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Nasty Women: The Politics of Female Identity in Antonio Ortuños's *La fila india*

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Abstract: Provoked by the outbreak of femicides in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s, a wave of socially critical narrative has circulated in Mexico since the turn of the twenty-first century. Taking into account this broader corpus of literature, the article contextualizes Antonio Ortuño's 2014 novel *La fila india* within a unique sector of this critical narrative, which highlights the interaction of gender violence and migration. The violent novel exposes an expansive social hierarchy that has developed in response to migration in Mexico, and which discriminates against all women, but targets migrant women in particular. Ortuño steps away from traditional characterizations of the Third World female migrant as a helpless victim, and instead orients his narrative around this figure's means of achieving agency in the face of intense discrimination and violence. The article demonstrates how Ortuño interweaves systemic, symbolic, and subjective violence and subverts the chingón-chingada relationship in order to offer a pessimistic, but revolutionary view of both Mexican and Central American women's future in Mexico. By tracing narrative strategies that normalize violence and uncovering Ortuño's connection of gender and ethnic discrimination, the author invites us to reconsider both the genre of social criticism in Mexico and the politics of female identity in the face of violence.

Keywords: gender violence, female identity, migration, discrimination, social criticism, *La fila india*, Antonio Ortuño

Nasty Women: The Politics of Female Identity in Antonio Ortuño's *La fila india*

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The second scene of Antonio Ortuño's 2014 novel, *La fila india*, describes the murder of a female social worker, Gloria, by a gangster in southern Mexico. In the cryptic paragraphs that follow, we learn that crimes targeting women are normal in the area, and that Gloria's assassination goes uninvestigated and unpunished. Miguel López-Lozano connects this type of crime and its impunity to the "politics of monsters theory", according to which society and its officials blame individual criminal masterminds for acts of violence (instead of linking them to a crooked institutional structure) as a way of justifying their inability to effectively investigate the crimes (López-Lozano 2011: 139f.). Ortuño's text emerges as a powerful rejection of this mentality. The author paints gender violence as a widespread systemic and cultural issue that is not limited to violent individuals or even criminal groups, but rather, runs rampant both in the corrupt justice system and Mexican society at large. Ortuño's text denounces this violence and societal normalization of it, and counteracts what Ignacio Corona calls Mexican society's "state of not-knowing", which is to say, their willful ignorance of the full scope of the violence that surrounds them (Corona 2011: 122). To do so, he exposes diverse manifestations of violence in the lives of both Mexican women and female Central American migrants. Through his comparison of these women's experiences, Ortuño connects gender-based marginalization and the ethnic discrimination that Central American migrants face in Mexico. Violence becomes a medium to explore the relationship between nationality, migration, and female agency. Ultimately, he proposes that female migrants who are triply marginalized by their national origin, lack of legal status, and gender are only able to attain the agency necessary to escape violence by assuming socially dissident or even subhuman behaviors.

La fila india is representative of a continually expanding corpus of social criticism narrative in Mexico. A branch of this type of literature, focused on criminal violence, has been produced in the country since the turn of the twenty-first century. The Juárez femicides of the early 1990s were a catalyst that provoked authors across the globe to create literature that both denounces the murders and fiercely criticizes capitalism and its ill effects on the border zone.[1] Yet, despite

[1] See López-Lozano (2011: 129). Consider, for example, the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño's text *2666* (2004), Chicana writer Alicia Gaspar de Alba's detective fiction-inspired novel, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005), and Latina author Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez* (2008).

the passage of various decades since the initial spike in this anti-female crime in Mexico, Latin American writers continue addressing diverse elements of violence in contemporary narrative because they are still surrounded by dead, and, as Oswaldo Estrada argues: "Porque el escritor latinoamericano de hoy escribe en espacios caóticos, violentados" (2015: 19). Accordingly, socially critical narratives of life and crime in northern Mexico have evolved over time, moving from their critique of NAFTA and neoliberalism to also investigate more closely the role of drug-trafficking networks, as in Orfa Alarcón's *Perra brava* (2010), as well as other manifestations of the violent and illicit lifestyle frequently deemed characteristic of the region.[2] Gradually, Mexican literature has widened its oft-northward gaze. In *La mara* (2004), for example, Rafael Ramírez Heredia writes about gang-related violence perpetrated in the Mexico-Guatemala border zone.

The aforementioned texts are similar in the attention they pay to gender violence, a thematic trend that Ortuño also follows in *La fila india*. The theme's presence in a wide range of narratives demonstrates the prevalence of gender violence in Mexico, as well as Mexican authors' desire to bring attention to the issue. Ortuño's novel criticizes the corrupt migration system, which allows criminal activity targeting women to flourish, and his plot centers on migrant women. However, he not only depicts these women as the perpetual victims of Mexican violence, but also as potential figures of resistance against the current state of oppression. At the beginning of the novel, unidentified criminals set fire to a state-sponsored shelter full of sleeping migrants. The Mexican social worker Irma is sent to the small southern city of Santa Rita to help connect the dead and surviving migrants with their relatives back in Central America. One such migrant is Yein, a young Salvadoran woman who survived the botched massacre. The novel largely focuses on the budding partnership between Irma and Yein, which is based on Irma's desire to get to the bottom of the criminal activity in the region and Yein's thirst for revenge against the gangsters who raped her (during her migratory journey) and murdered her husband (in the fire). However, a side plot in the novel presents the discriminatory musings of Irma's unnamed ex, called "Biempensante", a teacher who lives farther north in Mexico and is racist towards Central Americans. In a disturbing parallel to the suffering that Yein undergoes in her own journey through Mexico, Biempensante rapes a young Honduran migrant who comes to his home seeking assistance, and then turns her into his sex slave.

Through his descriptions of the interactions between his diverse female characters (Irma, Yein, and the anonymous Honduran) and an emphasis on the similarities and differences in

[2] Viviane Mahieux and Oswaldo Zavala argue that although violence is often considered as a stereotypical trait of the narrative of northern Mexico, it is not a literary trope. Rather, it appears in northern Mexican literature because it is representative of the natural context of the region (see Mahieux / Zavala 2012: 10).

their situations, Ortuño interweaves subjective, systemic, and symbolic violence in Mexico.[3] Although Ortuño's three characters are arguably all victims of these various types of violence, each of them, in connection with their Mexican assailant, seems to symbolize a distinct type of violence in particular. Yein, who is raped by gangsters and eventually murdered by the corrupt bureaucrat Vidal, exemplifies subjective violence. In turn, Irma, the social worker who is manipulated by the dishonest employees of the migration control office and ultimately pressured into exile, represents systemic violence. Finally, the Honduran migrant signifies symbolic or cultural violence. In her anonymity, she stands for the 'typical' Central American migrant who is discriminated against for her gender and ethnicity and seen as a deserving target for Mexican rape by 'normal' middle class men such as Biempensante. The varied plotlines that hearken to these distinct types of violence, together with insight into both the victims' and the attackers' perspective, put forth a multifaceted representation of violence as coming from diverse sources. Ortuño hereby avoids what López-Lozano calls the common error of essentializing the issue of gender violence.[4]

What is presented as a common thread throughout *La fila india*, however, is the idea that women become targets for masculine violence due to shifts in their social roles. Various critics explain that although women have become more active participants both in the labor market and in migratory flows internationally in recent decades, this shift in gender dynamics has been met with resistance. This social conflict often manifests in an increase in violence towards women.[5] Women experience violent responses to their efforts to be independent throughout Ortuño's narrative. Yein and the nameless Honduran are both raped during their migratory journey, and Irma is threatened with murder when she attempts to assume a detective role on Yein's behalf. Indeed, this is a common trend in literature addressing migration and social change. Similar episodes of threats, rape, and murder appear in countless other Mexican novels, such as Carmen Galán Benítez's *Tierra marchita* (2002), Alejandro Hernández's *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* (2013) and Ramírez Heredia's *La mara* (2004). The physical and emotional aggressions enacted by Mexican men against Central American migrant women represent men's attempts to manage changing gender roles by forcing women to conform once again to the more comfortable chingón-chingada relationship theorized by Octavio Paz.

Social norm dictates that men can defend their manliness by displaying physical virility,[6] thus also asserting the continued dominance of the chingón-chingada dynamic. Frequently,

[3] I use these terms in accordance with Bourdieu and Žižek's theorizations on violence. Alternative terms with similar meanings are found in Johan Galtung's categorization of violence as "direct", "structural", and "cultural".
[4] See López Lozano (2011: 129f.).
[5] See Corona / Domínguez-Ruvulcaba (2011: 4); López Estrada (2016: 31, 35f.).
[6] See Bourdieu (2001: 12).

these social power struggles play out on the body,[7] translating to rape,[8] but demonstrations of masculine supremacy manifest differently according to diverse factors. In *La fila india*, women's nationality and legal status are important considerations. Mexican women such as Irma are seen as inferior and are manipulated, threatened, and controlled by men, but migrant women like Yein and the anonymous Honduran are raped and murdered. Ortuño details apathetic, emotionless responses to rape throughout the novel to demonstrate how anti-migrant sexual violence has been normalized within Mexican society. While being raped, both Yein and the nameless 'hondureña' embody the passive 'chingada', apparently submissively accepting the abuses committed against them by Mexican men. In Yein's case, even her husband, a fellow migrant, bows his head and tolerates the violence committed against his wife without comment: "Al segundo día, comenzaron a exigirles a las mujeres. Casadas, solteras, viejas o niñas fueron llevadas a zanjas y garitas y violadas. Yein también. Su marido ni siquiera se atrevió a levantar la mirada de sus zapatos cuando la jalaron" (Ortuño 2013: 133). Similarly, when Biempensante violates the Honduran migrant, she is quiet other than informing him that she got an injection in her country before migrating, because she knew she would be raped during the journey.[9] Sharon Pickering explains that "rapes along the border have been systematic and racialized in two main ways: rape as a form of national security and rape as a mechanism of warfare" (2011: 14). In this sense, rape is normalized for use as a tool of control and punishment against those who are perceived as 'other' and out of place, namely, Central American migrant women. Ortuño depicts rape as an expected evil in the lives of both Yein and the Honduran to show that Central American migrants anticipate the discriminatory violence they will face in Mexico. If biological difference between the male and female sexes justifies social stratification,[10] both the ethnic difference between Mexican women and Central American women and their different legal statuses serve analogously as 'natural' dividing forces that rationalize amplified discrimination against Central American migrant women.

In Ortuño's novel, conservative gender roles, nationality, and legal status interact to administrate female movement, a key signifier of agency. Although Irma could arguably be seen as an internal migrant (since she moved to Santa Rita from a different Mexican town), she is a Mexican citizen and thus operates from a position of privilege that the Salvadoran and

[7] Marta Lamas asserts that "[l]a vivencia de lo social ocurre en el cuerpo" (2014: 159). Sharon Pickering contextualizes this to border zones, explaining that "borders are not only marked as lines on maps but are played out in social, racial and gendered contests which are often violent and often played out on the bodies of individuals" (2011: 54).
[8] See Prieur (1996: 104).
[9] See Ortuño (2013: 158f.).
[10] See Bourdieu (2001: 11).

Honduran migrants cannot replicate. As a Mexican, Irma is permitted to move freely between spaces for the most part. She takes her daughter to school, travels at will between the immigration office and the shelter, and has her own private space in her apartment. However, people such as Vidal, other coworkers, and even a server at the café she frequents still consistently examine and question her movements, feeling authorized to do so because Irma is a woman. In contrast to Irma's relative freedom, both migrant characters' movements are regulated and controlled by Mexican men. Yein is not allowed to move around Santa Rita unless an immigration officer escorts her, and when she attempts to flee the city, a group of gangsters curtails her escape.[11] The anonymous Honduran's spatial movement is also restricted, since she is enslaved in Biempensante's home, held captive by the risk of deportation. José Ramón Ortigas connects Yein and the Honduran's inability to freely navigate different spaces to their lack of legal status. As he explains: "[el] estatus legal [de los migrantes] como fugitivos indocumentados los obliga a ocupar espacios clandestinos en los márgenes de la sociedad" (Ortigas 2015: 102). Mexican men take advantage of a lax justice system, using both the threat of physical danger and of deportation to control Yein and the Honduran migrant's movements. The comparison between the various characters' ability (or inability) to move freely uncovers the pressing influence of ethnic discrimination, but also reveals the more subtle current of gender-based repression: this comes to a head at the end of the novel, when Vidal demands that Irma exile herself to the U.S.

A closer examination of how Mexican and Central American women relate to men in Ortuño's novel reveals further disparities in their levels of agency. Across contemporary Mexican narrative there is a pattern of unequal relationships in which Mexican women willingly adopt submissive roles to violent partners. In Alarcón's *Perra brava*, the young student Fernanda is so devoted to her narco boyfriend that she risks jail time for him, and in Ramírez Heredia's *La mara*, the gentle teenager Anamar falls head over heels for her gangster beau, who eventually rapes and then murders her. Similarly to Fernanda and Anamar, Irma also finds herself in tumultuous and violent romantic relationships. While there are traces of this dynamic in her conflicted relationship with her ex, Biempensante, it is explored more deeply in her budding relationship with the immigration officer Vidal, who is her neighbor as well as her coworker. The reader initially observes Vidal's predatory nature towards Irma in descriptions of the man's sexual gaze: when they are first introduced, for example, Vidal casually whispers to Irma that "[a] veces te veo bañarte" (Ortuño 2013: 47). He is also controlling in their work environment; he supervises Irma's work and frequently suggests how she should perform her

[11] See Ortuño (2013: 107f.).

tasks differently. As the plot advances, Vidal's vulturine and domineering nature becomes increasingly prominent in Irma's life. Fernanda, Anamar, and Irma's violent relationships demonstrate a persistent concern in Mexican narrative that Mexican women are at risk even within the context of supposed domestic safety. However, these women's ability to decide the future of their relationships (which offers a sharp contrast to the situation of migrants such as Yein and the anonymous Honduran) is key in constructing Mexican female agency. This presence of a choice suggests that while Mexican women are not free of the taint of gender violence, they do have more options to evade it.

In turn, *La fila india*'s female migrants' relationships with men are wrought with unavoidable symbolic and subjective violence. Throughout their travels, migrant women are objectified by the men who constantly observe them. Alejandro Lugo insists that the border and migratory routes are places of inspection, characterized by a "pervasive pattern of cultural surveillance" and by "supervision and scrutiny" (Lugo 2008: 116, 118). Legal status directs and filters this process of surveillance. Silvia Gianni attests that migrants without visas are made invisible within the Mexican legal system so that the government is not forced to spend the money necessary to grant them true rights, and they are seen within Mexican society as inferior, even subhuman.[12] Yet, Ortuño's novel proposes that the gendered body is also an important factor in how Mexican men perceive Central American migrants. Because Mexican law attempts to ignore undocumented Central American migrants, the women who are already vulnerable due to their gender become perfect victims for male aggressors,[13] who recognize that their crimes against these women will likely never be investigated.[14] In Ortuño's novel, this opportunistic and predatory attitude is exhibited in the way that Mexican men animalize 'other' female migrants like Yein and the Honduran in order to justify their abuse.

The casual animalization of migrant women throughout Ortuño's novel, scattered across multiple villains' thoughts and speech, draws attention to the prevailing mindset that gender violence is 'no big deal' because these women are inferior, and therefore natural targets for violence. For example, Yein and the other migrants in Santa Rita are repetitively called 'moscas', which classifies them as small, unimportant, irksome, and dirty. When the gangster El Morro drives through the town hunting for Yein because he intends to murder her, he coolly

[12] See Gianni (2017: 107f.).

[13] "Migration holds more dangers for women – notably during the journey, when they may experience physical, sexual or other forms of abuse. Travelling to a border is in itself a physical endurance test, in which women are at a social, cultural and physical disadvantage" (Pickering 2011: 61).

[14] López-Lozano addresses this idea in the context of the Northern Mexico border zone, proposing that "[w]hile working for the *maquiladoras*, women become part of the global production machine, making it easier for the murderers to see them as dehumanized objects that are easy to discard" (2011: 135).

speculates: "Se cazan moscas por ocio… pero además se les aplasta por asco, porque han sobrevolado donde no deben y nos irritan. Hay que matar moscas" (Ortuño 2013: 161). There are two ideas at play here: first, that women are objects, sources of masculine entertainment ("ocio"), and second, that female migrants deserve the abuse they receive – they have transgressed, and must be punished.

Biempensante's racist approach toward all Central American migrants, together with his abuse of the Honduran migrant specifically, supplements both notions and also expands the significance of the animalization of Central American migrants in Ortuño's narrative. Throughout the first half of the novel, all of the sections Biempensante narrates include his harsh criticisms of the isthmian travellers. He repeatedly insists on the vast difference between Mexicans and Central Americans, underlining a distinct physical appearance as evidence of Central American inferiority and Mexican superiority: "[No] somos como ellos, como los centroamericanos… somos distintos. Mírame. Dime si parezco" (Ortuño 2013: 52). Initially, he characterizes Central Americans as violent criminals, covered with tattoos,[15] and he later describes them as "sucios", "prietos", with "garras en vez de manos" and "costrosas en cada dedo" (Ortuño 2013: 114). Biempensante thus emphasizes their subhuman features and the ways they are different from him. Both the migrants' ethnicity and their lack of legal status are key factors consigning them to a subordinate, 'othered' position in his (and other Mexicans') worldview. Accordingly, the Mexican professor's early animalization of the young Honduran woman highlights these qualities and stresses her differences from him. He details, for example, that when the woman asks for water: "Se la sirvo en un cacharro metálico que utilizo para calentar las sopas de lata. No quiero sus *labios de lagartija* en la orilla de mis vasos" (Ortuño 2013: 136, my emphasis). The diverse signs of suffering on display on the Honduran's body, such as her chapped lips, supplement Biempensante's negative assessment of undocumented Central American migrants, and his animalization of the woman allows him to further dissociate himself from her, thus enhancing his own standing.

Beyond his typical evaluation of migrants' ethnicity and legal status, however, Biempensante also inspects the features that indicate the Honduran's female gender, which reinforces Ortuño's thesis that these three factors all contribute to a unique marginalization of migrant women. Biempensante's first observation about the Honduran is to the point: "Es mujer: flaca, prieta, joven y sola" (Ortuño 2013: 117). Before consenting to her request to work in his home for money, he takes notes of traits such as "las tetas caídas", and speculates with clear sexual undertones: "Seguro que sabe hacer más de una cosa" (Ortuño 2013: 117). His

[15] See Ortuño (2013: 53f.).

predatory approach to the woman is further evidenced in his use of diminutive names such as "flaquita", which emphasize her smaller figure and vulnerable position. In conjunction, Biempensante's remarks on the Honduran's female gender highlight the increased risk that migrant women face while traveling, an idea that comes to fruition when the teacher rapes the migrant. When considering the way that migrants are animalized throughout Ortuño's narrative, it is curious that Biempensante describes himself in animalistic terms when he finally pounces on the woman and rapes her after finding her in his shower, comparing himself to a leopard, then to a dog. Biempensante's initial self-animalization represents his short-lived acknowledgment that his violent actions are wrong, a crime against humanity. However, his subsequent animalization of the passive migrant, while he imagines himself more actualized as a man, is a reference point for how deeply entrenched symbolic violence that discriminates against migrant women is within Mexican society. In their assumption of the traditional roles of Paz's chingón-chingada relationship, the two characters evidence the stubbornness of cultural violence that allows no space for the Honduran woman's character to evolve out of an animalized 'chingada' state.

Ultimately, it is a combination of Biempensante's knowledge of the Honduran migrant's vulnerable position and his sense of her difference and otherness, encapsulated in his animalization of the woman, which allows his opportunistic sexual deviance to flourish. The Honduran woman's lack of legal status grants Biempensante the perfect means to control his relationship with her. For example, right after raping her, he threatens to have her deported before forcing her to perform oral sex. In turn, viewing the woman as animalistic and passive helps soothe his sense of guilt and even allows him to entertain delusions that he and the woman can have a positive and mutually beneficial relationship, despite the fact that their sexual relations are nonconsensual. Indeed, Biempensante soon begins to imagine that he is a considerate 'owner' or 'caregiver' figure for the woman, whom he compares to his dog, Rafa: "[S]uelo darle manotazos cuando algo cae al piso. No un golpe ni mucho menos, un simple roce de dedos, un suave correctivo como los que le daba al Rafa cuando era un cachorro […] Le acaricio la cabeza […] Le cepillo los dientes" (Ortuño 2013: 178). The direct comparison between the migrant woman and Biempensante's dog functions to put on display the darker side of Mexico's traditional patriarchy. Furthermore, when we continue to consider Biempensante's violent treatment of the anonymous Honduran as a parallel to the Santa Rita immigration office's manipulative treatment of Yein (as represented through the character Vidal), this comparison also works to subtly criticize Mexican migration policy. The metaphorical transformation of the Honduran migrant into something akin to Biempensante's

pet offers a pointed jab at the corrupt government that claims to care for female victims of violence, but in actuality dehumanizes them by enabling a twisted system of social stratification.

Through his meticulous descriptions of Biempensante's sexual acts, Ortuño underscores the idea (initially introduced through El Morro's character) that women are a source of masculine amusement. Ortuño describes how the Mexican teacher excitedly abuses the woman, musing, "Eso me divierte. También hacerla arrodillar e introducirle todos los objetos imaginables para el caso. Lo acepta con una pasividad animal que recuerda la de las vacas en la ordeña" (Ortuño 2013: 179). The novel presents diverse forms of violence against women, ranging from murder to rape, but El Morro and Biempensante's specific acts of violence are particularly meaningful. The gangster's caustic characterization of migrants as "moscas" and Biempensante's violent penetration of the Honduran's orifices both exhibit masculine power over women and migrant women's role as a source of entertainment for men in Mexico. Ortuño reinforces the concept of male control over female identity and agency in the use of vocabulary and verb conjugations that emphasize Biempensante's and other males' 'yo' actions, such as "*me* divierte" (Ortuño 2013: 179), or later, "[l]a *he* convertido en un artefacto" (Ortuño 2013: 195, my emphasis). In addition to diversifying Ortuño's portrayal of gender violence, the progressive objectification and abuse with which Biempensante treats the Honduran migrant also symbolically represents the increasingly worse conditions that Central American migrants, and especially women, face in Mexico.

Despite the extreme level of the abuse perpetrated by figures like El Morro and Biempensante, migrants such as Yein and the anonymous Honduran are unsurprised by the violence they confront in Mexico, as evidenced by the Honduran's perpetual passivity. In contrast, Mexican women like Irma struggle over how to cope with their marginalized position once they recognize it. By elaborating on how his female characters react differently to discrimination, Ortuño contributes to a growing body of Mexican novels that explore how both male and female characters negotiate power structures and marginalization in a nation ravaged by violence.[16] The women's varied responses to violence also further dissect the normalization of gender violence. Irma's shock to learn of the atrocities that migrants endure in small towns like Santa Rita highlights the aforementioned "state of not-knowing" that Corona declares to be widespread in Mexico (2011: 122).[17] Beyond emphasizing Irma's initial ignorance, Ortuño

[16] See, for example, Alarcón's *Perra brava* (2010) and Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* (2004).

[17] Gaspar de Alba employs a similar narrative strategy in *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* when she describes her protagonist Ivon's surprise upon reading a newspaper article about the outbreak of femicides on the Juárez-El Paso border zone.

underscores the danger of being uninformed about gender violence by describing Irma's steady deterioration into panic and paranoia as she realizes the reality of the peril she faces.[18] In contrast, Yein and the Honduran migrant's ostensibly passive acceptance of their rape not only stresses how common this sort of sexual violence against migrants is, but also how desperate they are to migrate. Pickering explains that "[f]leeing persecution, serious harm, threat of violence or insufferable poverty often requires submitting or at least risking those same or greater harms in order to escape", which is to say that Central American migrant women are aware of the probability that they will be raped, but decide that it is worth the risk if they can make it to the United States (Pickering 2011: 36). Ortuño's female migrants' stoicism becomes a reference point not only for the normalization of violence, but also for the determination of all Central American migrants to achieve a better life through migration.

Considering, as López-Lozano observes, that in much of the narrative exploring gender violence, Third World women "are portrayed exclusively as victims, not as subjects endowed with agency to potentially contribute to the betterment of their working and living conditions" (López-Lozano 2011: 148), it is groundbreaking that Ortuño creates female migrant characters with agency. In his illustration of Yein and the 'hondureña's' ability to act independently to help themselves, Ortuño challenges the status quo of solidarity literature. It is not just Yein and the Honduran's agency that is significant, however, but also their means of attaining it. Similarly to other Mexican narrative, Ortuño's novel emphasizes how gender roles are changing in contemporary Mexico, as exemplified in the single mother Irma who relocates cross-country for work, and the female migrants who travel alone. But through his portrayal of the two migrants' violent response to the suffering they undergo, Ortuño hearkens to a fresh shift in female gender roles, in which women who are victims of violence then become perpetrators of it, flipping the traditional chingón-chingada dynamic on its head.[19] In their rejection of the chingada identity, Yein and the Honduran become candidates for a new type of self-identification: Marta Lamas asserts that gender identity is constructed by social expectations,[20] while Judith Butler describes identity as a performance, made up of one's actions.[21] Taking both of these ideas into account, I would argue that the migrant women craft new, active identities by finding a balance between how society sees them (as subhuman sexual objects), and how

[18] Other authors have described how characters are negatively transformed due to the violence they experience in their daily lives. For example, Nora Guzmán Sepúlveda characterizes the novel *Perra brava* as a sort of inverted *bildungsroman*, in which the protagonist Fernanda descends into a lifestyle and persona of increasingly intense violence when she realizes her own power over her drug lord partner (See Guzmán Sepúlveda 2011: xxxiii).
[19] This unconventional depiction of a strong, independent, and violent woman is also seen in Alarcón's *Perra brava*.
[20] See Lamas (2002: 101f.).
[21] See Butler (1999: 33).

they are able to react to this assigned role. Hence, Yein and the Honduran migrant conform to the animalized identity to which Mexican society has condemned them by manifesting subhuman behavior, but simultaneously 'perform', subverting this bestial role to attain agency and progress on their own goals.

Both Yein and the Honduran migrant cling to physical vestiges of the barbaric migrant identity by which Mexican society characterizes them. This narrative strategy ironically plays on the manner that aggressors like Biempensante 'other' the migrants by indicating their corporeal differences. Yein stubbornly maintains the predominant physical trait that represents her sufferings – her shaved head – because "[n]o quería dejar de verse como la mujer que había subido al tren. No podía permitir que otra, diferente, cumpliera su condena" (Ortuño 2013: 81). Meanwhile, the anonymous Honduran proudly wears the old watch she stole from Biempensante, who once accused her of being a potential thief. Yein and the Honduran's mutual desire to sustain the physical features that symbolize their marginalization demonstrates a recognition that it is only within their subhuman, migrant identity that they can attain agency. As depicted in Paz's gender paradigm, women are perpetually assumed inferior to men, but Ortuño's migrants are able to escape this dynamic by embodying a subhuman and animalized role rather than a passive female one. Ortuño describes the Salvadoran woman on the revenge prowl: "Trancos rápidos, de *bestia* que caza. Porque ahora caza. No iba a ser una mosca aplastada toda la vida ¿no? Nadie nace para eso" (2013: 191, my emphasis). The active bestial identity that Yein embodies distinguishes her completely from the passive 'chingada' role, giving her a cool analytical mind as she cuts a gas line at the bar where several criminals are partying and prepares to set the place on fire. In a parallel model of animalistic destruction, the Honduran migrant loots Biempensante's belongings and wrecks his home before fleeing her imprisonment, defecating in his bed and leaving the dog perfectly bathed and brushed in an ironic play on the notion of humanity versus bestiality.

Yein and the Honduran's inability to act independently outside of the subhuman role to which Mexican society consigns them is of essential importance to Ortuño's critical message. The idea that Yein and the Honduran's singular hope to escape from violence is to take on a more 'chingón' and violent role themselves implies a pessimistic perspective of the possibility for peace and wellbeing in migratory Mexico. Ortuño depicts Mexico as wrought with cyclical violence that is secretive, contagious, and frighteningly pervasive. The dramatic conclusion conveys the message that violence is everywhere in Mexico; it is unavoidable. Through this violent denouement, in which the migrant women's dilemmas can only be 'solved' by bestial acts, Ortuño suggests that Mexico is so dangerous to women that female migrants are unable to

maintain their female identity and survive. Given no other alternative, migrant women embody the very stereotypes that 'justify' Mexican discrimination against them: they become animals, thieves, and violent criminals. By applying this idea to two distinct Central American characters and also depicting different fates for his three female characters, Ortuño reasserts his mapping of gender-based and ethnic discrimination, and solidifies his criticism of state- and socially-sponsored gender violence in Mexico. In contrast with Irma's survival (albeit in exile), Yein's death and the Honduran's harrowing experience at Biempensante's hands, along with the women's violent transformations, are the fundamental signifiers of the discriminatory social hierarchy in migratory Mexico. Ultimately, however, Ortuño's message is the same for all women. The violence enacted against the three characters and the limited options they have to escape it (or their inability to do so) demonstrate that there is no safe place for women in Mexico.

La fila india forms part of a growing body of socially critical narratives that address themes of migration and gender violence in conjunction. Within this 'genre", Ortuño's novel is innovative, in part, because of his multifaceted exploration of Mexican violence. His text includes systemic, symbolic, and subjective violence, and he allows his reader to see these distinct types of violence manifest through both the aggressors' and victims' eyes. The core of Ortuño's critical message, however, lies in his suggestion that gender violence has become so terrible in Mexico that women cannot simply be women and survive there. This assessment becomes more complex in his exposure of how gender and ethnic discrimination interact to make life in Mexico difficult for Mexican women, but impossible for Central American female migrants. The novel is a dark reflection on the marginalization of all women of the borderlands, and how this manifests in a unique experience of animalization and sexual violence (and often, death) for Central American migrants who traverse Mexico as an extended border zone. Ortuño's depiction of the bestial agency that migrant women are privy to in response to this violence is revolutionary in his critical evaluation about the affects of Mexican violence on female identity and agency. Through this subversive animalization of his female characters, the Mexican novelist criticizes solidarity narrative that depicts Third World women as helpless victims, but also offers a desolate prognosis for the options that migrant women have in their travels through Mexico. Today, Central American migrants continue to enter Mexico, hoping to reach the United States, and corruption and discrimination against them is only growing in the face of increasing pressure on Mexico to curtail isthmian entrance to the U.S. Therefore, it is of upmost importance to continue reading and producing criticism that explores and denounces the type of violence that *La fila india* unveils.

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