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Vengeful Bodies: Representing Femicide in Latin American Culture

Vivian Arimany[1]

Introduction: Fictionalizing Femicide and Performative Gender

Fiction (Noun)
1. The action of fashioning or imitating.
2. Feigning, counterfeiting; deceit, dissimulation, pretence.
From the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)

Fiction is an expansive term and alludes to an embodied style of inhabiting the world. It is a mode of understanding one's surroundings through symbols and signs, which are often adopted by communities. Through a process of mutual agreement, they then become tenements of socialization. The discipline of queer studies has posited gender as one example of such mutually agreed upon symbols of socialization. What follows is a survey of two queer studies scholars, and how they provide different but also complimentary modes of understanding gender as fictional. Firstly, Judith Butler proposed in the seminal *Gender Trouble* (1990) that cultural norms (or fictions) establish a set of speech patterns, movements, clothing, and activities that are associated with each set of binary gender marks. These sets of actions designated to each gender are referred to as "performative" by Butler, in that they are maintained, perpetuated, and repeated in every social interaction. We can perceive gender, then, as a fiction in that it is an "imitation" and a "dissimulation", (an embodiment), of that which is conceptually understood by "male" or "female". Butler has been credited as one of the initiators of queer studies. Following on Butler's notion of gender as performative, J. Halberstam (2005) proposes an epistemology of trans and gender non-conforming subjectivities that reject the linearity of heterosexual time. This is done by, for example, medically and surgically modifying their bodies to better fit an internal perception of themselves. Gender is fictional, then, in that it transgresses the physical exterior. It is both based on personal and subjective ideas of self, as well as exterior or social notions of how certain bodies should look.

While Butler was primarily interested in a theatrical representation of gender, Halberstam denotes the ways in which the body becomes a technology of malleability. Furthermore, queer time comes into being, argues Halberstam, in rejecting the bourgeois establishment of reproduction. While predominant gay rights movements focus on access to adoption and marriage, queer temporality posits how, by predominantly having a lower life expectancy (Halberstam focuses, for example, on the AIDS epidemic, as well as hate crimes) queer and trans people embody a way of living that is not dictated by the family plot.

After the above survey on queer theory that demonstrates gender as fictional, it must be added that this essay is concerned with fiction as it relates to gender, as well as femicide (that is, the muder of a person based on their gender identity, specifically women-identifying people). The analysis in this essay will look at how fiction, within the realm of culture, (literary and visual) portrays femicide and also provides a language to understand the bodily reality of gender based violence, which simulates and demarks the fragility within a socialized fiction like gender. For Andrea Long Chu, being "female" is not necessarily a gendered subjectivity, but rather a vulnerable and precarious state of being with others. In her seminal trans-feminist manifesto Females (2019), Chu states that "Everyone is female and everyone hates it. If this is true, then gender is very simply the form this self-loathing takes in any given case" (35). Romance languages, such as Spanish or French are inherently gendered languages, meaning that every object is assigned a binary male or female pronouns. Lacking neutral equivalents, Spanish speakers have traditionally implemented the masculine as the preferred category when signifying groups of multiple genders. That is, the masculine is neutral.

The universality of masculine language renders it resilient, or not vulnerable, as opposed to the feminine, whose linguistic invisibility proves it capable of distinguishing. Although coming from an Anglophone tradition, Long Chu's universalist statement rings as an opposition to this masculinist trend in the Romance languages. However, as is clear in Chu's statement, the universalism of being female is an abject state of being, due to a refusal of wanting to admit one's precariousness and vulnerability.

Part of this refusal to lean into one's "femaleness", as Long Chu proposes, is perhaps connected to the subjection to violence that occurs to so many precarious embodiments. Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos points out how the mass murders of women in Ciudad Juarez during the early 1990 's showed the complicity of journalists with the state in hiding these murders. As a result, strikes were initiated in demand for a revelation of the "truth" regarding this pernicious phenomenon. The adoption of a term that designates the murder of a person solely based on their gender identity allowed for a collective understanding that women weren't being murdered by chance and bad luck, but rather that it was and continues to be a systematic issue. Furthermore, recognizing these murders as systemic further reveals that people (women) are murdered due to not "performing" their gender correctly. However, other recent scholarship on femicide (for example, the work of Verónica Gago, Sayak Valencia, and Rita Segato) has denoted how it is not merely a matter of murdering someone based on the fact that they are a woman. Instead, it is a complex network of powers working to maintain patriarchal, heterosexual, and eurocentric hegemonies in place. One must, rather, follow Kimberlé Crenshaw's adoption of the term "intersectionality." As a possible solution to the erasure of racialized women in cultural discourse, Crenshaw fought for the adoption of both "black" and "woman" into legal language. By hyphenating these two terms together, language enables recognizing how a person is subjected to violence, not only because their gender is contrary to patriarchal power, but their race is also a target to colonial obtrusions. Verónica Gago (2020), following on this call for intersectionality, argues for "forms of transversal struggle" (199). Working within the context of Latin America, Gago notes how the interconnected phenomenons of, for example, state oppression and foreign interventions have all contributed to make femicide and other forms of violence possible. Furthermore, these colonial and patriarchal forces need the repetition and existence of these forms of violence (like femicide) because they allow for the permanence of hegemonic power.

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Femicide, then, is a pervasive aspect of our perceived reality and it affects the embodied experience of multiple people. How, then, is it possible for fiction to portray these realities? Objects like literature and art use fiction in a way that manifests the fact that all human beings exist within a socialized fiction that they have created themselves. The essay will explore these issues through the often called Gothic horror novel *Hurricane Season* by Mexican author Fernanda Melchor and the performance/installation pieces "Jardín de flores" and "Monumento a las desaparecidas" by Guatemalan Regina José Galindo. These two works demonstrate the varying and opposing manners of portraying femicide and gender based violence. The essay is interested in how these objects are concerned with the body and hence seek to create a mosaic of senses and emotions, through which audiences are able to emotionally connect with the topic matter. Furthermore, it will be argued that both works destabilize traditional notions of womanhood by stripping the notion away from embodied markers, and rather as a sensual and emotional experience that refers to a vulnerable and precarious state of being with others. A feminized body, then, is one that has been

coded feminine by its inherent vulnerability, as was argued by Andrea Long Chu in her call to universalize femaleness. The same can be said about Gago's intersectional approach to femicide. While Butler is correct in referring to gender as performative, it is also important to think of it through the senses, and how this experience posits gendered femininity as intrinsically precarious. In the context of the femicide of black and racialized women, Patricia Hill Collins (2019) has noted how there is a "conceptual glue that binds intersecting systems of power together" (238).

Rather than merely affecting black and racialized women, the patriarchal and colonial systems that enable and perpetuate the possibility of femicide affects racialized communities as a whole. The vulnerability of femaleness, then, encompasses the position of being a target to hegemonic systems of power, be it patriarchal, heteronormative, or colonial. In the context of Latin American literature that portrays femicide and other forms of oppression (such as ecocide, meaning the destruction of nature, and violence against indigenous people), Sofía Forchieri (2025) argues that "literary forms have the capacity to mediate relationality, rendering fathomable what otherwise risks becoming a diffuse, paralyzing idea" (627). Through the poetics of imagery and metaphors, as well as character development that unfolds throughout a narrative, the intersecting aspects of violence (gender, race, geography, etc..) become apparent. While non-literary narratives (such as feminist theory) also do an important job of demonstrating these intersections (or relationalities), the job of literary devices is to get readers to empathize with a character, which then elicits an affective response. These emotional responses can then be persuasive in demonstrating the effects of violence. For example, in Selva Almada's novel Not a River or No es un río (2020), analyzed by Forchieri, the femicide plot is intertwined with that of ecological destruction and the oppression of indigenous people in Argentina. Through the implementation of all of these different forms of violence, Almada's novel maps out the ways in which all structures of power are interconnected.

Why focus on art as opposed to law and other political initiatives that are actively fighting to eradicate gender based violence? Francine Masiello's (2023) makes a compelling argument in favor of literature about the migrant experience: a socio-political issue that is as relevant as femicide and gender based violence (it is, then, an example of the "relationality" of power and oppression, as well as the different manifestations of precarity beyond womanhood).

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Masiello argues that migrants phase us with the issue of the body, due to the spatial movements they must endure, as well as the physical and mental demands of these movements, and the embodied violence that is often experienced. Unlike political reforms, or, to not stray too far away from literature, pamphlets and scientific texts, art appeals to the senses as well as emotions. Masiello points out that this pledge to bodily experience is a way in which art and literature creates "a camp of stimuli and scenes that we are unable to fully embrace with intellect; matter flows through time and space and, in the most extreme circumstances, posits the physical experience as the only certainty" (16)[2]. Even though political action is certainly necessary and important, it is also imperative for art to exist, so that the irrationality of lived experiences can be expressed in a way where intellectual pursuits come to their limits. The horror genre of fiction literature is a rich site to think of this appeal to the senses, for it is a genre that explicitly aims to elicit an emotional response out of readers and viewers. As Sara Ahmed (2014) has noted, fear is a powerful emotion in the sense that it impacts the person experiencing fear as well as the object or subject which is the target of said fear (Chapter 3). Fear is, then, subject forming. More specifically, fear creates a sense of commonality amongst a group of people. Ahmed specifies this as the project of nation building, which, through a shared fear of blackness of racial otherness, is formed as an inherently caucasian entity. In her reading of one of Frantz Fanon's memories, where a young white boy runs to his mother in fear of the black man (Fanon himself), Ahmed points out that the white boy's fear has been shaped by a long history, which has socialized him into learning that black men ought to be feared because they are intrinsically dangerous people. In turn, the subjectivity of black men like Fanon is shaped by this fear, for their movement through the world is impacted by the perception of the predominant white subject. In this shape-forming fashion, fear (and emotions or affects in general) work in connecting disparate subjects through art.

Melchor's *Hurricane Season* has multiple elements of a traditional horror novel, particularly when it comes to the portrayal of body horror. It is a novel invested in the production of emotions, rather than the production of political change like a work of nonfiction would be. The novel opens with the finding of the Witch's body, and the narrator does not shy away from graphic depictions of what is left of her. The novel evolves into chapters from different character's perspectives, which lead to eventually unveiling the identity and motivations of the murderer. The ghost of the Witch delves throughout the text in subtle and mysterious ways, seeking revenge for a crime that will seemingly remain unpunished, until it's not. As for Regina José Galindo's performance/installations, they consist of volunteer women participants covering their entire bodies in blankets and standing like specters in public spaces across the world.

The covering of the bodies can be interpreted as a reference to the constant hiding of crimes like femicide, but it is also a stripping away of the body's senses, perhaps as a way of demonstrating how the pervasiveness of femicide has created a desensitization from the problem. It must be noted that another form of veiling occurs in that the critique of femicide is not immediately apparent in the pieces, and it is not something that is clear unless one visits the artist's website, where there is a description of the works. The need for concept clarification is present in most visual art, and limits the amount of viewers who can have access to the message. This lack of clarity, however, invites for dialogues that further problematize complex issues that would not be tackled if approached in simplistic manners.

Galindo's critique on femicide disrupts the quotidian space by forcing unsuspecting viewers to confront the ghosts of those who are no longer with us. Even though the women's bodies are veiled, unlike the explicitness of the Witch's body, the intention is also to shock. Just like the characters in *Hurricane Season* are haunted by the vengeful specter of the Witch, spectators of Galindo's performance/installations are similarly being haunted. Furthermore, the global nature of both Melchor's novel and Galindo's performances must be noted. While *Hurricane Season* specifically deals with femicide in Latin America, Sophie Hughes's translation has been widely hailed in the Anglophone literary market, demonstrating the text's ability to migrate the portrayal of femicide onto different cultures. "Jardín de flores" and "Monumento a las desaparecidas", although created by a Guatemalan artist, were performed in multiple parts of the world, demonstrating how the phenomenon of femicide bleeds across borders. The success that Sophie Hughes's English translation of *Hurricane Season* has received demonstrates how the novel is also committed to this crossing of geographical boundaries. In reviews for Sophie Hughes's English translation, readers often focus on the terror produced by the narrative. Despite the negativity associated with the effect of terror (as

noted in Ahmed's reading of Fanon and the little white boy's fear of the black man), these reviewers mirror the pleasure experienced when reading or watching horror literature or films. Notably, writing for Cleveland Review of Books, Andrés Emil González stresses his delight upon reading in the novel descriptions of the "kinds of places that, when encountered, will set off warning signs in the head of any fan of horror literature and film… The space of Mexican fiction, particularly of the macabre and mysterious sort, has signifiers that are just as effective, if less well known outside of the Spanish-speaking world." The author places *Hurricane Season* in comparison with popular American references, such as the *Halloween* film franchise, as an attempt to render as recognizable the alien nature of Mexican fiction. Interestingly, the terror of violence occurring outside the United States is pleasurably consumed when it can be placed next to the familiarity of the suburban Northeast of Halloween. Emil González's description of these eerie spaces references an embodied experience of reading, where the audience's imagination triggers in the self a state of emergency that is sensorially received as truthful. Even if the common Anglophone reader hasn't witnessed a Latin American town like La Matosa, the process of reading about it transports the outsider onto this space, allowing them to spectate the terrors lived by the foreign other.

These two works (Melchor's novel and Galindo's performance) are being compared as a way of understanding the intersection between writing and performance, a link that goes back to the question of the senses in art. This was explored by Hélène Cixous in her notion of women's writing. Cixous argues that the feminine subject must utilize writing as a process to better understand herself and her body, that is, the way in which the self experiences their surroundings in a material form. Galindo's performance pieces are of interest to me because the performer's bodies are veiled, not just resembling ghostly figures, but also provoking questions on the complexity of whether or not the veil is meant to cover or denounce. With multiple years of presence in the art world, Galindo has built a repertoire of utilizing her body as a creative instrument. While traditional visual artists rely on canvases, clay, or other objects, Galindo and other artists referred to as "performance artists" view their embodied selves as the sole source of communication. Popularly, Cuban Ana Mendieta paved the way for contemporary women like Galindo. Having grown up as a diasporic subject in the United States, Mendieta travelled back to Cuba to lay in multiple natural sites and leave behind her silhouette. This was a mode of reflecting on her relationship to the homeland. Furthermore, during her tenure as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, Mendieta executed several performances where she re-enacted scenes of sexual assault read about in newspapers. Appalled by the graphic depictions of rape cases, including images of the victims found after the attacks, Mendieta performed these pieces in her apartment, inviting her friends to reflect on the treatment of women in media. Following a similar structure, one of Galindo's debut pieces consisted of a video showing her naked middle body, projections of news articles depicting gender-based violence reflected on her skin. Her missing face in the performance demonstrates the depersonalization inflicted upon victims of femicide and rape, for their autonomy is often ignored when circulating images and written descriptions of their violated bodies. Galindo's spectral, veiled, figures seek to discomfort and shock spectators while avoiding the unethical quality of graphic depictions. Despite relying on differing tactics of representation, I am comparing these two works because of the spectral quality of the women represented. While Galindo's statues resemble ghosts that haunt the spectators, the supernatural elements associated by other characters to the Witch generates fear amongst them. In a particularly chilling chapter, one of the characters linked to the murder believes that the Witch's ghost is with him in his car, insinuating a potential revenge. The novel closes with an anonymous person leading an excavation to find murdered bodies, further demonstrating the theme of a spectral search for justice. Furthermore, comparing a work of literature with a performance art piece raises the potential to question the meaning of fiction.

Fear United: Homosociality and the Performance of "Bad" Femininity

Fernanda Melchor has stated that her inspiration for *Hurricane Season* was the real-life murder of a woman accused of witchcraft in the Mexican state of Veracruz. While Melchor has not specified the case, a quick Google search leads to an article in the Mexican newspaper La silla rota (The Broken Chair), under the title: "Woman is murdered in Veracruz for witchcraft." While the title gives for granted the victim's position as a witch, the final paragraph in the article clarifies that the claim was nothing but a rumor, a theme that is prevalent throughout Melchor's novel. On the night of November 15th, 2014, seventy-two-year-old Julia Zoquitecatl Atlahua, and her husband, seventy-eight-year-old Constantino Panzo Chipahua,

were shot in their home in Zongolica by brothers Claudio and Macario. The siblings were Julia's nephews, and their excuse was that she had placed a curse on their father that caused his death. Independently of fiction literature's intervention, the instance that inspired Melchor is rampant in soap operatic melodrama, and the fantastical figure of the witch grows into a realist embodiment. The *Silla rota article* was published in November 2015, exactly a year after Julia's murder. According to the author, both siblings had been sentenced to prison on the day that the article was published, meaning that the murder remained unpunished for an entire year. Delays in gender-based violence is a common trend. In her autobiographical novel Liliana's *Invincible Summer* (2019), Cristina Rivera Garza recounts her and her family's decades long search to find her sister's murderer and avenge her. Rivera Garza explains how when her sister Liliana was forcefully disappeared and murdered in the 1990's, the term femicide did not yet exist in Mexico, and hence the crime could not be processed until there was a language available to describe gender-based violence.

The story of *Hurricane Season* focuses on the day when the Witch is found brutally murdered in a river by a group of young boys. The Witch is a transgender woman in the fictional town of La Matosa, in Veracruz, Mexico, who helps local women abort and undo romances through, supposedly, the help of the Devil himself. In each chapter, told through the perspective and lives of a different character, readers eventually learn about the three male culprits: Munra, an alcoholic older man left crippled after a motorcycle accident; stepfather to the second culprit, Luismi, a skinny, coyly haired young man addicted to methamphetamine. He explores his repressed homosexual desires at the loud house parties hosted by the Witch. Lastly, there's Brando, who is addicted to pornography and desperately in love with Luismi, but unwilling to admit so, except when he's under the influence of alcohol and various drugs after one of the Witch's house parties and the two have an erotic encounter, leading Brando to violently exterminate the Witch and anything else that could resurface his deviant desires. As was noted previously following Andrea Long Chu, femaleness is a signifier of precarity and vulnerability. Brando's unwillingness to accept his homosexual tendencies is a way of rejecting this femaleness, and murdering the Witch becomes a symbolic act of killing off those deviant desires, that is, what Brando believes approximates him to femaleness; the undesirable part of himself.

Besides the Witch, there is more female presence in the novel, such as Chabela, Luismi's mother and Munra's partner who works as a prostitute. She attempts to correct her son's naïve mistakes after he returns home with Norma, a young runaway pregnant with her stepfather's baby. Norma has complications with abortion after Chabela takes her to see the Witch, who provides her with an abortifacient described as a "special potion." At the hospital, after losing her baby, Norma faces legal repercussions due to abortion being illegal. Lastly, there's Yesenia, Luismi's famously unattractive cousin living with their grandmother, whom she attempts to and fails to please by turning in Luismi and the rest to the police. Looming around these stories is the presence of weirdness, manifested by the overly long, smothering sentences of the text as well as embodied character traits that render a subject undesirable and hence an abject being that must be violently expelled via verbal and physical abuse. The character of the Witch, for example, materializes these bodily junctures of un-desire and dislike, evinced in a poetics of polyphony that textually drowns readers within a beauty of disgust.

Melchor's novel opens with the discovery of the Witch's body, whose materiality after being brutally murdered is described with grotesque detail. After a group of young boys stumble upon the body, the omniscient narrator announces:

> "the ringleader pointed to the edge of the cattle track, and all five of them, crawling along the dry grass, all five of them packed together in a single body, all five of them surrounded by blowflies, finally recognized what was peeping out from the yellow foam on the water's surface: the rotten face of a corpse floating among the rushes and the plastic bags swept in from the road on the breeze, the dark mask seething under a myriad of black snakes, smiling" (3-4).

While the chapters drastically switch between the first and third person; the narrator's voice fighting against that of the chapter's central character, the beginning of the novel is told entirely in the third person, hence avoiding a distinct voice to any of the boys[3]. Despite it being stated that it was five boys who found the body, they are "a single body", unified by the experience of being surprised by

the Witch's grotesque, decomposing body. The material shell that previously housed the subject is now unrecognizable and produces a state of shock upon the viewer, who in this case also becomes unrecognizable in their unity. Those five individual beings who were walking separately yet together towards the river are now indistinguishable from one another[4]. Materially, the passage further alludes to the homogenizing of the five boys in mentioning "the plastic bags swept from the road on the breeze." Just as the Witch's body has become another disposable object in the river, so have the witnesses turned into a commodity, later serving as the announcers to authorities that there has been a murder. However, this misrecognition of the self doesn't imply a cease of it, but rather, the formation of an entirely different subject that does not equate with a lack or loss of something. We notice the formation of a circle in the narrative, for just like the novel opens with anonymity, it closes with the same theme during the excavation of murdered bodies buried beneath the ground. While most often the victim of gender-based violence is dehumanized through anonymity, Melchor questions this trend by focusing the plot of the novel on the victim and the relationship that the protagonists had to her. Furthermore, the dehumanizing anonymity is instead inflicted upon the viewer of the victim's body.

The shock generated upon the witnessing of the decomposed body of the victim, meaning the recognition of death, builds a new self. This homogenized group of five boys lend a voice to the omniscient narrator, who in turn lends the view to readers for us to also remain in shock. From the beginning, readers are warned of the paralyzing terrors awaiting through the remaining chapters. Converting the witness of atrocity into a spectacle, as is the case with this scene, relates to what Sayak Valencia (2013) terms "gore capitalism." By adopting a category in cinema studies, Valencia theorizes how local Latin American media, as well as international outlets, glorify the extreme, senseless violence that occurs in the region. While these acts of violence are a way to achieve the monetary demands of an increasingly capitalist planet, the images and stories also become a selling tactic. While Valencia writes about the holistic effects of violence, Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos (2010) has noted how femicide is often tied "to other criminal activities and groups, such as the selection of the victims and the use of their damaged bodies as coded languages among powerful men, businessmen, or among criminals and gangs. It is presumed that there are ties between the homicides of girls and women and organized crime and drug trafficking" (xiv). It is not necessary, then, to verbally conjure criminal groups. When portraying gender-based violence in a cultural context such as Mexico, it is impossible to not allude to its connection with gang violence. In posing Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos's writing with Sayak Valencia we are able to note the intrinsic connection between "gore capitalism" and gender based violence. These connections between Valencia's and Lagarde's work further demonstrates the intersectionality at play in femicide.

The key plot point threading the homosocial fear in different characters is the death of the Witch. Throughout the Spanish version of the novel, characters refer to the Witch in the feminine form. The gendering of this omnipresent protagonist gets destabilized halfway through, in the chapter told through Munra's perspective. Melchor doesn't implement the language onto the novel, but critics in the U.S. have referred to it as an exploration of trans femicide. It is evident why readers would interpret the Witch as trans, for, in Munra's chapter, readers learn for the first time that the Witch is not a cisgender woman. Munra recounts the shock he felt when Chabela takes him to see the Witch for a cleansing: "up until that point nobody had told him that the Witch they all went on about was in fact a man… dressed in black clothing, in ladies clothing" (82)[5]. More so than transgender, the Witch's ambiguous femininity materializes a travesti subjectivity, which Joseph M. Pierce (2020) defines as referring in the Southern Cone (predominantly Argentina, Chile, Uruguay) to

> people assigned male at birth and who feminize their bodies, dress, and behavior; prefer feminine pronouns and forms of dress; and often make significant bodily transformations by injecting silicone or taking hormonal treatments but do not necessarily seek sex-reassignment surgery (306)[6].

Throughout the rest of the text, Pierce denotes the different modes of embodying travesti subjectivity. The unspecificity and ambiguity of what it means to inhabit this category evidences the fluidity and instability of gender performativity. While all gender categories are unstable and in constant flux, travesti in particular seems to be more obvious about this definitional precarity. Travestis and other trans subjects often face what Jana Krávolá (2015) has referred to as "social death."

States often make it difficult for trans and gender non conforming people to have access to education, jobs, and housing. These legal inequalities positions trans subjects at the margins of social structure, hence isolating them. In the context of Mexico, Sayak Valencia and Liliana Falcón (2024) demonstrate how the "social death" of trans women is further exacerbated when taking into account the fact that places like Mexico, and other nations in Latin America, don't make it possible for trans women to change their sex mark in legal documents. This prevents trans femicides, or other forms of violence, to be recognized, or for there to be justice (380). Similarly to how the characters in *Hurricane Season* negate the Witch's femininity through language, the lack of legal recognition prevents violence against trans women to be recognized or legitimized as femicide, precisely because their womanness is negated. The Witch's subjectivity is weirded by the embodied attributes that are recognizably masculine, hence problematizing the binary notion that transgenderism requires an explicit movement from one gender to another. This lack of distinct embodied transition appears as a rhetorical reasoning to murder the Witch in Brando's point of view: "the Witch deserved it: for being a dirty fag, for being a cunt and a bully. No one was going to miss that cocksucking witch" (148). The gendered language in this scene transitions between feminine markers (cunt and witch) and masculine (fag)[7]; all being derogatory descriptors that feminize the subject through the violence of abjection. Rather than imposing the transgender category onto the Witch, it is more productive to perceive her as a feminine subject. As Rivera Garza pointed out in her narration of her sister Liliana's murder, the perpetrator always finds an excuse for committing femicide. The fact that the Witch had masculine attributes serve as the character's excuse, but the text urges us to not view this trait as taking away her femaleness.

Ghostly Apparitions: Performing the Femicide Archive

Regina Galindo's series comprises of eight performance/installation/ photographic projects[8] executed between 2020 and 2022 in different parts of the world: Guatemala, Costa Rica, Germany, Spain, and Italy; all aiming to criticize and denounce femicide[9]. The denunciation of femicide in these pieces is not apparent until one reads the description in Galindos's artist website. I will focus on only two of the pieces: "Monumento a las desaparecidas" (2020) and "Jardín de flores" (2021).

Even though Regina José Galindo is from Guatemala, and "Jardín de flores" takes place in said country, the artist is drawing a transnational dialogue by showcasing how the brutal treatment towards feminized bodies persists globally. Following on the arguments made previously in this essay on the inherent intersectionality when understanding femicide, Rita Segato (2016) expands the term femicide to "femigenocide" in order to denote the transnationality of this recurring problem. Segato argues that, by legally recognizing femicide as a global issue, its severity will be made more apparent. This term proposed by Segato proposes equating femicide with severe crimes against humanity like genocide, which would further ensure the legal recognition of femicide.

Similarly to the literary works of Fernanda Melchor and Cristina Rivera Garza, Galindo's embodied art work is delineating how femicide is oftentimes ignored, and seldom find legal justice; manifested in the participant's veil-covered bodies, which stands still in open, public spaces. The veil symbolizes the invisibility of femicide; the ghost-like quality of a problem that is persistent and present yet ignored[10]. The participating women are, for the most part, standing still, either with spectators around, in the daytime, or nighttime. In the photographic archive, the stillness of the performers creates a statuesque quality to their bodies, particularly with the veil covering them, for it's difficult to discern the human shape. The veil covering their bodies homogenizes the performers. It prevents the viewer from perceiving a gendered mark in the participants and any racial or economic divide that may exist between the participants fades with the veil. The viewer is invited to consider how a body is read when socially recognizable gender marks are no longer visible. While Butler (1990) proposed the idea of gender as performative, Galindo's pieces also inhabit Diana Taylor's (2016) notion of performance art, which refers to creative practices that focus on the body (1). Taylor differentiates between a performance and something that is performative, that is, actions that, similarly to gender, are recurring and never ending. Temporality is, then, an important part of performances. In terms of art, there is no permanent object as is the case with painting. The work ends and vanishes at a decisive moment. As for performative actions, even though they occur in specific moments and instances (such as a handshake), their pervasiveness and constancy in social

imaginaries make them permanent.

The first of these veiled pieces took place in Berlin, Germany, in 2020, commissioned and produced by Galerie Im Körnerpark, and it is titled "Monumento a las desaparecidas" or "Monument for the disappeared women." Along with photo documentation, Galindo also included texts describing the work's background. In the case of "Monumento", the accompanying text reads: "28 women disappear every week in Guatemala. 28 covered women disappear with the light of the sun." The writing reveals a central theme in the series of performance/installations; the veil as a way of representing the dichotomy of that which appears but is not present. The veiled, or "covered", women appear in a garden with a large building behind them; their bodies draped in a black cloth. The blackness of the veil mirrors the cloudy, grey sky. In the image replicated below, one can distinguish a black umbrella from a corner, insinuating a rainy day.



Image credited to Galerie Im Könerpark, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist.

The performer's position and role in the mise-en-scène makes them resemble statues[11]. Particularly in this specific performance, the performers resemble gravestones, as if a cemetery was the stage, demonstrating the fictionalization of the space. Like the appearance of the Witch's body in a river, the similarity of these statues to gravestones demonstrates the disposability of feminized bodies. As a way of understanding the disposability of systemically chosen populations, Achille Mbembe (2003) proposes the term "necropolitics" to understand how states and other establishments of power use extreme violence and murder to manage and control subaltern populations. For Mbembe, these subaltern populations are primarily indigenous and other racialized subjects, but can also be applied to queer and trans people who do not adhere to predominant relations of heteronormativity. "Necropolitics" draws from Michel Foucault's (1978) understanding of "biopolitics", which is described as a "calculated management of life" as well as the "power to expose a whole population to death" (137-140). Mbembe's intervention is in the specificity of how oftentimes, racialized populations are brutally eliminated in the name of protecting a predominantly white nation. While Foucault draws as a historical example the Nazi mass-murders of the Jewish population, Mbembe can be credited for making more apparent the intersectionality of state violence.

Going back to Galindo's piece, it is noteworthy that the body-installations are placed specifically in a controlled fashion, which resembles the state of the garden itself; the grass is cut, and the plants and flowers are only found in the borders, demonstrating that they are managed (or fictionalized) by a human hand. Aesthetics, in this sense, further demonstrate disposability, for it is an external force who must stage the statues, as if they were objects of decoration. The presence and importance of the garden, then, also demonstrates a possible reading of the human installations as dark flowers, the color insinuating their imminent death. This resonates with the common link that is enforced between femininity and nature. Just like the intersection of race, queerness, and gender has been made when discussing femicide and other instances of mass violence, so has the link to violence against nature been made. Danielle Celermajer (2021) has argued that "the more animalistic a person the less capable of agency or of exercising moral responsibility; indeed, the less a person they are" (1164). The controlled nature of the setting mirrors the lack of agency suffered by those deemed "less human." As Mbembe and Foucault posited that certain populations are rendered disposable due to the violence they are subjected to, so are nonhuman elements subjected to the modification and control of human hands. Epistemologically, the human control over nature and other non-human beings has been linked to the subjection to violence that women face from men. This sphere of thinking is referred to as "ecofeminism." An important contributor to this field has been Carol J. Adams (1993), who notes that

> "Ecofeminism stresses relationship, not solely because it has been women's domain, but because it is a more viable ethical framework than autonomy for transforming structures that are environmentally destructive… Ecofeminism identifies the twin dominations of woman and the rest of nature" (5-11).

More so than arguing for the essentialising of womanness as biological, ecofeminism provides a possible mode of disrupting systems of power by turning to non-human beings. Because nature cannot be chronicled through human paradigms, there have been multiple attempts to control it. A culture of caring for the environment that doesn't involve a violent imposition can also lead to non-violent relationalities amongst humans. In Galindo's piece, the femininity/nature link, however, is broken in the blackness of the possible flowers, insinuating the death of perceiving nature as feminine.

Another factor playing in the death of nature and femininity is the fact that the veil prevents the bodies from being read as feminine. Un-gendering the bodies of the performers links the natural world to bodies in a homogenous fashion. The death of nature as feminine opens space for viewing nature as connected to human beings beyond gendered or sexual difference. As for the importance of colors in this performance/installation, the accompanying text delineates the presence of natural light in the piece. In the image below, one can witness the adjusting light as the timing of the performance progresses:



Image credited to Galerie Im Könerpark, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist.

When the performance begins in the first image, the action is occurring in broad daylight. As the performance's temporal framework progresses, the light slowly fades. The natural lightning contrasts with the control of the garden and the natural surroundings, for the light is harder to control. As it can be observed in the image above, the blackness of the veil forces the body installations to merge with the surrounding area, further drawing a parallel between the human body and nature; the bodies become part of the environment itself. Sarah Ahmed (2014) notes that emotions (such as fear) draws people together (as is the case with white nationalism). I previously demonstrated how the affect of fear in Hurricane Season partakes in the formation of a unified body in the beginning of the novel. Similarly, emotions have the capacity to draw objects away from each other, as to other certain groups and communities. In Galindo's pieces, however, because the veils eradicate distinguishable features, this movement (or oscillation) between subjectivity and otherness as mediated by emotions is not apparent. As stated before, the natural elements, (such as the grass and flowers), viewed in the image, are clearly controlled. By becoming part of these elements, the performer's bodies are also controlled beings; their visibility or invisibility is subjected to the changing natural light. There is a ghost-like quality to the body installations, for they become further invisible by the changing natural light; they are ghosts fading and appearing depending on the time of day. This rendering invisible of the bodies highlights the oppression that occurs when ignoring femicide; the appearing and disappearing game occurring with the bodies resembles what occurs with a feminized body when it is subjected to violence: it disappears from the public eye and the world of humans, transcending to another one. The bodies of the performers are meant to represent those who are dead; a visual assertion of those whose bodies have disappeared and hence do not have the ability to denounce the violence they were subjected to. Even if the body of a victim of femicide is found and buried, a looming ghost remains when the event doesn't receive the closure it deserves, something that could be found, for example, by judicially punishing those guilty of the murder. The phantasmagorical quality of the veiled body, then, is also representative of the ghost left behind in the social archive, not simply in terms of the person who is dead and hence no longer present, but also in the legal sense.

Another one of the veil performances that clearly draws a connection between the body and nature is titled "Jardín de flores", or "Flower Garden", which took place in 2021 between Guatemala and Costa Rica. The accompanying text reads: "Jardín de Flores seeks to make visible and act against the violence and discrimination suffered by LGBTQI+ people, especially Central American

trans women, who are the protagonists of this artistic piece." This performance holds a further connection to *Hurricane Season* due to the element of queerness. While the Witch rejects normative notions of naming identity, the figures in the performance also defy identity discourses, for the veiling of the body prevents any visual markers of queer embodiment. This performance takes place in both Guatemala and Costa Rica, hence depending on two different performances, even though Galindo and critics refer to them as one single artistic piece. "Jardín de flores", along with the rest of the veil pieces, does specify intersectional identities regarding the participating performers. While the other pieces speak to the experience of women from certain nationalities, here transness is the distinguishing mark. However, as with the remaining performance/installations, these trademarks are indistinguishable due to the covering veil. I find that this invisibility of specific identity marks invites a questioning of how social difference is manifested. The veiling of the performers demonstrates that embodied readings of these differences are unstable. In this case, language is the mediator by which identity marks are recognized, delineating discourse as the foundational technology that differentiates subjects, opposing essentialist beliefs that view the material body as the sole space to find these marks.



Image credited to Galerie Im Könerpark, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist.

The photograph replicated above belongs to the performance/installation that took place in Guatemala. "Jardín de flores" stands in contrast with "Monumento a las desaparecidas". Even though in both cases the body installations are placed in a garden, the colors of the veils in "Jardín" are brighter, more closely resembling flowers. There is more of an accuracy between the language in the title and the artistic piece itself, for the installations are clearly representing the flowers mentioned in the title. As opposed to the likeness with death in the installations of "Monumento", the installations here evoke radiance; they more closely liken living flowers, as opposed to dead ones. Despite the allusion to natural life, the installations also appear to resemble ghosts, similarly to the previous piece analyzed. The installations in this photographic performance piece seem to confuse viewers; the line between ghosts and flowers is not clearly delineated. Even though the installations could most likely be labeled as ghostly flowers, hence reconciling those polarizing signifiers, the striking, bright colors of the veils prevent this conciliation from occurring. As in the space in the previous piece, the natural environment of "Jardín" is controlled by human beings; the grass and bushes are cleanly cut and well groomed. The natural space of the setting lies in contrast with the metropolitan scenery surrounding the garden. With this in mind, "Jardín de flores" is playing with polarities: urban space and suburbia, life, and death. "Monumento" also plays with binaries in similar ways, for the building in the background alludes to an urban space. More so than "Jardín", the previous piece creates a sense that the body installations are in a liminal space. Especially with the photographic medium, viewers rely solely with what they can perceive in the images. Without any background information on the location, the contrast between the garden and the urban space surrounding the installations in both performance installations seems to be laying in a limbo.

Concluding remarks

This essay began with the desire to demonstrate how literary and visual fiction is able to represent as well as make sense of femicide. By analyzing a novel and a series of photographic performances, the notion of fiction in art is destabilized, for it is made apparent that categories like gender, sexuality, and race are all socialized fictions that have become tenements of relationality, even if they are not biologically constituted. Through an appeal to the senses and to affect, fiction in literature and visual art is able to make apparent these nuances of relations that can otherwise not be explained through rationality. Intersections, then, were drawn in this essay. The specificities of various artistic expressions were taken into account. Furthermore, it was noted how femicide, a category largely associated with the binarism of gender (men killing women), is itself unstable and consists of intricate networks of power that have other factors at stake, such as race, geography, and socio economic status. The Witch is a trans

feminine person whose womanness is denied by others and their use of language. However, because she herself identifies as a woman, the ambiguity of her gender expression invites a reformulation of how we think of womanhood and also what constitutes femicide. In the case of Galindo's pieces, the veils erase gender marks. While the Witch seeks the recognition of her womanness, the veiled figures eradicate specific gender marks. This lack of specificity doesn't necessarily mean that the veiled figures lack a gender altogether. Rather, it means that this representation of gender stands outside of any stable or binary conceptions of it. It must be noted that, due to the context of Galindo's performances, evidenced in the texts from her website, the veiled figures are to be understood as gendered, even if the gaze is unable to discern what it is.

Endnotes

[1] Vivian Arimany is a Ph.D. student in Latin American and comparative literature at Columbia University in New York. Originally from Guatemala, Vivian is researching written, filmic, and performative practices by women and queer people in Latin America and the Caribbean, with a focus on cultural production that incorporates aesthetics of the monstrous and other supernatural embodiments to portray gender-based violence. Her research questions how gender-based violence is consumed by cultures outside of Latin America and how the experiences of feminine subjects are translated into unrecognizable dimensions. Vivian is also a published translator and poet.

[2] Translation is my own. Original reads as follows: "Nos enfrentamos, entonces, a un campo de estímulos y escenas que no podemos abrazar plenamente con el intelecto; la materia fluye a través del espacio y del tiempo y, en sus ejemplos más extremos, pone de manifiesto la experiencia física como la única certidumbre" (16).

[3] The fact that these are young boys brings us back to Ahmed's rendition of Fanon's experience with the white boy. Ahmed describes this becoming of a white nationalist as a primal scene. She compares it, then, to Sigmund Freud's studies, for he believed children to be highly prone to change and convincing and hence they are affectable. In his study of Little Hans, Freud concludes that fear moves between the objects that cause the emotion. In the case of the primal scene in Melchor's novel, fear doesn't move amongst objects of fear, but rather, amongst the objects who experience the fear, and they are in turn "velcroed together" (to use Ahmed's terminology).

[4] "Stuck" or "velcroed" together, to continue implementing Ahmed's terminology.

[5] Similarly to how fear connects and unites (or "sticks together") the boys from the opening scene, the hatred that is placed upon the Witch (and stems from homosocial anxiety) "sticks" the murderers together.

[6] The travesti category does not exist in English, and in fact, the word traditionally holds negative connotations, for its association to the belief that transgender people are deceitful. Perhaps the closest category that exists in the English language is non-binary, which conservatives have criticized as confusing for not being "specific" enough.

[7] Feminization further occurs in homosocialization. The Witch's murderers fear losing their masculinity if they are believed to engage in homosexuality.

[8] Galindo's veil pieces are multimedia, consisting of performance, photography, and body installation. Throughout the essay, I switch between all these idioms. As a critic, I do not have a preference for any of these terms, and the artist has not publicly defined one either.

[9] The artistic series being analyzed in the essay do not have a collective title, only individual ones. I will be naming the series the "veil pieces" when I am not referring to a specific piece.

[10] Veils have been theorized as a covering or hiding of misogyny. Predominantly, theories on the Muslim hijab highlight this tension. For an example, see Lila Abu-Lughod's Do Muslim Women Need Saving, Harvard University Press, 2015.

[11] All images used here are taken from Galindo's website.

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