a

masculine force who “ha dejado su humanidad colgada / en el perchero de su casa” (4-5). This description queers the torturer as it strips him of his humanity. However, deep within the feelings attached to such a portrayal, the reader senses an unwelcome, perverted sort of sympathy for the man who allows his human identity to be robbed by the militant powers. Just like Roque, the man who tortures the poem’s protagonist does so out of a need for livelihood and a looming threat from those subversives. He is queered as he essentially rejects the prescribed masculine role of protector and provider. He left his humanity hung on the coat rack, and as he bids goodbye to his children, he steps outside of this role of protector and into the role of destroyer. He once ruled a family before becoming a part of this overarching macho power that was the Dirty War’s militant forces:

¡No!
¡No quiero oír esos pasos! ...
ese caminar pesado
que olvidó la ternura
después de despedir esa mañana a sus hijos. (1-2, 6-8)

She senses her undoing as his footsteps grow nearer, and it is brought to fruition upon his arrival:

tiritando entre mis vómitos
humillada en mis propios excrementos
pego mi cuerpo resquebrajado
a la humedad del piso...
la puerta se abre de golpe

y trato de formar una barrera con mis gritos...

voy muriendo poco a poco

cuando me arrastran

hacia el más innombrable horror

¡NO!!! (12-25)

The oppressor has left his humanity behind and now he strips his female counterpart of her humanity. She lies completely stripped of her faculties and subjected to complete humiliation and submission. She has no doubt been erroneously accused of some crime, namely one that requires her to step outside of the tightly packaged ideal that is *woman* and now she must pay the ultimate price. This death can be seen in two complimentary ways. On one hand, the tortured woman has died to herself as her identity and autonomy have been robbed from her. More specifically, this can be seen as a literal death—that which removes the physical being from all earthly identifications. In death perhaps the torturer has removed his victim from her queer state through force, and through the most extreme means possible.

VIII. Poem XI

Rio continues in *XI*, reserving no details:

la picana feroz

hurga mi cuerpo como una lengua de fuego

y sacude mi carne

arqueando mi ser en formas horribles....

y busco ese lugar chiquitito

para reunir las fuerzas que ya se van

lugar chiquitito
inviolable
donde no llega la dentellada feroz de la picana
y entro en la bruma delirante
sabiendo que hay cien mil compañeras que me guardan. (8-26)

The poet mentions the *picana*, that brutal instrument charged with electricity and the will of man to do harm to its victims. A poetic description need not be inviting for its beauty, as one can clearly see here. Indeed, she poetically describes the instrument as having “una lengua de fuego”, which is only inviting for the enlightenment it affords those wishing to educate themselves about the ferociousness of this torture. The mention of the tongue pertains to its usage for sexual pleasure, creating a perverse gratification for the instrument that causes intense pain for the receiver. This act calls to an inversion of gender roles as well, since oral stimulation should provide pleasure in any romantic duo. That notion of oral intimacy is destroyed, as pleasure is replaced with physical and mental anguish. The speaker personifies the electric prod, gives it teeth, and situates it as the object of her pain. Later, Rio speaks of how one might find solace from such brutal force. Once again, the speaker dissociates herself from the pain she feels when she retires her mind to her “lugar chiquitito”. The speaker clings to a place of safety in her mind that cannot be touched by her oppressors. She searches for a mental place where she is no longer vulnerable, and just as the *picana* sends her into a delirium of pain, she remembers that she is hardly alone. The victim uses this small mental space much like one might use a box of memories, where she keeps pieces of a happiness she once felt

before falling prey to the brutal dictatorship. She opens the poem with a description of this place:

Tengo un lugar chiquitito
en mi corazón
donde guardo sonrisas pedacitos de sol
un gesto amable
un tambaleante confianza en la humanidad
y cien mil compañeras que luchan por la verdad
la justicia y el amor. (1-7)

This place holds what is left of nicety, with a kindly gesture taking up valuable room in her memory. And finally, there remains a vulnerable trust in whatever humanity might still exist in the world. This is a place of imagination, far from the torture that is currently racking the body of the oppressed. No humanity exists in this physical place, but in the true tone of this volume by Nela Rio, hope is still alive. The prisoner can still imagine a time when humanity existed and she can pretend that it exists still.

IX. Poem XII

The *picana* is also the subject of another of her poems, numbered *XII*. This time, Nela Rio focuses on the multiple ways in which this prod was used, and she sends her reader into the chamber of fear along with the victim. One can almost feel the multiple pain of a physical hurt as well as a humiliation as she doubles the experience with the voices of the oppressors:

¡Putá!
¡Carajo!

y golpean y golpean
mi boca fuertemente cerrada
¡Putas!
¡Carajos!
y tiran
de mis pezones hinchados
¡Putas!
¡Carajos!
y atan mis piernas abiertas
al duro camastro de acero...
y meten
los dedos los puños
entre mis piernas abiertas...
y penetran
y penetran
con ferocidad
con voracidad
el miembro viril que no tienen...
y usan la picana
como un macho cabrío...
y se deshacen como hombres
y vociferan impotentes...
y cuando terminan de

violarme

violarme

no han tocado a la mujer, ni nunca lo harán! (1-47)

Here, the torture instrument has not changed, but Rio has changed her focus to the horrifying sexual aspect of the torture. She describes in detail the way that she is forced into a sexual position, and penetrated again and again. Though the word “penetrate” has a sexual connotation, the sufferer is being penetrated beyond the coital meaning of the word. Her soul is penetrated by the mere act of the torture, as one can infer from the testimonies mentioned above. Yet, the victim refuses to give in to those who would oppress her. She maintains her “boca fuertemente cerrada”, refusing to speak the information that would certainly not grant her freedom, but more likely would only serve to enslave countless others. Amidst the suffering of the violated woman, those taking what is rightfully hers can manage only to hurl insults. A chant of “¡Puta! ¡Carajo!” is incessant between the girl’s own thoughts, and the soldiers would dare call her a “whore” whilst depriving her of her chastity. Nevertheless, they may take her physically, but the things they are truly after, she will not give. They have not managed to destroy the queer woman that endures her torture without giving in; they have not touched the *woman*, the true woman that exists beneath their expectations of timidity and compliance. Rio also comments on the state of the afflicters. They have ceased to be men, as they undo their very humanity through their actions. Even more so, the issue of a collective rape brings the idea of masculinity to the forefront. In a patriarchal order, man has sex with woman in order to procreate, and for a pleasure that fits nicely into traditional norms. In this instance in Rio’s poetry, the men take turns sharing the victim’s sexual space and

essentially, they are immersing themselves in the result their compadres' pleasure and bodily output. They have not touched the woman, but they essentially touch each other by sharing the woman's intimate space. This creates a sort of hyper-masculinity that fits under the blanket of queer, for it also steps outside of a prescribed male norm. Though the torturers have failed to analyze their actions thus, in attempting to un-do the pristine nature of the female's sexual autonomy, they queer themselves by essentially fornicating with one another. Through this, the oppressors only fuel the solidarity of the woman's essence, with an emphasis on her personal freedom apart from a socially prescribed tradition. The insulting chant is an attempt at linguistic penetration, which only encourages the regrouping of the female body as a whole (the Argentine people), and their story is collectively made known by the pen of Nela Rio.

X. Poem XXIV

The last poem in this collection entitled *En las noches que desvisten otras noches*, we see the final number—XXIV. The dedication to this poem reads, “*María José, ¿dónde estás?*” (60). Here, Rio faces the feelings of those on the outside of the torture camps, forced day and night to learn how to live, never knowing the whereabouts of those they love most:

nos preguntamos todavía
si la vida que sigue andando
me contiene
te contiene
nos detiene....
los recuerdos

de tantas vidas que se han dado se dan al mundo
para crear vida en las vidas que viven sin vivir...
Son las vidas de esas muertas
que dan vida.
Yo te digo
mujer,
yo nos recuerdo. (3-39)

The author materializes the fears of every free Argentine at this moment in history. Not only is one afraid for those already missing, but one is afraid for their own personal future as well. Now the loved ones are no more than memories, but the author is assured that the lives of the dead will not end there. They tell a brutal story, and just as documentation is the key to a future free of such strife, the dead here also give life. This is so because they warn of history's incessant brutality, and they implore future beings not to follow down the same, beaten path. As this poem ends, Nela Rio dedicates the compilation for this cause exactly. She writes, "Estos poemas son para la paz. Hay cosas que pasaron, pasan ¡que no deben pasar nunca más!" (64).

XI. Conclusion

Nela Rio have successfully demonstrated the power of a changing of weapons. She has turned her sights towards recording and re-associating the devastation that happens when man raises his hand against woman through use of violent weaponry and mental anguish. To be sure, this man is the oppressor found in each poem, and he is the Dirty War militant government as well, while this woman is each character chronicled in the above work, and it represents the Argentine people for our additional purposes.

Valenzuela and Rio now use the written word as their weapon of choice, and their example proves the superior power of such an arm. Their words last forever, telling society for an interminable amount of time of the destruction caused in their once-militant homeland when one masculine force tried to quell the voice of its feminine counterpart. The trauma cannot be erased, though the government continually has tried to hide the powerful word, which tells the truth of the Dirty War and the whereabouts of its *desaparecidos*. Rio's words cannot be hidden, though censorship may still try, and their weapon of choice may not have the power to right the great wrongs done to the people, but it affords them a justice never given them under an oppressive regime.

Conclusion

Throughout the study of queer theory and its application to the cultural production of the Dirty War in Argentina, the detriment involved in the prescription of normative gender roles is evident. The Dirty War was a destructive period for Argentines hoping to improve the political situation between their borders, and it manifested itself in the form of sexual repression. This masculine dominance was not only reserved for the female faction, but for anyone who would challenge the patriarchal order. The people's defiance came in many forms, but one consistency is that all those targeted were believed to have stepped outside of their expected gender role in society. Those who posed a threat to the government yearning for legitimacy were women who behaved *other* than a woman traditionally should, males and females who sexually categorized themselves as anything other than strictly heterosexual, revolutionaries hoping to better the tumultuous political environment, and even those who were merely found to have handled fliers which questioned the new government. Conversely, the militants in control expected strict conformity with regards to sexual expectations, and their behavior was much the opposite of those they condemned. The Argentine government that catalyzed the Dirty War expanded a lofty notion of the masculine duty to protect, preserve, and punish their counterpart, the people.

I have brought to current discussion the stark similarity found in the literature resulting from the Dirty War; it depicts a gendered oppression wherein the female (subversive) faction is stuck under the heavy hand of their masculine equivalent. Within each work of literature analyzed, I have highlighted relationships wherein the feminine representative is damaged by the masculine group. In every instance, this connection can

be expanded on a larger level to represent the destruction caused during the Dirty War when the machista government repressed their helpless constituents.

My analysis cannot possibly outline every instance in literature in which this dual depiction is found, and it cannot even be delimited regarding *El beso de la mujer araña*, *Cambio de armas*, and *En las noches que desvisten otras noches*. Each work of literature seen here intricately details the destruction involved in prescribing sex roles, and they all require further studies in order that queer theory's application to the Dirty War may be solidified. My study opens the arena for further rumination and research on the subject of gender roles and their relation to widespread conflict. Though the abolition of prescribed expectations for males and females will require enormous effort and evolution in the social realm, the issue is pertinent. My proposal can only grow as it is introduced to the sphere of academic discourse, refined, and developed.

One example of a field where further work on queer theory and the Dirty War is pertinent is the sphere of film production that has surged from Argentina. *La historia oficial* (1985) is one such film that depicts a pointedly gendered oppression. As highlighted in the theoretical overview and first suggested by Marilyn French, one possible explanation for masculine domination of the female spirit is the ultimate reproductive power of the anatomical woman. In *La historia oficial*, the Argentine government attacks this natural feminine power as they attempt to alter the one advantage that social infringements cannot affect. The film recounts the fate of those children born from imprisoned mothers, and tells of their subsequent kidnapping by Argentine political officials. This depiction is one further speculation at the whereabouts of the disappeared, and it portrays an attempt at robbing the female of her naturally instilled power to

procreate. By robbing the woman of her child, she is denied the benefits of motherhood, and thus her effort at childbirth seems futile, and her reproductive power is essentially nullified. Through this account, facets of queer theory's application to gender roles is displayed for its multi-faceted nature, as more doors are opened to my Male-Female analogy's future possibility.

Countless individuals fell prey to the captures of the Dirty War Argentine government, and due process was granted to none. Though unforgiving, one must understand in detail the physical, sexual, and mental torture that was inflicted upon the captives during this time in history in order to also decipher the countless cultural responses that resulted. The physical torture produced lasting effects upon its subjects, and was wrought with a deafening sexual undertone. For this reason, society can benefit from a discussion of the government-people relationship of Argentina at this time as a Male-Female power relationship, proving the need for society to move outside of these prescribed gender roles. This relation is affirmed by the many actual accounts of torture coupled with literary and cinematic responses that explore the way that a macho fear tactic seeped its way into the lives of each Argentinean. Though past destruction can never be erased, a global society must come forth in order that power be returned to the people. Scars remain, but recognition and documentation serve as the first steps to ensuring that mankind refuses to fall victim to such conflict in the future of human society.

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