

## The Body of Exclusion: Femicide and Transfemicide in Dahlia de la Cerda's *Reservoir Bitches*

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*Reservoir Bitches* (2023), the book of short stories by Mexican writer Dahlia de la Cerda (1985), clearly and explicitly denounces the femicides taking place in Mexico. From the onset of the book, violent deaths of women at the hands of macho and misogynist men are depicted. In all these events, women's and feminized bodies are tortured, raped, and scorned, crimes which are left unpunished, thus creating suffocating atmospheres.

In this way, the feminine body is belittled and deemed a disposable object once sexual desires have been satisfied. This paper will analyze, from a gender perspective, the way in which the bodies of women and feminized bodies are disposed of without justice for the victims, while the authorities cover the murders up or are complicit in them.

The stories "La sonrisa" ["The Smile"], "Lentejuelas" ["Sequins"] and "La Huesera"<sup>1</sup> have been selected for analysis, as these texts denounce the machista and misogynist environment that gives way to femicides and transfemicides and the total impunity that shelters them.

### FEMICIDES AND TRANSFEMICIDES

The subject of femicides and transfemicides has begun to appear more frequently in Mexican literature written by women. The novel *El invencible verano de Liliana* [*Liliana's Invincible Summer: A Sister's Search for Justice*] by Cristina Rivera Garza (1964), winner of the Pulitzer award in 2024, is a clear example of the visibility of this issue in the literary field. It narrates part of the life of the writer's sister, who was a femicide victim in 1990. Through a series of biographical and autobiographical resources, Rivera Garza recreates the impunity that sheltered the murderer, to the extent that his case has been dismissed after more than thirty years. It is a raw and detailed story that provokes a sense of outrage in the face of injustice and makes us question our ways as a society by exposing such revictimizing indifference.

In the case of the book of short stories *Reservoir Bitches*, there is a criminal atmosphere in most of the texts, as most of the stories are told from the perspective of women that are hitwomen, drug dealers or thieves. Therefore, the homicides and femicides narrated are the product of a series of affective, amorous or revengeful relationships in the criminal world. However, the book also recounts the lives of women (cisgender and transexual) that are annihilated simply because they are women, for owning a body that in Mexico's 21st Century violent, macho and misogynist world is seen as a property or an object that men can dispose of at will. Hence, the

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note: In this context, the term *huesera* refers to a bone gatherer. The official translation of *Reservoir Bitches*, by Heather Cleary and Julia Sanches, adhere to the Spanish term, which will also be the case in this translation for consistency purposes.

crimes committed against the feminized bodies are also part of the impunity and pandering of the authorities, who take bribes from the offenders in exchange of their freedom.

As it happens in *Liliana's Invincible Summer: A Sister's Search for Justice*, in *Reservoir Bitches* the tense atmosphere of injustice where the female or feminized bodies are subdued and thrown away blooms again, leading other women to occasionally take justice in their own hands (like in the short story "La China"), either by directly killing another woman's assassin or hiring a hitwoman to fulfill the vengeance. In both cases, women know that the patriarchal arrangement between men allows those who are guilty to go unpunished so it will be them who, as an act of sorority, will have to avenge a friend's death or simply, as it happens in the short story "The Smile", will have to kill their assassins with their own hands (the femicide victim turns into a vampire and comes back to the crime scene to kill the men who raped and killed her.)

In such way, crimes against women are harshly represented and try to elicit in the reader both a sense of outrage and empathy with the characters who decide to take matters in their own hands and carry out the sentence. Even though in *Liliana's Invincible Summer: A Sister's Search for Justice* the perpetrator has not yet been detained, it is true that at the end, just as in De la Cerda's text, the author summons the readers to keep demanding justice and join the fight of those who will be restless until amends are made.

Having said that, the transfemicide cases remain equally unpunished as they are also covered up by the indifference of the authorities who often classify them as crimes of passion. This circumstance has been denounced in texts such as *Las malas [Bad Girls]* (2019), by Camila Sosa Villada (1982), where the main characters, a group of trans women, have to put up with scorn, mockery, and direct and indirect attacks from society at large (the ill-treatment in this case does not come only from police officers, but from citizens as well). The novel, also told with autobiographical elements, narrates the precarious and vulnerable conditions this group of women experience and the way in which, just like that, some of them are brutally murdered. So, not being able to access justice, they rally under the protection of Aunt Encarna who supports them emotionally and "protects" them, as she acts as a maternal figure of authority.

Meanwhile, *Reservoir Bitches* also addresses the issue of prostitution, and the vulnerable conditions trans women face as sexual workers. However, in this short story, the main character does not join forces with other prostitutes and does not create a community, thus working and living without the protection of a pimp or madam. Even when these figures fail to prevent or inhibit the murders (as is the case of *Bad Girls*), it is true that the protagonist of "Sequins" exposes herself even more to the perils of the streets, taken by transphobic and violent men. Hence her situation can be considered as even more vulnerable, while she lacks any kind of support. Thus, both the protagonist of this tale and the female characters in Sosa Villada's novel are annihilated without any regard, as the killers know they are untouchable in a system that despises the bodies and lives of women in general, and trans women in particular.

### THE SMILE

As mentioned above, "The Smile" tells the story of a young woman who migrates from her village to the north of the country in search of better living and working conditions. As a worker in a maquiladora, the young woman enjoys the small comforts that the city offers and the dances she attends almost every weekend. Her life, which happens between work and the

pleasures she can gift herself with, is suddenly disrupted by being the victim of a group of men (accomplices of the bus driver who transports her to the desert) who are sheltered by policemen that, being able to stop their actions, prefer to receive money and let things be. So, she is brought to the desert, where she is raped and tortured by her attackers, who leave the scene assuming she is dead. However, an unknown being bites her in the neck and takes her to a cave where the protagonist goes through a radical change—she describes how she “dies” to come back to life in a body that transformed into a vampire. Once she assumes her new identity, her thirst for vengeance leads her into a quest for her assassins and, just like the first time, she is taken to the desert to be abused without the police arresting the perpetrators. Back in the desert, one of them notices who she is and they all panic, but the protagonist, putting her fear aside, faces them and kills them.

The femicide described is based in real events of women murdered in Ciudad Juarez. In the short story, just as it happens in real life, the young woman migrates from the southern region of the country towards the U.S. border, to work in a maquiladora and improve her life conditions. Her routine, which is going from home to the maquiladora and enjoying dancing on the weekends, is abruptly interrupted one afternoon when she boards the bus that takes her close to her house. As opposed to what usually happens, the truck driver deviates from his route and being alone in the bus, she starts screaming, but the driver still takes her into the desert. The police car that intercepts them realizes something is wrong, but the driver bribes them, and they let him go. Once in the desert, the bus is boarded by four men, who will then enjoy torturing and raping her until they think she is dead. As the protagonist points out, it will be the desert that devours her, like so many other women who have been killed in it: “I came looking for live music to dance to but, just my luck, what I found instead was this brutal desert that devours women, carves them up, disappears them, swallows them whole. See nothing, say nothing. But you can’t pull the wool over my eyes.”<sup>2</sup> (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 96).

This deserted space becomes the stage where, like a great theater of horror, the ravished bodies of women are exhibited, without anyone doing anything to prevent it, as the protagonist states. The bodies, which constantly appear, are bodies destined to collective oblivion as, despite the tragic and painful nature of these deaths, the inhabitants of Ciudad Juarez do not want to see or be aware of such atrocities. Under the appearance of a developing city, the face of a monstrous, sexist and misogynist space that feeds on the blood of its victims is hidden: “The border isn’t what you think, or what people say it is. The border is a hungry monster. A bottomless pit that feeds on work, sex, drugs, and women. I had no idea.” (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 96).

When it comes to femicides, Juarez<sup>3</sup> is the ultimate symbol of the prevailing impunity in Mexico as, for more than three decades, it has staged a myriad of murders that, to this day, remain unsolved. The short story’s protagonist is not spared from this cruel reality, as she joins the statistics that blur the face and history of the murdered women. The degree in which the murderers and the authorities are colluded is such, that the short story mentions openly and directly how the police officers are accomplices to the murderers when receiving money and letting them act as they please. This explicit accusation strengthens the feeling of helplessness

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<sup>2</sup> All the translations in this paper are citations from the official translation of *Reservoir Bitches*, by Heather Cleary and Julia Sanches, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> TN: Ciudad Juárez city is often referred to as “Juarez” by Mexican people.

and abandonment of the protagonist when she notices no one will protect her from her deadly fate: "I heard him step out [*of the bus*] and saw the lights of a patrol car. I screamed, I screamed my lungs out, I called for help, I begged, but those dirtbags pretended they couldn't hear me and waved him on." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 98). The conspiracy becomes evident and reinforces the strain resulting from the inevitable: fear takes over the protagonist, who questions the readers directly, by asking them: "You want me to tell it?"<sup>4</sup> (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 98). In this way, without giving them any choice, the protagonist quickly and explicitly narrates the torture and rape. This sense of haste achieves the creation of a suffocating atmosphere that engages the readers and makes them participants in the monstrous acts. Thus, enclosed by a climate of anguish and despair, the protagonist narrates her ordeal until she is left for dead and abandoned in the desert.

Despite the vexations and suffering, the protagonist survives and is "rescued" by an enigmatic man who approaches her, not to cure her, but to bite her in the neck and transport her to a cave where she finally "dies" to be reborn transformed into a creature that, although having her original appearance, no longer belongs to the world of the living. This metamorphosis, necessary for her rebirth, takes place over several days in which she empties her being to re-emerge, again, as herself, although different: "After puking up all my organs and losing my hair, I died again. I don't know what to tell you. The whole thing seems like a weirdass trip, but when I woke up, I was me. Like before. No cuts or bruises, no pain, no nothing: there I was, motherfucking Chiki in all my splendor" (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 100).

Who bites her? Who brings her back to a new life so that she can seek revenge? A strange man the protagonist refers to as *Charro Negro*<sup>5</sup> and who, in fact, explains to her that he trapped her last breath to make it eternal. From this revelation, we then know that it is a vampire who has given her life and that, therefore, the protagonist must follow certain instructions and take certain precautions to not die for real. The mutation to this new condition gives her the opportunity to take justice into her own hands, an opportunity that the protagonist does not miss and decides to become the murderer of her killers. Although the transformation into a vampire is a fantasy way different to what happens in reality, truth is that, in the possible world of the story, it becomes an opportunity to punish the crime, thus satisfying the yearning for justice that lays in the hearts of the victims' families and friends: "It broke my heart to picture my family out there searching for me and my aunt tallying the days I'd been gone." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 102).

Before this situation, the protagonist writes a promise to her family and herself: "Pieces of shit got nothing on me, I'm alive and I'm coming for them." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 102). And, supported by the *Charro Negro*, she executes her plan by rebuilding her routine and putting herself, again, in a vulnerable position that leads her to recreate the scene of her murder. The same route, the same driver, the same complicit police officers and the same men who get on the truck appear again, although, this time, it will be her who puts them down, thanks to her new supernatural strength. The murder of the perpetrators is not described in detail, but we

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<sup>4</sup> TN: Her story

<sup>5</sup> TN: "Black Charro". The term *Charro* in Mexico, refers to the horseman of the countryside who worked in Haciendas and did all their tasks in horseback. The term persists to this day and is also a synonym of a *Ranchero* or a Mexican cowboy.

know she will make them suffer and, above all, that by quenching her thirst for blood she will also quench her thirst for revenge: "I walked up to them, real slow, and saw the panic on their faces. One of them pissed himself. Those fuckers can dish it out, but they can't take it. I was scared, because our bodies remember. But I swallowed my fear and smiled, baring my fangs." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 103).

The ending closes with a feeling of contentment that, unfortunately, victims of femicide never have. However, by fictionally posing this other way of closing the circle, the story manages to partially alleviate the helplessness before all the inequity in Mexico.

### SEQUINS

In turn, the short story "Sequins" tells the story of Julia (born Julio), who suffers rejection from her mother and father because neither accepts their son's transsexuality, which has been evident since being a child. After being threatened with being sent to the army to become a man, Julia decides to leave home and, to survive, she becomes a prostitute. In this trade, she meets and has clients from different social classes and professions, being priests and politicians the ones she likes to serve the most because they are the ones who pay the best. Also, in her story, Julia recounts the different likings and fantasies of her clients, which she fulfills without a problem, thus emphasizing her openness to experience her sexuality. However, one night, while Julia is walking down the street, she encounters a group of men in a vehicle who begin to catcall her and, noticing that she ignores them, begin to insult her. The verbal aggressions then turn into physical aggressions, as they get out of the vehicle to beat, rape and torture her. Her body, evidencing all the mistreatment, is found in an abandoned property and the newspaper headlines refer to her with derogatory adjectives such as "fag". In this way, her murder is added to the long list of transfemicides that are not investigated because they are considered a "crime of passion" or, simply, a consequence of her profession (in several headlines, the fact that she was a prostitute is emphasized.)

The story, as is the case with the rest of the stories in the volume, does not stop at giving details of the murder, since it explicitly describes the damage caused by the aggressors with different objects: they stab her neck with a screwdriver, they repeatedly wound her face with a razor and pour acid on it, they mutilate her breasts and suffocate her with her own underwear. These details allow us to understand the magnitude of the attack and, above all, the violence with which the aggressions are committed, since in the background lies a hatred towards what Julia represents according to the conservative perspective: the transgression of the gender binary order. The hatred with which the transfemicide is committed demonstrates the aversion felt by certain social groups and, in particular, by some men who perceive trans people as a threat. This open disdain for what is different is framed by the need to prove to themselves how macho they are, since, as Julia herself expresses it, only among several are they capable of carrying out atrocities of all kinds: "The other guys got out, too. Then they all came down on me, the bullies, the chickenshits, the fucking machos." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 110).

Thus, Julia's transfemicide is clear evidence of the contempt the heteropatriarchal society feels towards the feminine. As mentioned before, Julia is disregarded by her own family since she was a girl, not for being homosexual, but for her inclination towards the feminine. Her own

mother tells her: "Be a faggot if you want. Just not a tranny Jules, for the love of God."<sup>6</sup> (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 108). The fact that it is the mother who speaks like this, reinforces the character of contempt for the feminine performed by someone who is not a woman. This is accentuated in the malice and cruelty with which Julia is attacked by her aggressors, since the injuries they cause are focused precisely on the attributes that confer femininity to women's bodies: the face, breasts and abdomen:

*My body was found face down and half-naked with cuts on my breasts. They removed his fake tits. They slashed my face. With cuts on his botoxed face. The neighbors said I was a prostitute who went out at night dressed as a woman. There were six stab wounds on my neck and three on my torso. [...]. Extra! Extra! Transvestite strangled with his own thong. Acid on my face. There's nothing glamorous about death because death isn't sequined. My black dress stained with blood. (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 111)*

Just as it happens with femicides, transfemicide takes place when a woman is killed for the fact of being a woman, and her body is tortured and violated in a clear act of macho and misogynist domination. For this reason, Julia's murder is condemned to oblivion, because it does not matter who she is since, deep down, everything she represents is treated with contempt. Invisibilization becomes a weapon, a strategy to erase the feminine presence: "When they found my body, no one called me Julia." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 110).

Despite this absolute denial, the ending is inspiring as, even when in life she was despised to the point of being annulled, beyond death she will be welcomed with affection and respect by other trans women who were also victims of transfemicide. In this ending, where Julia sees herself dead and covered in blood, her existence does not end with the violent act, but opens up to a new life where everything is a party, as symbolized by the sequins and the direct allusion to Gloria Trevi's song that says, precisely: "And suddenly the night was no longer dark, it was made of sequins"<sup>7</sup> (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 111). This phrase highlights the celebratory spirit brought by the realization of belonging to a sisterhood of trans women, who welcome her with joy and invite her to join the eternal celebration: "Come on girl, we're late to the party," I heard among the chirring of the crickets. I looked over my shoulder and saw Paola Buenrostro standing with Susie Pop, Brigeth, and Diana Sacayán. I said goodbye to my body, wiped the dust off my dress, and took their hands. We walked together through the dark November sky." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 111)

So, same as in the previously story analyzed, "The Smile", the last say is not that of death. The difference lies in the fact that, in "Sequins", there is no revenge but a celebration of life beyond

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<sup>6</sup> TN: Translation of this citation by Susana I. Sevilla Beltrán. In this case, I decided not to go with the official translation of the book, as, in Mexico, the original word "*vestida*" used by De la Cerda in Spanish, is a direct and derogatory term referring to men who dress like women, often referred to as *travesties*. In the translated version of the book, the translators opted for "Just don't dress like that", which can portray the sense of a man dressing in a feminine way but leaves out the rejection towards transsexuality.

<sup>7</sup> TN: Translation of this citation by Susana I. Sevilla Beltrán. In the official translation, the translators opted for merging the November night walk with the reference to the sequins: "We walked together through the dark November sky, and suddenly the night was made of sequins." I chose to portray the full translation of Gloria Trevi's song, as it is, because in Mexico that song constitutes the ultimate hymn of many homosexual and trans people.

death, transcending time and space, indicating that hatred cannot destroy the festive essence of the feminine.

### LA HUESERA

Lastly, we will analyze the story “La Huesera”, one of the longest texts of the volume of short stories *Reservoir Bitches*. As in the two previous stories, this text narrates the femicide of Claudia, a teenager who, after getting into a rental car when leaving a party, disappears only to be found dead months later. In this case, as in the previous stories, Claudia is sexually abused, tortured and strangled, so, the intention of setting a pattern for murdering women can be observed. Thus, when searching on the internet about murdered women, Claudia’s friend “discovers” her friend is not the only one and, regrettably, nor the last one who suffers extreme violence in hands of her perpetrators (in the story, it is known she was killed by three men). This recurring formula of rape, torture and death, is denounced with a long list of cases that account for the terrible reality suffered by women in Mexico:

*The five-year-old was brutally beaten, raped, and murdered.*

*Five years old.*

*Five years old.*

*Five years old. Raped and murdered.*

*He killed the thirteen-year-old girl after raping her and then dumped her body in the river.*

*A woman is stoned to death in front of a cemetery.*

*She was killed by her boyfriend.*

*By her husband.*

*By her ex.*

*By her lover.*

*By her father.*

*By her son.*

*By a man.*

*By the man who said he loved her. And then killed her. (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 132)*

As shown in the list of women’s murders, the age of the victims does not matter, because girls are also murdered with extreme cruelty and as noted, the facts occur at the hands of those who allegedly love them. Femicides and transfemicides are, therefore, crimes that never cease to occur in our country and one of the reasons is, as mentioned, the fact that the feminine (represented in women's bodies) is considered inferior, with the entitlement to appropriate and annihilate it. Thus, in this endless list of cases, the protagonist sentences with a scathing phrase the condition of vulnerability in which women live in our country: “Being a woman means living in a state of emergency.” (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 133).

Unfortunately, this state of emergency cannot be solved with simple programs to prevent violence against women, since this contempt for the feminine recedes in the deepest machista and misogynist roots that require a radical change in mentality, culture and education. If this task is not achieved, we will continue to reproduce and suffer the most extreme forms of violence against women: "Every three hours and twenty-five minutes, a woman in Mexico is strangled, raped, dismembered, burned alive, mutilated, beaten to a pulp, and left with bruises and broken bones. A woman's body, another woman. Some woman, a nameless woman. A lifeless body was found." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 133)

Claudia's femicide, the total impunity, the absolute indifference of a society that turn a blind eye to this terrible situation, are openly denounced with the intention of provoking an awakening of consciousness. The visibilization of these crimes is, therefore, a first step to create this awareness, but it is not enough; so, the protagonist hopes to gather the bones and ashes of so many murdered women, so that they themselves express their pain and outrage. The protagonist ends the text with this longing that she hopes to achieve sooner or later: "Even if only part of your ashes is under my bed—your greedy mother wouldn't give them all to me—the way I see it, your bones have been gathered. I hope someday I get to hear you howling in the night." (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 139)

The howl, the most anguished and poignant call, is a cry that must arise from the entrails of the Earth to claim justice, to protect the others, to speak of the pain of having been taken away before their time. It is the bone gatherer's mission to put the stories together, to tell them and "then to let them run free" (De la Cerda, 2024, p. 138) in the hope that, one day, women in Mexico can live a violence-free life.

## CONCLUSION

In the three stories analyzed, "The Smile", "Sequins", and "*La Huesera*", the femicides and transfemicides recounted share their features, namely: extreme violence, sexual abuse, torture and death by asphyxiation. Through them, the author addresses this serious problem experienced by women in Mexico, where they are not subjects of law while, as victims, justice is denied to them. Albeit there is a glimmer of hope in the first two stories, it is also true that, in the last one, such hope vanishes in the face of the large number of cases that occur and go totally unpunished. The howl of thousands of women is the only thing that remains, as an act of complaint that expresses the deepest pain of the victims and which, sooner or later, will be heard as a deafening cry. Thus, violence against women must be made visible to implement real public policies that lead to a change of mentality in Mexican culture. The mission, as the last story points out, might be to gather those bones, those stories, and give them a body, a voice that transforms the roots of a sexist and misogynist society. Let us hope that works such as Dahlia de la Cerda's will bring us closer and closer to that goal.

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