



Hipertexto 18
Verano 2013
pp. 3-18

**Enforced Heteronormative Socio-Cultural
Structures in *Garage Olimpo*
and “Cambio de armas”**

Rebecca J. Ulland
Northern Michigan University

Hipertexto

Una ella borrada es lo que él requiere, un ser maleable para armarlo a su antojo. Ella se siente de barro, dúctil bajo las caricias de él y no quisiera, no quiere para nada ser dúctil y cambiante, y sus voces internas aúllan de rabia y golpean las paredes de su cuerpo mientras él va moldeándola a su antojo.

(Luisa Valenzuela, “Cambio de armas,” 138-139)

In Argentina, before and during the so-called *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (1976-1983), state-authorized kidnappings and torture were used as weapons to control the populace and wage war against supposed subversives. In this article, I will focus on the film *Garage Olimpo* and the short story “Cambio de armas” as fictional representations of how the military *juntas* maintained their grip on society during this period of intense repression. Although from different genres and produced over twenty years apart, *Garage Olimpo* and “Cambio de armas” feature women characters whose lives are shattered by the oppressive forces around them.¹ Specifically, I argue that male antagonists force female protagonists to enact strict gender roles that uphold a heteronormative socio-cultural structure. In both texts, heterosexual cultural norms are defined and enforced by males within the authoritarian hierarchy. These heterosexual cultural norms are forced on female protagonists via sex and confinement. In particular, these texts feature female protagonists who are required to adhere to a strict gender role (submissive, compliant, dependent and passive) by male captors within the regime hierarchy. In particular, power is maintained and gender roles are enforced by captors who feign “normalcy;” by spies who monitor the women’s actions; and by a system that perpetuates the illusion of control by those in power.

¹ Although many interesting and fruitful avenues exist for considering the generic differences between these texts, this article focuses specifically on the concrete textual representations of my argument.

In *Garage Olimpo*, a 1999 film by Marco Bechis, the director uses the camera lens as a porthole through which the viewer is an uncomfortable witness to the degradation, fear and torture that suffuses the sinister atmosphere of a clandestine detention center.² We witness one woman's literal descent to the dark world and what she must do in order to survive. In Luisa Valenzuela's 1977 short story, "Cambio de armas," the author utilizes a female-centered, third-person narrative to deconstruct the *juntas'* carefully-fabricated façade of normalcy.³ In this case, the reader is privy to one woman's painstakingly slow ascent out of captivity, both physical and psychological.

First, let me begin with *Garage Olimpo*. Due to the film's limited release and lack of viewers,⁴ few scholars have studied *Garage Olimpo* since it premiered in 1999. Those scholars, however, who have had the opportunity to view this film have brought it to the forefront of theorizing the Argentine dictatorships. Most notably, Amy Kaminsky argues that the film presents contrasting visions of female agency under conditions of hyperpatriarchy and contends that while this film is not a documentary, its cinematic representation of this repressive period places it firmly within the historiographical archive of this era. Other scholars have utilized philosophical frameworks as theorized by Jacques Derrida (Page duBois), Giorgio Agamben (Gabriel Gatti) and Tzvetan Todorov (Eduardo Jakubowicz and Laura Radetich) to elaborate on the film. Gatti, as well as Patricia Vieira, argue that pain is invisible and therefore its visual representation through film is problematic. DuBois and Vieira also argue that *Garage Olimpo* demonstrates the evolution of torture in the twentieth century—as a means of punishment rather than to extract information. DuBois further argues that torture is a punishment used to remove the "other" within an individual in the belief that what remains will be "pure" and that unwanted belief systems will be eradicated.

Unlike the above-named scholars, this study argues that Bechis's and Valenzuela's male antagonists force their female protagonists to enact strict gender roles within the confines of incarceration in order to sustain the heteronormative socio-cultural structure defended by the regime. The women are tortured in their captivity, in part, because their male captors not only represent the dictatorship, but are also gendered and embedded within this same authoritarian patriarchal structure that espouses traditional female (and male) values. Again, although Bechis and Valenzuela

² For additional films that treat the dictatorship see *Botín de guerra*, *La cara del ángel*, *Cautiva*, *La historia oficial*, *Kamchatka*, *La noche de los lápices*, and *Los rubios*, for example.

³ For additional works that treat the dictatorship see María Teresa Andruetto, Miguel Bonasso, Marta Lynch, Enrique Medina, Ricardo Piglia, Omar Rivabella, Osvaldo Soriano, Jacobo Timerman, Javier Torre, Marta Traba, and David Viñas's novels, for example.

⁴ According to Amy Kaminsky, "Although *Garage Olimpo* was nominated for awards at festivals all over Europe and Latin America, Marco Bechis' film never had a commercial release in the United States, and it had very limited success in Argentina. [...] However, during the first week of the run, box office workers in the upscale cineplexes showing the movie told patrons that the film was sold out (Beladrich). This meant not only that those who wanted to see *Garage Olimpo* did not get in, but that first-week receipts were so low that the film was largely withdrawn from circulation" (1).

utilize different artistic genres, they both use similar strategies to show how the military *juntas*, as portrayed in their texts, strive to enforce strict gender roles that uphold heteronormative socio-cultural structures in order to maintain the power of the regime.

Before I further my argument, let me begin with a brief background of the film. Relying on a tension-filled cinematic structure, *Garage Olimpo* portrays a young woman's captivity, torture and regression to infantile dependence in a clandestine detention center in Buenos Aires during Argentina's Dirty War. In one of the first scenes of *Garage Olimpo*, the spectator meets María, a young woman who helps the impoverished citizens of Buenos Aires learn to read and write. We see her patience as she reads one gentleman's first attempt at journaling about his experiences that brought him to the city. She turns and then kindly praises another woman who we see has laboriously written her name for the first time.

Later we learn that María and her mother live in a large house.⁵ To make ends meet, Diana, the mother, rents out rooms. María, after arriving home one evening, sits with Félix, one of the boarders, who asks her if she would like to see a photo of his girlfriend. Surprised that such an unsociable young man would have a girlfriend, she consents to look at the photo, but is immediately angered to see a photo of herself and demands that it be returned to her.⁶ This interaction is critical because the viewer clearly sees the romantic and power dynamic between the two. That is, Félix is in love with María, a woman beyond his own social standing and who clearly relishes her superiority. At this early point in the film, Félix is trying to fulfill the role of boyfriend (and thus control María), but María spurns him and refuses to be categorized as a girlfriend thus ignoring her prescribed gender role.

The following day, or perhaps a few days later, María descends the steps to the first floor of the house only partially-clothed (a foreshadow of her descent into *Garage Olimpo*). To finish getting dressed, she rifles through a large cardboard box at the foot of the stairs. (This is the same box referred to in an earlier conversation between Félix and Diana, who asks where he gets so many clothes. He replies that where he works the people have a lot of money and they give away their clothing after just one use.) María chooses a dress, pulls it on and starts to zip up. Suddenly, she becomes aware of the eerie quiet of the house and calls out for her mother. At the same moment that María senses something is amiss, the viewer also has the terrible premonition that María's life is in danger. And, certainly, within seconds, a single plain-clothed male

⁵ The female pairing of María and her mother disrupts the heterosexual narrative of dictatorship and raises further suspicion. As Amy Kaminsky points out: "During the *Proceso*, the discourse of order, obedience to authority, and patriotism used by the right was highly gendered. A true man defended nation and protected his family. A true woman tended lovingly to her children, and their behavior was her responsibility. [...] Under conditions of hyperpatriarchy, the absent father presents a dilemma. The mother/daughter dyad is by definition suspicious, with no male to control them" (12).

⁶ Based on how the film develops, the spectator cannot help but wonder how Félix came by this photo since María clearly did not give it to him. Did he find it at *Garage Olimpo* and already know that María was on a list for kidnapping?

walks into the room and simply asks: “¿María Fabiani?” That question sets off a chain of events, including María’s attempt to escape, her mother’s struggle to find out what is going on, the harassment of another boarder, and the plundering of the house. Finally, amidst frenetic and dissonant string music Diana screams “¿Adónde la llevan?” and María is taken away in a dark green Ford Falcon.⁷

In the scenes that follow María’s capture she, along with the viewer, glimpses her grim new surroundings. While María is prevented from seeing the outside of Garage Olimpo when she arrives, the viewer eventually sees that from the outside Garage Olimpo looks like most any other building in Buenos Aires that is closed for business—the metal shutter protecting the entrance is pulled down and only a small door is visible through which a few people occasionally pass. María, however, is immediately driven inside the detention center and is roughly handled on her way to her first torture session, located in a dirty, windowless, underground room. On her way to the torture cubicle, the spectator begins to piece together the physical parameters of the basement of Garage Olimpo: gray walls, shower-like stalls to hold prisoners, miniscule cells for long-term prisoner confinement, a torture chamber outfitted with a metal bed and electrical shock machine, and a common room with a ping pong table for workers at Garage Olimpo.

María’s first torture session is swift and brutal. In fact, her torturer is so zealous that he applies too much electric shock to her body and she slips into unconsciousness. In response, the torturer calls in the chief, el Tigre. El Tigre revives María and then firmly reminds the torturer to follow the “rules” of the torture machine. That is, given her weight of 40 kilos, she should only receive 15,000 volts. Shortly after the first torturer ends his shift we see Félix, the same boarder who earlier claimed María to be his girlfriend, enter the chamber with his ever-present toolbox (also seen in earlier scenes while he is at the boarding house and later, at a restaurant). He enters without looking at his victim. Instead, he conscientiously washes his hands. Finally, looking at María’s reflection in the mirror, they recognize each other. Félix rushes to María’s side and helps her sit up, but jumps away, which causes her body to slam back onto the metal bed, when el Tigre opens the door and requests his presence in his office in fifteen minutes. Knowing he is being watched via closed circuit television (just like the other jailers are watched as they play ping pong), Félix prepares María for a torture session while telling her that she can save herself if she tells him where he can find her friends. Since he cannot show favoritism toward her while he is being monitored, he bides his time until he can take advantage of her vulnerable position and control her.

At this point, I wish to return to my argument. Specifically, I will turn my attention to how Félix uses his dominance of María to force her into a strict gender role. He must mold her into a traditional, submissive and dependent woman in order to uphold the heteronormative socio-cultural structure that the regime is based on. As indicated

⁷ The Ford Falcon became the symbol of the dictatorship since it was used extensively by the Policía Federal Argentina (PFA) and the Army. Usually unmarked and blue or green in color, the Falcon was used to kidnap “subversives.”

earlier, *Garage Olimpo* portrays not only the terror of dictatorship, but how authoritarian military rule ruthlessly enforces heteronormative socio-cultural norms. Specifically, repressive regimes violently force women into roles of dependency and submissiveness in order to uphold traditional gender roles. To demonstrate how María is brutally fashioned into a traditional woman, I will focus on three of Félix's strategies that cause her to spiral further downward into a state of dependence and how these actions reinforce heteronormative socio-cultural structures. First, I will discuss how Félix tries to manipulate María by creating a dependency on him for food, shelter and clothing. Second, I will demonstrate how Félix attempts to further "normalize" their relationship by "making house." And, third, I will highlight María's descent into infantilization and submissiveness while on a "date" with Félix.

A short time after María's arrival at Garage Olimpo, Félix begins to show his favor for her. His special treatment of María comes in the form of more plentiful food. The contrast is significant. For example, Félix enters her cell carrying a paper bag filled with a roasted chicken. María devours it while Félix looks on with a bemused expression, eating much less rapidly. While accepting food may seem minor, this scene shows María's first step toward becoming dependent on her torturer for physical nourishment and the moment when the seed of hope for survival begins to grow within her. Most importantly, however, this scene demonstrates that a new power dynamic has been established—Félix is clearly in control of their "relationship" and he, as a representative of the patriarchal authoritarian regime, has clearly drawn the line between "proper" male and female roles. He is the dominant provider and she is the submissive receiver.

This special bond continues to develop between Félix and María—a bond they both try to manipulate to their own advantage. When María is assigned a more permanent cell, he begins to visit her as if she were living there, as if they had a real relationship. In fact, at times, he even waits for her—lounging on her cot—while she is forced to work elsewhere in the compound or is away at a torture session. He brings trinkets from her home and decorates the cell in a twisted parody of "making house." María, for her part, follows the rules and accepts his attentions in the hope that she can regain her freedom.

Toward the end of the film, in a parody of romance, Félix invites María on a date. He allows her to shower and finds a clean dress and high-heeled shoes for her to wear (from the pile of clothing stripped from the prisoners). We see her donning "new" clothes while Félix puts on her shoes. Finally, María gets a chance to see the sun again. The contrast between the darkness of the detention center and the outside world of Buenos Aires is highlighted as María squints to shield her eyes from the glaring sun and Félix, at first, keeps a tight arm around her. Soon, his grip slackens, but María continues to grasp his arm tightly. This scene strongly evokes what Félix, as a representative of the authoritarian patriarchal regime, considers the trappings of traditional, heterosexual cultural norms. María's shoes and dress are necessary props to re-enforce Félix's manhood and to remind her, and others, that she is fulfilling her proper gender role. To the hurried pedestrians of Buenos Aires (if they were to look at her), María looks like a

devoted woman on the arm of her man. In reality, not only is she having trouble walking in high-heeled shoes and adjusting her eyes to the bright light, she is wary of how this “date” will turn out.

Even though Félix seems to fully control the situation, he still tries to win María’s trust by giving her some limited freedom within the structure of their “date.” The two walk for awhile, with María holding tightly to Félix’s arm. Then the scene cuts to a children’s playground where Félix watches as María swings as high as she can (perhaps she is trying to become what the jailer Tex calls her earlier, “la pajarita que quería volar,” when she makes an unsuccessful escape attempt—an attempt that also would have disrupted the power hierarchy that Tex and Félix must control). Félix even allows her to try to call her mother (although the viewer knows that her mother was already murdered by Tex). Up until this point, María has gone along with Félix: she has never resisted nor has she tried to escape. The scene at the playground is a powerful demonstration of how Félix has forced María into an even narrower version of traditional womanhood: one of infantilization and dependency. She has lost all power and agency and is completely controlled by Félix who, through the brutality of the situation, has shaped her into a dependent woman.

Following the failed phone call, the scene cuts to a hotel and a bland room within. The viewer can sense Félix’s excitement as he finally gets the chance to act out his sexual fantasy with María. María, on the other hand, does not show any enthusiasm. Although her body responds to Félix and she yields to his advances, María’s face remains blank. It is as if she has exited her body in order to preserve her mind. Even though María acquiesces and does not fight the inevitability of the sexual encounter, having sex with Félix is part of her punishment. She *must* have sex with him. As Page duBois states: “[T]orturers torture to punish” (148). María is punished as both a subversive and as a woman who refuses to adhere to her gender role. This is her role as both a prisoner and a woman in the heteronormative socio-cultural structure.

Following the hotel bedroom scene, another quick jump cut to a café finds María again trying to call her mother while Félix looks on and offers words of support. María tries in vain, ignorant of the fact that Félix already knows that her mother is dead. She is dejected and sits glumly at the counter. At this point, María is no longer willing to continue playing the role of the passive, dependent girlfriend. Instead, she tries to convince Félix not to return to Garage Olimpo. He politely refuses and insists that they will have to return. If Félix were to allow María to control the relationship, as she did at the beginning of the movie when she spurned his advances, the power dynamic would not conform to the prescribed heteronormative structure. As a member of the regime hierarchy, Félix must not waiver in his dominance over María, especially since his own life depends on his adherence to the same gender rules.

Despite Félix’s determination to return to Garage Olimpo, María decides to escape. María not only tries to break free of her imprisonment in the clandestine torture center, but she also attempts to escape the traditional female role she is forced to play with Félix as her “boyfriend.” His swagger demonstrates his confidence and the fact that

he believes he has eradicated the subversive element within her and that she will now follow her prescribed role. However, at this point on their “date,” María is no longer hanging on his arm because Félix feels a false sense of confidence in his power over her. However, on their walk back to Garage Olimpo, María remains still at a crosswalk while Félix continues forward. Traffic separates the two, then the scene cuts to María running against the crowd. Just as quickly, Félix catches up with her and drags her back to Garage Olimpo.

But why doesn't María scream? Why doesn't she plead for help from those around her? And why don't those around her rush to find out what is the matter? María recognizes that by being on the street she is in what Gabriel Gatti calls the “On” world—the world of light and wholeness. Unfortunately, she is an inhabitant of the “Off” world—the world of the clandestine detention center. As Gatti explains: “En el mundo *On* no tendría sentido alguno gritar su condición de detenida-desaparecida, de habitante del mundo *Off*, nadie la vería, era una invisible” (33). That is, María quite rightly recognizes that she is in the “On” world and that she has a chance to escape back to the light. However, she also intuits that no one around her will risk helping her since she is an escapee of the “Off” world.

María, however, does not escape—neither from the detention center nor from the gender strictures that confine her. The dreams harbored by María and Félix vanish. Félix now understands that María, however dependent on him that she might have seemed for her own physical survival, is not dependent on him and she will try to escape. Because of this, he roughly pushes her into Garage Olimpo. Now, if María does not already know that her feigned dependency on Félix will not free her, she immediately understands that Félix is a coward. As she is thrust back into Garage Olimpo (the dark world, the “Off” world), she is unceremoniously shoved into a line of prisoners who are receiving “vaccination” shots as part of their “transfer” to another camp (the lie is easy to recognize and everyone knows that the “vaccination” is in fact a drug that will render them unconscious so they cannot struggle when they are dropped into the Río de la Plata from the military plane on a death flight mission.) During this whole scene Félix unflinchingly ignores her as he waits in el Tigre's office for a reprimand. He makes no move to save her and does not even look at her. The brutal forces that Félix has at his disposal to restrict María to her prescribed gender role are the same mechanisms that confine him and prevent him from saving her. María serves as an example of what happens to those who ignore their gender bounds. In María's case, her dead body will serve as a warning to those who step outside their prescribed roles.

While María is forced into the role of traditional womanhood within the boundaries of a clandestine torture center, Valenzuela's protagonist in “Cambio de armas” unwillingly plays the part of a traditional woman as she struggles against the confines of a psychological prison and juggles notions of language and memory as the effects of a drug-induced amnesia are weakening. Also dealing with military dictatorship, “Cambio de armas” (1977) was written a few years after Luisa Valenzuela's return to Argentina in 1974, after traveling through Latin America and Europe. Because

of intense censorship, the existence of the manuscript placed Valenzuela in great danger. In fact, the fear was so palpable that she admitted, “The threat became so intense that in 1977, when I completed the novella ‘Other Weapons,’ ... I didn’t even dare to show it around” (“Legacy” 294). Although *Garage Olimpo* and “Cambio de armas” fit into different narrative genres they both use similar strategies to show how strict gender roles are enforced by males within the authoritarian hierarchy during times of intense repression, such as Argentina’s *Dirty War*.

As I now shift my focus to Valenzuela’s short story to demonstrate how heteronormative socio-cultural structures are strictly enforced during periods of intense repression, I am aware of the many approaches scholars have utilized in considering Valenzuela’s texts. A great number of scholars have utilized the theoretical underpinnings of feminist theory in their approach to Valenzuela’s text as well as a variety of other theoretical positions. For example, María Inés Lagos uses Judith Butler’s framework of gender performativity to discuss notions of subjectivity in the text. Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal redefines Robin Morgan’s term *wargasm* to argue that female subjects in Valenzuela’s texts subvert “dominant sexual, social, and political orders” (159). Still others, including Laura García-Moreno and Silvia Sauter, have drawn on psychoanalytical and philosophical approaches as outlined by Jung, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous in order to analyze power issues and otherness. Along with García-Moreno and Lagos, Gwendolyn Díaz also draws on philosophical positionings, including Hegel, Lacan and Foucault to analyze power relations in Valenzuela’s texts. My approach and argument, however, differ from these scholars (although I will draw on some elements of their approaches) as I focus specifically on how male antagonists enforce heteronormative socio-cultural structures in texts of the dictatorship.

As “Cambio de armas” opens, the reader is as unclear as the anonymous third-person female narrator as to what is happening around her. In the second paragraph, the story reveals that the woman’s name is Laura. However, she does not claim this as her identity and feels ambivalent toward the name: “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).⁸ As the narrative unfolds we learn that Laura was a rebel sent to kill a colonel in the army. She was caught and this same colonel forced her complete dependence on him. During the present time of the story, Laura is confined to a nondescript apartment with only the housekeeper, Martina, to keep her company during the long days when her colonel husband, Roque, is away. While Laura makes minor discoveries about her surroundings and her past, the reader makes bigger connections, learning that Laura’s amnesia is maintained by drugs and the colonel only uses her as a plaything and an experiment.

⁸ Laura’s lack of language and memory is not the primary focus of my study. However, I believe that Sharon Magnarelli makes an important point: “[El coronel] ha borrado su pasado e incluso su lenguaje, imponiéndole el suyo. O al menos así parece hasta que en los últimos momentos del texto [...] y el lector se queda preguntándose si ahora va a ser ella quien escriba en un cuerpo” (“Cuerpos que escriben” 57).

As I previously demonstrated with *Garage Olimpo*, one way in which female protagonists are forced into narrow gender roles is through farcical attempts at feigning normalcy. In Valenzuela's text, the colonel's efforts at "making house" is much more overt compared to Félix's decorations in María's cell. Following Laura's torture (after being discovered as an assassin) and memory loss (maintained by drugs), the colonel forces Laura to marry him and confines her to an apartment. Although the apartment seems typical—kitchen, bedroom, living room—it lacks many personal touches that would suggest the inhabitants care for the space, with one conspicuous exception. The apartment has one personal touch: a wedding photo. Laura frequently contemplates this photo and, even in her confused mental state, questions its authenticity: "Y dentro de esa casa por demás ajena, ese elemento personal que es lo menos suyo de todo: la foto de casamiento. Él está allí tan alerta y ella luciendo su mejor aire ausente tras el velo" (119). While in *Garage Olimpo* Félix sets up house in the confines of a clandestine torture center, in "Cambio de armas" the colonel has the power to go beyond the torture center and makes the effort to create Laura's surroundings to look as if she really is married and living in a traditional marriage. Therefore, in Laura's case, the apartment walls not only define her physical space, they also suggest her psychological boundary.

Unfortunately for the colonel, his cruel attempts at maintaining Laura's submission actually cause psychological ruptures during which she examines, however briefly and superficially, her place in the heteronormative socio-cultural structure he has created and maintained. In fact, during some scenes of intense sexual abuse Laura psychologically breaks apart and the reality of her past (as a rebel and would-be assassin) breaks into her consciousness. During these moments, too, we see how the colonel's current actions, supposedly those of an adoring husband, parallel his previous actions as a torturer. One such instance occurs during a session of cruel sex under the new mirror on the bedroom ceiling. The colonel commands her to open her eyes and watch what he does to her. When she inadvertently closes them, he shouts:

¡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 rompérselo, 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. (123-4)⁹

While in *Garage Olimpo* the female subject is tortured off-screen, in "Cambio de armas," Laura's torture is visible, but disguised as a marriage in which she is forced to play the part of a compliant and dependent wife.

⁹ Not only does the mirror serve as a prop for the colonel's sexual abuse of Laura, but also by forcing her to recognize herself in the mirror he forces her to see how he has molded her. Sharon Magnarelli also points this out: "Here the oppressor [...] compels Laura to look at herself in the mirror; he does not permit her to close her eyes because he wants her to see to what degree she is his creation, to what extent he has shaped her" (*Reflections/Refractions* 192).

Just as María is treated as a child in *Garage Olimpo* in order to enforce her submissiveness within a confined gender structure, so too is Laura in “Cambio de armas.” However, in Laura’s case she is not only treated as an incompetent child, but forced to remain in a juvenile mental state in which she is denied access to the world around her and forbidden to question the authority of her husband. As previously mentioned, Laura is drugged and the effects of the drugs keep her in a constant state of absolute present. She has no recollection of her past and does not, or cannot, challenge the colonel’s authority over her. This childlike disposition is evident in the section called “Los colegas.”

In “Los colegas,” the colonel prepares Laura for a visit with his colleagues by buying her a new dress (in a parody of “dress up”) and explaining to her that his associates want to visit “para que te distraigas un poco” (127). During the visit by the colonel’s presumed accomplices, Laura’s emotions alternate between pride at the ability to answer their questions (however inadequately) to bewilderment at her lack of knowledge on the political topics they bring up. After the colonel defends her saying, “Laura ni lee los diarios. Lo que ocurre fuera de estas cuatro paredes le interesa muy poco. Ella mira a los demás sin saber si sentirse orgullosa o indignarse” (128). Again, this scene reinforces Laura’s status as a child within the relationship. She senses her own inadequacies, but is unable to interpret them. She remains adrift as an infantilized adult in a room of men who verify her ignorance and confirm that she has not overstepped the boundaries of her prescribed role. That is, to Roque and his colleagues, an ideal woman is one who neither questions her dependency on, nor the authority of, the opposite sex. In fact, this is exactly the kind of attitude the regime cultivates outside the apartment.

Just as the commander at *Garage Olimpo* uses closed circuit television to monitor the guards and prisoners, Laura is also spied upon. In both instances, spying by those in command is a necessary component to safeguarding rigid gender structures. Obviously, the colonel keeps a close watch on her when he is in the apartment, but when he arrives he always brings along two bodyguards who remain posted outside the door. Even though they remain outside, Laura always notes their presence: “llegan otros dos tipos que se quedan del lado de afuera de la puerta [...]. Ella los denomina Uno y Dos, cosa que le da una cierta seguridad o un cierto escalofrío” (114). Their presence, however, is not innocuous. In one particularly abusive scene, the colonel begins to undress Laura for sex in the living room rather than in the bedroom. By this point in the text, Laura is more aware of her situation and has had brief glimmers of revelation so she is curious, and later frightened, that this sexual act is taking place in the living room’s public space, knowing that Uno and Dos are just on the other side of the door.

Indeed, Laura is justified in her worries as the colonel not only initiates sex in the public arena, but he also pointedly walks to the door to open the peephole for Uno and Dos to watch. Once the peephole is opened and other eyes are watching, the colonel’s actions turn violent: “El apareamiento se empieza a volver cruel, elaborado, y se estira en el tiempo. Él parece querer partirla en dos a golpes de anca y en medio de un

estertor se frena, se retira, para volver a penetrarla con saña, trabándole todo movimiento o hincándole los dientes” (135). And then Laura realizes she is the star of a show with an audience that has not only eyes but also ears:

Ella a veces quiere sustraerse de este maremoto que la arrasa y se esfuerza por descubrir el ojo del otro lado de la mirilla. En otros momentos ella se olvida del ojo, de todos los ojos que probablemente estén allí afuera ansiosos por verla retorcerse, pero él le grita una única palabra—perra—y ella entiende que es alrededor de ese epíteto que él quiere tejer la densa telaraña de miradas. Entonces un gemido largo se le escapa a pesar suyo y él duplica sus arremetidas para que el gemido de ella se transforme en aullido.

Es decir que afuera no sólo hay ojos, también hay oídos. Afuera quizá no sólo estén Uno y Dos, afuera también esos ciertos colegas. Afuera. [...]. (135-136)

When the colonel stands up and begins pacing the room, Laura feels unprotected and visible to those who watch and listen outside the door. Although afraid of his actions and wary of others watching, “lo llama de vuelta a su lado, para que la cubra con su cuerpo, no para que la satisfaga” (136). The physical abuse and power differential of this scene not only exemplify how the colonel and other unseen forces control her body and patrol her actions, this episode also shows how the colonel demands Laura’s dependence on him to such a degree that she cries out for his presence and seems to desire the continuation of his cruel sexual performance.¹⁰ Here again we see how Laura has been made into a sex object who has no control over her sexuality or desire. She is only allowed to feel sexual pleasure when Roque commands it. This control over Laura’s body is integral to keeping control of women’s bodies throughout the nation as the arrangement inside the apartment is a microcosm of the nation at large. This scene also most likely parallels her public torture in front of several men shortly after her capture.

Additionally, this scene is a clear example of duBois’ assertion that “torturers torture to punish” (148). The colonel’s original rage at being the target of an assassin compels him to “save” Laura from a clandestine torture center only to replace the space of the detention center with a seemingly “safe” apartment. Although the setting seems innocuous, Laura is sexually tortured and becomes the “[example] of the pain to be suffered as a consequence of certain actions.” The colonel “torture[s] because of [his] own rage, [his] own sadistic desire to punish, to offer for [himself] the spectacle of conversion” (148). This torture is the means by which the colonel does his part to uphold the heteronormative socio-cultural structures enforced by the regime to maintain control.

In neither *Garage Olimpo* nor “Cambio de armas” do the protagonists control their present or future. Although María is aware enough to consider the frightening

¹⁰ The bodyguards Uno and Dos are not the only ones watching and listening to the rape in the living room. We learn that the housekeeper has also been silently watching: “Al rato Martina entra sigilosamente y los cubre a los dos con una manta” (137). She, too, has a role in perpetuating the colonel’s game and thereby upholding strict gender norms.

possible outcomes of her confinement at *Garage Olimpo*, Laura's drugged state does not allow her the luxury of remembering a happier past, much less a future in which she is free to live a life of her choosing. In fact, in Laura's case, much of the narrative revolves around the glimpses of her past that intrude upon her current situation and confuse or frighten her. Laura does not contemplate the future because she is living "en el presente absoluto, en un mundo que nace a cada instante o a lo sumo que nació pocos días atrás (¿cuántos?) es como vivir entre algodones: algo mullido y cálido pero sin gusto" (116). By living in the present and ignoring the painful memories of her previous incarceration, Laura remains dependent on the colonel for her physical and psychological needs which thereby reinforces the gender role she is forced to enact.

Throughout "Cambio de armas," the colonel controls Laura's life. Through drugs, confinement, food and sex, he forces her into complete dependence and his power seems unshakeable. However, just as in *Garage Olimpo*, the male who dominates the female turns out to be powerless against the larger forces of dictatorship. That is, while both Laura and María are powerless against the colonel and Félix, their captors turn out to be equally powerless within the repressive structure of the regime even though both their public and private actions are designed to perpetuate the regime.

In the case of "Cambio de armas," the colonel seems invincible in his role as captor and enforcer in Laura's life. The reader knows nothing about his role in the larger regime except his rank. One suspects that a person with the power to halt torture and set up an apartment to act out a ruse in which his "wife" remains confined and controlled by him would be very powerful. However, at the end of the story the precariousness of the colonel's position within the regime is revealed when political circumstances disturb his private escape. As the reader and Laura learn together:

[...] un timbre insistente la trae de golpe al aquí y ahora. Algo inusitado ese timbre que no cesa, alguien que desesperadamente quiere hacerse oír y entonces él se dirige cauteloso a la puerta para ver qué pasa y ella puro nervio, toda alerta, oye las voces de los otros sin tratar de comprenderlas.

—Coronel, perdón, señor. Mi coronel. Hay levantamiento. No teníamos otra manera de avisarle. Se sublevaron. Avanzan con tanques hacia su cuartel. Parece que el Regimiento III de Infantería está con ellos. Y la Marina. Se levantaron en armas. Coronel. Perdón señor. No sabíamos cómo avisarle.

El se viste a las apuradas, se va sin despedirse de ella como tantas otras veces. [...] (140)

Although in *Garage Olimpo*, Félix is clearly a subordinate player in the regime taking orders from el Tigre, the colonel is not, yet he flees from the apartment. And, at this point in the text, we do not know if he will return. The colonel's abandonment of his project demonstrates the impossibility of maintaining rigid heteronormative socio-cultural structures.

Eventually, about a week later, the colonel does return. Upon his return to the apartment it is clear that he is only there to tie up a few loose ends with Laura. The penultimate section, aptly titled "La revelación," is the colonel's attempt to expose the

whole drama to Laura. He reveals her secret mission to assassinate him, his violence toward her and finally his attempt to force her to love him and depend on him: “te iba a obligar yo a quererme, a depender de mí como una recién nacida” (144). Now, however, the regime has toppled, and the colonel’s game is over: “Se acabó nuestro jueguito ¿entendés? Se acabó para mí, lo que quiere decir que también se acabó para vos” (145), he says. Laura is no longer useful or entertaining to him because he no longer has the power to keep her submissive to him because the regime that he was defending no longer exists. While the colonel admits to having fun—“Pero gracias de todos modos, fuiste un buen cobayo, hasta fue agradable” (145)—he decides to abandon his efforts to force her into a dependent role since he can no longer control his own situation, much less Laura’s. He must flee and she can do as she wishes. She, like María, is expendable. Unlike María, however, she is not destroyed, but rather left to her own devices. At the end, she holds the gun that she was supposed to use on her original mission to assassinate the colonel: “Entonces lo levanta y apunta” (146). What exactly Laura does after aiming the gun remains unresolved.¹¹

Although not fully awakened to the reality of her past or present, the power dynamic is reversed and Laura asserts her power over the colonel by controlling and aiming the original object of power. Laura points the gun, the powerful phallic symbol that subdued her, at her own torturer in a clear example of how quickly gender-specific cultural norms crumble. Laura is lucky. Even though the story ends, her life is starting. Unlike María, Laura’s final act of agency, in which she oversteps gender bounds, saves her.

As I have demonstrated, both *Garage Olimpo* and “Cambio de armas” feature female protagonists whose immediate survival depends on their submission to male captors and adherence to strict gender roles. While María and Laura endure distinct forms of incarceration, they are both monitored and forced into roles of traditional womanhood by men who control the relationship dynamic. As Elisa Larraín Masson explains: “[La] representación del cuerpo como un espacio violentado apunta al hecho de que el cuerpo fue el blanco de la violencia militar, la tortura fue el medio que se utilizó para crear subjetividades acordes al sistema social que se quería instaurar” (415). These female protagonists suffer terrifying physical violence because their bodies must be controlled in order to uphold the regime’s power that is based on a heteronormative socio-cultural structure that prohibits women from stepping outside their gender boundaries. Strictly defined and regulated gender roles are important in these texts in order to literally, and violently, keep women in their place.

Works Cited

¹¹ As Sharon Magnarelli points out: “[She] is awakening from [her] lethargy, from [her] Snow White dream worlds, and beginning to take the first steps toward self-sufficiency and a consciousness of how to inscribe [herself] as [an] active [agent]” (*Reflections/Refractions* 187).

- Andruetto, María Teresa. *La mujer en cuestión*. Córdoba, Argentina: Alción, 2003. Print.
- Bonasso, Miguel. *Recuerdo de la muerte*. Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1984. Print.
- Botín de guerra*. Dir. David Blaustein. Zafra Difusión, 2000. Film.
- Cara del ángel, La*. Dir. Pablo Torre. Perf. Virginia Innocenti, Mario Pasik and Enrique Pinti. Contracampo, 1998. Film.
- Cautiva*. Dir. Gaston Biraben. Perf. Bárbara Lombardo, Susana Campos and Hugo Arana. Cacerolazo Producciones, 2004. Film.
- CONADEP. *Nunca más, informe final de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*. Buenos Aires: Eudaba, 1984. Print.
- Díaz, Gwendolyn. "Politics of the body in Luisa Valenzuela's 'Cambio de armas' and 'Simetrías.'" *World Literature Today* 69.4 (1995): 751-756. Print.
- duBois, Page. *Torture and Truth*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Garage Olimpo*. Dir. Marco Bechis. Perf. Antonella Costa, Carlos Echeverría and Dominique Sanda. Classic, Nisarga, Paradis Films, Radiotelevisione Italiana and Tele+, 1999. Film.
- García-Moreno, Laura. "Other Weapons, Other Words: Literary and Political Reconsiderations in Luisa Valenzuela's *Other Weapons*." *Latin American Literary Review*. 19.38 (1991): 7-22. Print.
- Gatti, Gabriel. "Las narrativas del detenido-desaparecido (o de los problemas de la representación ante las catástrofes sociales)." *CONfines* 2.4 (2006): 27-38. Print.
- Geisdorfer Feal, Rosemary. "The Politics of 'Wargasm': Sexuality, Domination and Female Subversion in Luisa Valenzuela's *Cambio de Armas*." *Structures of Power: Essays on Twentieth Century Spanish-American Fiction*. Ed. Terry J. Peavler and Peter Standish. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1996. 159-188. Print.
- Historia oficial, La*. Dir. Luis Puenzo. Perf. Norma Aleandro, Héctor Alterio and Chunchuna Villafañe. Pacific Arts, 1985. Film.
- Jakubowicz, Eduardo y Laura Radetich, "Represión y desaparecidos. Las representaciones a través del cine argentino (1983-2005)." *FILMHISTORIA* 1 (2007): n. pag. Web. 12 May 2010.

- Kamchatka*. Dir. Marcelo Piñeyro, Perf. Ricardo Darín, Cecilia Roth and Héctor Alterio. Alquimia Cinema, Oscar Kramer, Patagonik Film Group, Televisión Española (TVE), Vía Digital, 2002. Film.
- Kaminsky, Amy. "Marco Bechis' *Garage Olimpo*: Cinema of witness." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. 48 (winter 2006): n. pag. Web. 13 May 2010.
- Lagos, María Inés. "Sujeto, sexualidad y literatura en 'Cambio de armas' y *Novela negra con argentinos* de Luisa Valenzuela." *La palabra en vilo: narrativa de Luisa Valenzuela*. Eds. Gwendolyn Díaz y María Inés Lagos. Santiago, Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio. 1996. 131-161. Print.
- Larraín Masson, Elisa. "Narrar el cuerpo roto. La representación de la violencia en 'Cambio de armas.'" *Río de la Plata*. 29-30 (2004): 413-418. Print.
- Lynch, Marta. *Informe bajo llave*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1983. Print.
- Magnarelli, Sharon. "Luisa Valenzuela: Cuerpos que escriben (metonímicamente hablando) y la metáfora peligrosa." *La palabra en vilo: Narrativa de Luisa Valenzuela*. Ed. Gwendolyn Díaz y María Inés Lagos. Santiago, Chile: Cuarto Propio, 1996. 53-77. Print.
- . *Reflections/Refractions: Reading Luisa Valenzuela*. New York: Peter Lang, 1988. Print.
- Medina, Enrique. *Con el trapo en la boca*. Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1983. Print.
- Noche de los lápices, La*. Dir. Héctor Olivera. Perf. Alejo García Pintos, Vita Escardó and Pablo Novak. Aires Cinematográfica Argentina, 1986. Film.
- Piglia, Ricardo. *Respiración artificial*. Buenos Aires: Pomaire, 1980. Print.
- Rivabella, Omar. *Requiem por el alma de una mujer*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1989. Print.
- Rubios, Los*. Dir. Albertina Carri. Perf. Analía Couceyro and Albertina Carri. Primer Plano Film and Women Make Movies, 2003. Film.
- Sauter, Silvia. "Liberación de y reencuentro con 'lo otro' en *Cambio de armas*." *Chasqui* 27.2 (1998): 89-105. Print.
- Soriano, Osvaldo. *No habrá más penas ni olvido*. Barcelona: Bruguera, 1980. Print.
- Timerman, Jacobo. *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número*. New York: Random, 1981. Print.

- Torre, Javier. *Las noches de Maco*. Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1986. Print.
- Traba, Marta. *Conversación al sur*. Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1981. Print.
- Valenzuela, Luisa. *Cambio de armas*. Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1982. Print.
- . "A Legacy of Poets and Cannibals: Literature Revives in Argentina." Trans. Lori M. Carlson. *Lives on the Line: The Testimony of Contemporary Latin American Authors*. Ed. Doris Meyer. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. 292-297. Print.
- Vieira, Patricia. "Torture and the Sublime. The Ethics of Physical Pain in *Garage Olimpo*." *Dissidences: Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism*. 2.1 (2006): 1-14. Web.
- Viñas, David. *Cuerpo a cuerpo*. Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1979. Print.