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**Amamos Diferente:**  
**Creating the Imagined Lesbian Community in**  
**Rosamaría Roffiel's *Amora*, Sara Levi Calderón's**  
***Dos mujeres* and Reyna Barrera's**  
***Sandra secreto amor.***

**Morna Dick (MA Hons)**

**A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree**  
**of Master of Philosophy in the University of Glasgow**

**Hispanic Studies Department**

**Faculty of Arts**

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## **DEDICATION**

To my family for their continuous encouragement and support, to Karen  
por ser mi cheerleader personal and to Rena for being there always.

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## INTRODUCTION

...digan lo que digan, las mujeres del futuro van a tener que agradeceremos muchas cosas a nosotras las pioneras del decir que no, del atrevernos a pensar y a desafiar, a vivir solas, a ser independientes, a correr riesgos, a negarnos a ser objetos sexuales, a enfrentarnos con una nueva mentalidad a una sociedad secular y patriarcal.

*Amora.*

Rosamaría Roffiel<sup>1</sup>

It is the creation of a new, imagined community expressing lesbian desire through literature within the context of Mexican secular and patriarchal society which this thesis intends to address. *Amora* by Rosamaría Roffiel (1989) and *Dos Mujeres* by Sara Levi Calderón (1990) were the first two explicitly lesbian novels published in Mexico. The third novel I will address is Reyna Barrera's *Sandra, Secreto Amor* (2001) written a decade after the first two novels. I propose to discuss how the three novels address lesbian love by exploring the creation of lesbian centred communities, the subversion of nationalistic symbolism and gender norms and the depiction of difference by negotiating the action of 'coming out' in both public and private spaces through performativity and passing techniques. Aspects of nation creation, imagined community and myth making will also be addressed as each of the novels explore their characters changing personal sexual identities.

The silence that surrounds Mexican lesbian writing, which led to the first openly lesbian novel being published only at the end of the 1980s and which allows lesbian desire to continue be classified as 'secreto amor' as late as the turn of the twenty-first century in Mexico calls to be examined. Lesbian texts have been denied authority and their

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<sup>1</sup>Rosamaría Roffiel, *Amora: La llave la tengo yo*, horas y Horas, 1989, p. 42.

difficulty to obtain enhances their silencing. Despite the fact that *Amora* was a best seller in Mexico the year it was published and remains popular within Latin American lesbian circles today I found it hard to track down to buy, eventually ordering it online second hand from a Spanish buyer who would only deliver to a friend in Spain. It was equally difficult to buy *Dos Mujeres* and *Sandra, Secreto Amor* both of which I was only able to order as ex-library copies from the United States. I could only imagine that my location in Scotland was greatly influential and that the texts would have been much easier to come across in Mexico and the United States. However, Elena Martínez supports my findings when she states that:

[...] one of the problems encountered by readers and critics interested in Latin American lesbian literature is the unavailability of the texts...The literary canon, hiding its political agenda behind a mask of good literary taste, a supposed objectivity, and the pursuit of a non-ideological discourse, has overlooked texts that present a lesbian perspective. Lesbian writing has not been taken into consideration because of its social implications and because it presents a system in direct opposition to the male tradition. The canon, with its male-oriented view and through a process of silencing ‘others’ – in this case writers who present lesbian issues – has allowed the literary establishment to remain unchallenged.<sup>2</sup>

The relative lack of critical attention to Mexican lesbian texts can thus be explained by a bias in the male-centred and hetero-centred literary criticism academy, although that has been changing in the last few decades as I will discuss later in this chapter. There are various critics who have discussed *Amora* and *Dos Mujeres* in depth and to whom I am indebted for their valuable insights.<sup>3</sup> I have not however found any articles written by critics on *Sandra, Secreto Amor* and only one outdated lesbian chat room forum in

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<sup>2</sup> Elena M. Martínez, *Lesbian Voices from Latin America: Breaking Ground*, New York: Garland, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Nuala Finnegan, *Ambivalence, Modernity, Power: Women and Writing in Mexico since 1986*, Peter Lang, 2007; Elena M. Martínez, *Lesbian Voices from Latin America: Breaking Ground*, New York: Garland, 2006; Norma Mogrovejo, *Un Amor Que Se Atrevió A Decir Su Nombre*, Plaza y Valdes, S.A. de C.V., Enero 2000; Deborah Shaw, Erotic or Political: Literary Representations of Mexican Lesbians, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. 1996.

which the author, Reyna Barrera, very briefly discusses the novel around the date of its publication. The print I have indicates that there were only one thousand copies published in its first edition in 2001 and this may account for the lack of critical attention it has received. The lack of publication of homosexual texts can be accounted for by the fear of being labelled as gay or lesbian within a society where homophobia is pervasive. Deborah Shaw comments in her article ‘Literary Representations of Mexican Lesbians’ that ‘while silence is a strategy which has enabled writers to avoid social and academic rejection, this self-imposed censorship has contributed to gay and lesbian invisibility.’<sup>4</sup> Whilst both literary critics and authors avoid lesbian topics to protect themselves from homophobia in the academy, the lesbian and feminist movements have been influential in raising visibility as I shall now discuss.

In the article ‘(Be)coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics’ by Shane Phelan it is asserted that, ‘lesbians have been denied the right to be heard not just by forced silence but also by having ‘lesbian’ voices and words deprived of authority.’<sup>5</sup> In order to discuss the lesbian literary movement it is important to contextualise it within the larger lesbian and feminist movements in Latin America. The LGBT<sup>6</sup> movement in Mexico emerged in the 1970s around the same time as other human rights and liberal social movements became increasingly visible in the Latin American continent. Norma Mogrovejo situates the lesbian and homosexual movement in Latin America as ‘motivado por las diversas transformaciones políticas, sociales, culturales e ideológicas que acontecieron en la década de los sesenta y cuya mayor expresión se evidenció en

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Shane Phelan, (Be)coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics, *Signs*, Vol.18, No. 4. *Theorizing Lesbian Experience*, Summer 1993, p.16.

<sup>6</sup> I use LGBT to stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.



1968 en las revueltas juveniles de diversos lugares del mundo.’<sup>7</sup> In Mexico the student demonstration and subsequent massacre in la Plaza de Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco in October of 1968 was a poignant marker of that change which not only affected the political stance in regards action towards social change but also the attitude of young people and socially marginalised groups.

Influenced and encouraged by the actions and manifestos of European and North American feminist and lesbian movements, Latin American groups became stronger and joined in solidarity across the continent. Aware that lesbian issues were being silenced within the larger feminist groups due to a heterosexual bias arising from a fear of being further associated with lesbianism (which some feminists feared would further marginalise them in the public arena), lesbian feminists formed separate groups which would better serve their interests whilst allowing them to remain involved in the wider feminist movement. In 1977 Lesbos, the first lesbian feminist group in Mexico was formed.<sup>8</sup> The description of the new lesbian group subsequently published in the Mexican feminist journal ‘Fem’ read, ‘Lesbos se levanta como una organización política, junto con las luchas de todos los sectores marginales, contra los sistemas socioeconómicos represivos y por la construcción de una nueva organización social.’<sup>9</sup> Lesbos, and the other lesbian groups which were subsequently formed, thus had their goal as fighting for the rights of all marginalised groups with a feminist, lesbian focus.

The early 1980s marked the launch of the first feminist *encuentros* held in Latin America with feminist and lesbian groups from various countries coming together and

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<sup>7</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, 2000, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, 2000, p.75.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Grupos Feministas en México’. *Fem* Vol. 11 núm. 5 octubre-diciembre 1977 pp27-32 in Norma Mogrovejo, 2001.

forming allegiances across borders. In 1983, at the second *encuentro*, which was held in Lima, the first workshops which specifically addressed lesbianism were influential in increasing the visibility of lesbian issues within the movement. The interest in the lesbian workshops meant that subsequent *encuentros* allowed further discussion and a greater awareness of lesbian issues within the feminist movement whilst also denoting a sense of legitimacy to minority concerns.<sup>10</sup> These meetings also encouraged individuals to go back to their respective countries and form new groups and to challenge heterosexual prejudices within the existing feminist groups. Norma Mogrovejo describes the first national *encuentro* of lesbians in Mexico, which took place in 1987 in Guadalajara, as inciting within her feelings of liberation and solidarity at the discovery of ‘a variety of lesbian spaces...a community that made lesbian existence visible and liveable.’<sup>11</sup> Mogrovejo describes the adoption of the ideology that ‘*the private is political*’ which meant that lesbian activists were defending sexual freedom as political freedom.<sup>12</sup> However, depicting the emergence and success of these lesbian *encuentros* does not intend to underplay the continuing homophobia that exists within Mexican society which undoubtedly affects the lesbian population and which led to the first regional Latin American lesbian and gay conference in 1991 being cancelled in Guadalajara due to opposition by the municipal government.<sup>13</sup>

The increased visibility of lesbianism in legitimised areas can be seen as indicative of a changing social climate in Latin America during this period. Shaw states that this change is evidenced in the publication of two of the first and most famous Latin

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<sup>10</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, p. 52 and Norma Mogrovejo, 2000, p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, Immigration, Self-Exile and Sexual Dissidence, *Passing Lines*, Brad Epps, Keja Valens and Bill Johnson Gomez Eds., Harvard University Press, 2005 p.411.

<sup>12</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, 2005, p. 413.

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, p. 53.

American lesbian texts: Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rosi's *La nave de los locos* (1984) and Silvia Molloy's *En Breve Carcel* (1981) (Molloy was resident in the United States at the time of the novel's publication).<sup>14</sup> These were, of course, not the first examples of female authored Latin American literature which could be seen to have a lesbian voice. Writers who encoded their 'lesbian sensibility' in socially acceptable forms have been part of Latin American literary tradition at various points in its history. Writing in ways in which the lesbian aspect of their work would only be visible to those with an understanding these authors gave, albeit disguised, a visibility to lesbianism as a practice which is not recently conceived. In *Tortilleras* Janis Breckenridge refers us to Lillian Faderman's description of the use of codes in the silencing of lesbianism. She concludes that:

[...] the lesbian writer has often purposively encoded her lesbian subject matter so that it is veiled to the majority of the population yet often decipherable by the reader who has knowledge of the writer's homosexuality and understands her need to hide her lesbian material...whether accomplished through deliberate gender suppression...double entendres, or other narrative tricks, the widespread use of encoding points to universal homophobia which forces writers to obscure lesbian themes.<sup>15</sup>

Elena Martínez cites the work of seventeenth century Carmelite nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's poetry and that of the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral as exemplary of this type of encoding and examines how well known critics have attempted to conceal their lesbianism.<sup>16</sup> The technique of encoding sexual desire within literature is not merely a

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<sup>14</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Faderman, Lillian, Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present, New York: Penguin Books, 1994 in Janis Breckenridge, 'Outside The Castle Walls', *Tortilleras*, Lourdes Torres and Inmaculada Pertusa Eds., (Philadelphia) Temple Press, 2003, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> Elena M. Martínez, 2006, pp. 12-13. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) was a Mexican Carmelite nun who is well known for her love poetry and essays which had a feminist perspective and were female orientated. Her love poetry which was written for the Countess of Paredes and the Marquise de Laguna

historical device and continues to be employed in works where the writer fears revealing their sexuality ‘publically’ or does not wish it to be understandable to everyone. A writer may also encode his/her work in order to limit accessibility to certain individuals who are ‘in the know’ and aware of the codes in use. Whether referring to sexual identities or practices, ethnic, cultural or linguistic particularities, who should have full accessibility to a text is often due to the author’s use of encoding.

I would like to briefly mention the work of Mexican writer and activist Nancy Cárdenas. It is impossible to ignore Cárdenas’ poetry, plays and activism within the Mexican lesbian and feminist movements. Her collection of poetry *Cuadernos de amor y desamor* which encompasses her writings collected between 1968 and 1993 addresses the theme of homosexuality and lesbianism in an open and celebratory manner.<sup>17</sup> Within political activism she was a strong voice and active participant, founding the Homosexual Liberation Front in the early 1970s and seen as many as the representative figurehead of Mexican lesbian activism.<sup>18</sup> We can undoubtedly see her influence both in the activist work of Roffiel and in her novel *Amora*. We can also situate Roffiel, Calderón and Barrera within a larger Mexican lesbian tradition which include Sabina Berman’s book of poetry *Lunas* (1998), the novels of Rudy Sánchez’s *Los nombres del aire*, Amparo Jiménez’s *Bajo mi relieve* (1990) and *no me alcanza* (1996) and Victoria

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can be read as addressing lesbian desire. Her lesbianism has been argued against by critics, in particular Nobel Prize Winner Octavio Paz.

Recent letters written by Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) to her secretary Doris Dana suggest that they may have had a long love affair. See: Pedro Pablo Zegers B’s books *Gabriela Mistral: Niña errante. Cartas a Doris Dana*. Mistral, in other poetic works, often depicts frustration, marginalisation and loneliness, avoiding gendered pronouns, which has been debited to the death of a male lover in her early years as a writer. More recently critics have sought to explore the lesbian sensibility in the works of both Sor Juana and Gabriela Mistral and to view them as part of a lesbian literary tradition in Latin America. See: Fiol-Matta, Licia, *Queer Mother for the Nation: the State and Gabriela Mistral*, Minneapolis, MN: London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, 2000, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Rafael de la Dehesa, *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies*, Duke University Press, 2010, p.151.

Enríquez's books of short stories *Con fugitivo paso* (1997). Reyna Barrera has also published three books of poetry *Material del olvido* (1992), *A flor de piel* (1996) and *Siete Lunas para Sandra* (1997).<sup>19</sup> It can be seen that the texts I have chosen to explore are not the only lesbian centred texts to be published by Mexican female writers and that there exists a small canon of lesbian texts published in the last two decades of the twentieth century. I have, however, chosen not to discuss these writers or the chosen writers' other works in preference of an in depth exploration of the three novels chosen, Roffiel's *Amora* (1989), Calderón's *Dos Mujeres* (1990) and Barrera's *Sandra, Secreto Amor* (2001).

In order to discuss the gender norms which Mexican lesbians are writing against I would like to turn towards the United States and to the recent history of Chicana lesbian discourse. The work of Chicana lesbian theorists and novelists in working against male-prescribed representations of women and their subversion of mythical female figures, in particular that of Gloria Anzaldúa and her *mestiza* consciousness is useful in the later examination of the depiction of lesbian identity in the three Mexican texts addressed. The 1970's and 1980's heralded the appearance of a great deal of work by Latin American women in the United States articulating their resistance to dominant Chicano discourse which was in itself a struggle against feelings of displacement by an immigrant population with a culture of its own and its existence within North American society. Benedict Anderson's study on nation-building indicates a solidarity and a perception of commonness felt between nation members which leads them to form what he calls 'fraternal bonds' within an imagined community, solidified in 'the nation'. Anderson asserts that nation-building is 'closely linked to print communities formed

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<sup>19</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, 2000, p. 48.

around newspapers and novels that nurture the preconceived notions that groups have of themselves as they wish to be, as they imagine themselves to be.<sup>20</sup> Anderson's theory will be discussed in depth in relation to the creation of a 'lesbian community' in the novels in Chapter One on Writing a New Imagined Community. At this moment however it suffices to note that the Chicano<sup>21</sup> imagined community has a strong sense of identity and was given credence by the document which identified the Chicano nation with the mythical origin land of Aztlán.

The Chicano poet-theorist Alurista wrote the document the 'Plan Espiritual de Aztlán' in order to define the Chicano people as belonging to a common culture and originating from a territory that had been held in common in a historical time. Aztlán was 'a mytho-historical place of origin from whence the Aztecs had set out in search of a new homeland...Serving as the basis for the reclamation of the original homeland, Aztlán was indeed an imagined community.'<sup>22</sup> The 'Plan Espiritual de Aztlán' declared the Chicano nation for brothers who link hands with all others in the bronze continent. The implication is that all Mexican's (and in particular Chicanos who have returned to the spiritual homeland located in present day United States territory bordering Mexico) are linked through their shared Indian heritage. But it is a gender biased description which repeatedly uses the word 'brother' as a term for the whole Chicano nation and, to use Richard Gilman's reference to sexism in language, where language is indicative of the hierarchal structure of male-female relationships, 'demonstrates that male dominance, the idea of masculine superiority, is perennial, institutional and rooted at the deepest

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<sup>20</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> At the moment I am using Chicano to refer to the wider Chicano community including both men and women.

<sup>22</sup> Roberta Fernández, 'Abriendo caminos in the Brotherland: Chicana Writers Respond to the Ideology of Literary Nationalism', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1994, pp. 23-50, p. 25.

levels of our historical experience.’<sup>23</sup> The importance of a consideration of how age and sex are located within the picture of national identity is seen here to be imperative. Whilst men are seen as at the centre of the Chicano nation, of their imagined community of whose core myth is Aztlán, women and children can and do identify with this idea of nation even though they are not its representative subjects.<sup>24</sup> As Fernández declares, ‘Chicano cultural nationalists adhered to the traditional perception of women’s roles espoused by modern nationalist movement in general, which are characterised by a defensive cultural conservatism and a tendency to view women’s liberation as a threat to the traditional institution of the family and to the ingrained female subordination found in patriarchal system.’<sup>25</sup> The commonalities between Chicano views on the place of women in society and those of Mexican cultural (male-centred) views come from the same cultural heritage and can be seen as indicative of the treatment of women in Mexico.

The Chicana movement in the 1970s was influenced in a similar way to the Mexican feminist movement, acknowledging women’s place as a second class citizen in the fight for social justice. However, they were also fighting for their place as women within the newly formed Chicano movement and emerging Chicano nation.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the Chicana feminists of the 1970s remained committed to the general goals of the Chicano cultural nationalists while they attempted to fight for greater equality to women. It was the pioneering work of Anzaldúa and Cherie Moraga and the publication in 1981 of

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Alleen Pace Nilsen, ‘Linguistic Sexism as a Social Issue’ in *Sexism and Language*, Alleen Pace Nilsen *et al.*, eds., Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1997, 5 in Roberta Fernández, 1994, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Roberta Fernández, 1994, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Roberta Fernández, 1994, p. 29.

*This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*<sup>27</sup> which opened up an alternative feminist discourse in both Chicana feminist discourse and wider feminist discourse in the United States. In Anzaldúa's subsequent landmark work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) she declared that 'the culture expects women to show greater acceptance and commitment to the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males.'<sup>28</sup>

I will now briefly discuss the normative roles and symbols of women used within Mexican and Chicano cultural discourse as examined by Anzaldúa. Chapter Three on Subverting Norms will discuss how the novels write against these traditional roles but for now I attempt to outline the image of women which is supported by traditional, patriarchal, and nationalist discourse.

In *Passing Lines* (2005) the editors in their introduction identify 'the complicity between ideologies of national identity and the enforcement of sexual norms in the way in which standards for proper sexual conduct can be tied to universal or timeless values believed to be intrinsic to a particular national identity.'<sup>29</sup> The three most potent symbols of women in the imagination and construction of Mexican national identity are the Virgen de Guadalupe, la Malinche and La Llorona. The Mexican woman is simultaneously represented as the eternal mother figure, chaste and eternally bound to the religious hierarchy of the Catholic Church through association with Mexico's own Virgen de Guadalupe; with *la chingada* or Malinche as the betrayer of the indigenous population and the origin of the mestizo people through Malinche's association with

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<sup>27</sup> Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa Eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Book, 2007:1987, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> Brad Epps, Keja Valens and Bill Johnson Gomez Eds. *Passing Lines: Sexuality and Immigration*, Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 19.



Spanish Cortés; and as insane and ever suffering through her association with the mythical figure of la Llorona, a woman punished by being forced to wander the night wailing in search of her missing children.<sup>30</sup> Yarbrow-Bejarano describes how Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* points to the power which these cultural figures has been bestowed in repressing Mexican women and how the true identities of the figures (which I shall address in Chapter Four) have been subverted. She identifies their roles as, ‘*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, [and] *la Llorona* to make us long suffering people.’<sup>31</sup> Not only does the association of women with these figures encourage the *virgen/puta* dichotomy by suggesting that women should be dutiful mothers within a heterosexual framework or risk bringing shame upon their nation but it also means that ‘women are made to feel like total failures if they don’t marry and have children.’<sup>32</sup> It is within this cultural framework that the lesbian authors studied within this thesis strive to articulate difference and to subvert these dominant images of women which dominate the Mexican cultural imagination.

It is hoped that this previous discussion has allowed us to view the novels within the wider context of socially and historically influenced publishing of lesbian centred texts in Mexico and Latin America. Through an analysis of the novels of Roffiel, Calderón and Barrera I shall examine how they approach the construction of a lesbian centred world through their negotiation of nationalism and the imagined community, coming out and passing, and performativity and subversion of traditional roles and myths.

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<sup>30</sup> Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, *The Lesbian Body in Latin Cultural Production, ¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, Emile L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith Eds., Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Yarbrow-Bejarano, 1995, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987:1997, p. 39.

One common aspect of the novels is a tendency to concentrate on middle class, educated women and not the subaltern figure often associated with the Eurocentric imagining of Mexican women. All of the central female characters have left the family home and live independently, furthermore this shift from the familial sphere to individual living is explored in depth by each author. All three novels also have biographical elements or are largely biographical. Calderón herself is a Jewish woman from an immigrant family who studied sociology and who embraced lesbianism later in life similarly to her protagonist Valeria in *Dos Mujeres*. Roffiel in writing *Amora* includes various details of her life within the novel. Among other themes her participation in various feminist movements within 1970s Mexico and her writing for *Fem* magazine are parodied by Guadalupe. Her prologue to the novel begins, ‘Sí, en efecto, esta es una novela muy autobiográfica. Casi todas las personajes existen. Casi todos los nombres fueron cambiados. Y casi todo ocurrió realmente.’<sup>33</sup> And Barrera’s introduction likewise admits that, ‘Escribirla fue una tarea que me llevó a recordar o reconstruir a capricho, para darle gusto al deseo, como la historia de amor aquí planteada.’<sup>34</sup> All the novels include violent scenes by men against the lesbian protagonists although how they figure that violence is different in each case. *Amora* deals with the rape, or threat of rape, against women as a constant spectre on the boundary of lesbian existence, *Dos Mujeres* addresses violence within the family as punishment for sexual dissidence and in *Sandra, Secreto Amor* it is a lesbian character who carries the threat of violence (although this violence is represented as a masculine quality, something which will be discussed later in Chapter Three).

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<sup>33</sup> Roffiel, 1989:1997 – note her use of the word ‘personajes’ instead of the male identified ‘personajes’.

<sup>34</sup> Barrera, 2001.

The issue of public secrecy and passing is also addressed in all three novels. Public secrecy is the phrase that Roger Lancaster in *Passing Lines* has used to describe the space within Mexican culture where a person can be simultaneously *out* and *in the closet* as regards their sexuality depending on the concept of public secrecy. Lancaster argues that homosexuality should be considered differently within the Latin American context than within Northern Europe and the United States. Whereas in Northern Europe and the United States individuality and autonomy are valued, the family is the focus of Latin American identity with the majority of sons and daughters remaining within the family home until they are married. The action of coming out not only has implications for the individual but also for their extended family within community settings.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, there often exists a sort of private acceptance where it is known that an individual practices homosexual relations but this is not acknowledged publically. In public secrecy, ‘one is neither completely hidden nor, short of catastrophe, completely exposed, but always, it would seem, on the cusp of the two: concealed within what is revealed, and revealed within what is concealed; installed in a liminal space of magical transformation and creative spectacle but also of terror, madness and paranoia.’<sup>36</sup> The idea is that, within Latin American tradition, the taboo is not against knowing that someone is having same sex relations but against speaking, as public acknowledgement would effect not only the individual but would also implicate the family. This is most explicitly encountered in the public ‘coming out’ of Valeria in *Dos Mujeres* by which her family feel she brings shame upon them but is also pertinent to the discussion of the secrecy in *Sandra*, *Secreto Amor* and within the different public,

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<sup>35</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, Immigration, Self-Exile, and Sexual Dissidence, *Passing Lines: Sexuality and Immigration*, Brad Epps, Keja Valens, and Bill Johnson González Eds., 2005, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts: London, England.

<sup>36</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, Tolerance and Intolerance in Sexual Cultures in Latin America, *Passing Lines: Sexuality and Immigration*, Brad Epps, Keja Valens and Bill Johnson Gomez Eds., Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 263.

private and familial spheres of being openly lesbian within *Amora*. Differently to the generally accepted concept within Euro-American that whoever has sex with someone of the same sex is a homosexual in Latin America, ‘it matters not only with whom, but how and in what context, one has sex.’<sup>37</sup> The result is the conception of a malleable space in which different rules apply to different spaces and contexts.

Dealing with difference and constructing a lesbian identity and community are considered within the novels, although these are articulated using different methods. I liken the construction of an imagined lesbian community with Anderson’s imagined community as a theory of forming the nation and Homi Bhabha’s theory of nation as produced by particular historical and social situations. I will also examine the idea of refuge and asylum as important in the construction of a lesbian community. The right to asylum in a particular community is aligned with a form of passing which identifies an individual as part of or as outside of a particular group. Adrienne Rich’s suggestion of a lesbian continuum will be utilised in my examination of the community aspect of the novels, where solidarity and shared experiences between women are what strengthen and shape community bonds. Whilst *Amora* embraces the idea of a lesbian continuum, the rejection of bonds with other lesbians in Calderón’s *Dos Mujeres* can be seen to further accentuate the isolation that the couple experience from the wider heterosexual community and it is only through a visit to the United States and an eventual move to Paris through which they are able to seek asylum in what, it is suggested, is assumed by the author to be a more liberal and accepting society.

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<sup>37</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, N., 2005, p. 261. This is particularly relevant to gay homosexual relations where the sexuality an individual can be quite different for the penetrator than for the person being penetrated but is not applicable in the same way for female-female sexual relations.

The construction of a lesbian identity and community will be further discussed in relation to the subversion of traditional gender roles within the texts. With an emphasis on performance and constructing meaning I will consider how each other break the assumed heterosexuality of the female characters and challenges culturally prescribed roles of women. Anzaldúa's subversion of mytho-cultural figures such as Guadalupe can be seen to be mirrored in Roffiel's *Amora* alongside challenges to the stereotypical representation of lesbians in the cultural imagination. A reconfiguration of butch and femme images in all three novels is also important, in particular *Sandra, Secreto Amor* which includes the only overtly 'butch' lesbian figure. The lesbian characters in the novels break with the stereotypical myths of the lesbian as a tragic, dysfunctional and emotionally unstable without reducing her to a flawless, utopian image existing within a perfect female erotic relationship or community.

Through close readings of the novels I intend to explore how the authors create an imagined lesbian community through their portrayal of a lesbian love story set in urban Mexico. I will compare and contrast the approaches of the three women writers in creating strong, lesbian characters who are successful in their relationships and who do not allow their protagonists to present lesbianism as a lifestyle which ultimately leads to a tragic end. I anticipate that the creation of a lesbian community will be most effective where the community can be both imagined by the reader and realised within the novel and where lesbianism can be seen to exist within a Mexican cultural tradition whilst acknowledging its radical standpoint in Mexican society.

## Chapter One

### WRITING A NEW IMAGINED COMMUNITY

When Franz Fanon wrote that ‘culture abhors simplification’ he was arguing that the complexities of people and their lifestyles cannot be contained within the narrative discourse of nationhood which attempts to create a homogenous, standard view of commonality between a nation’s citizens. He argues that continuist national narratives miss ‘the zone of occult instability where the people dwell.’<sup>1</sup> Whilst Fanon was addressing representations of post-colonial peoples in Africa his hypothesis can also be seen to apply to the representation of minority groups within Mexican nationalistic discourse. Fanon’s critique of the fixed and stable forms of the nationalistic narrative, questioning theories of the horizontal, homogenous empty time apparent in the creation of a nation’s narrative, has been employed by minority groups so that they too create alternate communities against the framework of the imagined nation.

This idea can be further explored if we consider how legal and moral restraints found within the prevalent national identity discourse can prevent marginal groups from practising their lifestyles without facing discrimination or invisibility. Whilst the imagined Mexican nation is exemplified in the family unit and roles which women are inscribed are primarily those of wife and mother and as subservient to their husband and father, the lesbian figures in the text move outside of this male-dominated framework and assume a minority status. Yuval-Davis discusses this phenomenon in her work *Gender and Nation* and calls these minority figures ‘moral aliens’ who are found ‘in the marginal matrix of citizenship’ where constraint by the patriarchal state is ‘exercised in

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p. 179-90.

social, political and economic arenas and results in both formal and informal discrimination [where they are] located outside the national ‘moral community’ but inside the civic nation.’<sup>2</sup> She argues that multi-culturalist policies employed by the state are ‘aimed at simultaneously including and excluding the minorities, locating them in marginal spaces and secondary markets whilst reifying their boundaries.’<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I will explore how the authors of the novels studied both critique the imagined community of the Mexican nation and its created depiction of Mexican women in particular and how they utilise the model of a imaginative community to create their own lesbian ‘nation’ or imagined lesbian community.

Of course the concept of a nation as community is not one which comes from nowhere to be imprinted in the nation’s subject’s cultural imagination but must be produced and created through discourse which constructs and constrains the figuration of national consciousness. In *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* Claudio Lomnitz acknowledges that ‘nationalisms are historically recent creations and yet terribly successful at shaping subjectivity.’<sup>4</sup> The modern nation exudes the aura of the inhabitants having always held a common sense of being despite many nations having a history of only a few hundred years and which are formed from territorial areas whose peoples have very different histories, ethnicities and cultural practices. Lomnitz references Benedict Anderson’s treatment of nationalism ‘not as an ideology, but rather as a hegemonic, commonsensical, and tacitly shared cultural restraint.’<sup>5</sup> The nation is seen to be created as a result of the proliferation among a people of symbols, myths, cultural practices and beliefs which are assumed to be held in common and are disseminated as though they

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<sup>2</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, Sage Publications, 1997, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Lomnitz, 2001, p. 3.

derive from ancient roots. Although many territorial areas which are subsequently created as ‘nations’ may contain peoples from different ethnic, cultural and, at times, linguistic backgrounds, in creating a nation these differences are amalgamated in order to create a feeling of commonality which produces a national consciousness. Myth making plays a significant role in the development of self-image which is intrinsic to nation creation. Roberta Fernández describes the concept of nation as an imagined community formed as a result of a created ideology of national consciousness which ‘presupposed the existence of a nation, which in the classic sense had a common culture, a language of its own, a territory that had been held in common over many generations, an economy of its own, and a socio-political structure.’<sup>6</sup>

Anderson argues that the nation can be seen as *imagined* because although the majority of members will never meet their fellow-members they imagine themselves to be part of the same common nation. This results in invented bonds of community which exist outside the limits of knowing or meeting other members. It is *limited* as the nation has finite borders from which members differentiate themselves from others, who are part of other nations. Finally, the nation is imagined as a *community*, because, ‘regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.’<sup>7</sup> It is this imagined community which gives nations their power in the national consciousness. The community bond which people experience in their families and immediate local community can be seen to be transferred to a national self-image in which all members share, as Anderson phrases it,

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<sup>6</sup> Roberta Fernández, Abriendo caminos in the Brotherland: Chicana Writers Respond to the Ideology of Literary Nationalism, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1994, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, p. 7.



a fraternal bond in their imagined commonalities.<sup>8</sup> Homi Bhabha develops the idea of the power of the nation as an imagined community when he discusses it in context of industrialisation and people leaving their family and local (we can infer rural) communities for the cities where the idea of nation as community, ‘fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging....across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of nation-people.’<sup>9</sup> Although Bhabha is addressing the isolation of individuals due to them leaving their close familial community for urban (isolated) dwelling I believe this notion of imagined community replacing kin can be applied to queer communities. The rejection of queer individuals from mainstream national identity, and often also by their families, due to their difference from nationally accepted gender norms can lead them to create alternate imagined communities which exist both within the larger imagined community of the nation and as defined by otherness. One of the manifestations of the creation of this alternate imagined community is created and contrasted with the assumed otherness of the compulsory heterosexual nation through the minority centred novel.

Anderson sees the development of print and the subsequent sharing of ideas throughout the inhabitants of a territorial area as key to the creation of the nation as an imagined community.<sup>10</sup> He identifies three ways in which print-language laid the foundations of national consciousness and was a form in which ideas of national commonality were disseminated in the national consciousness. The first, and the most important for Anderson, was that the distribution of print and in particular novels which contained

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, 1983, p. 8

<sup>9</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, (London) Routledge, 1990, p. 291.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, 1983, pp. 37-46.

national themes, ‘created unified fields of exchange and communication’<sup>11</sup> between speakers of a common language. In Mexico the distribution of national discourse in print was not only important in creating a national consciousness of commonality within Mexican Spanish speakers but also helped to create a wider sense of solidarity with other Spanish speaking Latin American countries. People who would have previously found it difficult, or even impossible, to communicate with others who spoke their language but who lived hundreds or even thousands of miles away became able to understand each other through the printed word. They became aware of others who shared a common language and also were able to differentiate themselves from those who were outside that language-field. Anderson argues that this very acknowledgement of and connection to people who belonged and distinction from those who did not belong within their ‘secular, particular, visible invisibility’ was the early formation of a nationally imagined community.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is possible to view the printing of lesbian centred texts as mirroring the formation of the national imagined community through their publication and distribution. Lesbian identified women from different areas of Mexico or Latin America who are unable to engage each other in conversation can connect and share a common identity through reading texts within which they can identify themselves within the discourse and differentiate themselves from ‘others’ (in this case the ‘other’ not being another nation’s subject but rather the heterosexual national subject). In the introduction I discussed the importance of political activism in creating a sense of community among feminist and lesbian Latin Americans, allowing both commonalities and differences to be identified within the experiences of women where previously they were unable to engage in conversation. The actions of the Latin American feminist and lesbian were highly influential and empowering for authors due

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, 1983, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson, 1983, p. 44.

to, as previously discussed, both the support given to members writing and the themes of the novels being published as new publishing houses were organised and texts disseminated through activist networks. The publication of lesbian centred texts allowed this communion to happen on a significantly larger scale, giving a visibility to lesbianism to the larger population which was not limited by an individual's involvement in political activism or academia but simply in her ability to obtain and read a text.<sup>13</sup> This allowed for more women to feel involved in the community as they could be more discrete by reading and sharing a book than they would be if they were publically involved in activism.

The second way in which print-language contributed to the creation of national consciousness was the manner in which it 'gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation.'<sup>14</sup> As the modern nation was constructed in order to portray a new created nation which evoked (a mythical) sense of shared characteristics and homogeneity within its subjects the printed book made that form permanent. The printed book was unchanging in time and space, just as nation creators intended that encountering 'the nation *as it is written* displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness.'<sup>15</sup> Texts were no longer altered, individualised or 'unconsciously modernised' by scribes but were reproducible and unchanging. The publication of lesbian texts by lesbian authors allowed them to break with images of the lesbian community as 'unchanging' and homogenised and made those alternate representations permanent in the printed novel. In publishing these lesbian texts they were viewed within their particular social and

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<sup>13</sup> Whilst the publication of lesbian novels did increase the availability of lesbian community identification, of course you did still have to be able to obtain a copy and be literate in Spanish in order to be involved in this textual imagined community.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, 1983, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Homi Bhabha, 1990, p. 2.

historical contexts and no longer would only one image of the imagined lesbian community (that homogenized view which exists in popular cultural rhetoric) be the only one available. However, as I have mentioned, the novels could be made less visible by lack of reprints and narrow distribution by publishing houses

Finally, Anderson identifies how print-capitalism created 'languages-of-power' in which certain dialects were favoured in print language and dominated their form.<sup>16</sup> We can see how the use of particular vernacular from specific areas led to identification by people with their nation's rhetoric and a creation of a common feeling of connectedness which contributes to the imagined community of the nation. This is also true of the use of particular use of feminist and lesbian discourse uniting members of those communities through the printed word and particular authors utilising dialects or symbolism specific to their countries.

The importance of an imagined community and common consciousness being created through writing is addressed, of course, in studies of women's writing. Feminist theorists have repeatedly asked women to 'write their bodies', inscribing a feminine consciousness onto the printed word. Cixous famously declared that:

[...] women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs, at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence' the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word 'impossible' and writes it as 'the end'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Benedict Anderson, 1983, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, No. 4, 1976, p. 342.

In Chicana lesbian theory this call to action is most eloquently addressed by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The construction of an alternate consciousness and the creation of an inclusive, multiple and malleable identity is addressed by considering Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*. By working against the concept of the nation subject as a solid, essential 'I' Anzaldúa creates the new *mestiza* crossing borders of linguistic, ethnic and national identity. Anzaldúa's *mestiza* is a figure who 'lives in the borderlands' – she is not fully part of the figure which obeys the norms of national consciousness either of her ethnic and linguistic roots in Mexico or those of the United States where she lives. For Anzaldúa as a queer Chicana she straddles two cultures and is thirdly differentiated by her lesbianism. 'From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una consciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.'<sup>18</sup> Whilst I shall discuss the value of Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* as it can be seen to apply to lesbian consciousness in Mexico I do not mean to imply that it is applicable to all minority peoples. There is a danger in appropriating a theory which is implicitly specific to a certain people, in this case Chicana women, and applying it to another, different situation without recognizing its specificity. However there are parallels which can be drawn if we are to apply Anzaldúa's work to a broader thesis on lesbian writing within Mexico as breaking down dualisms apparent in national discourse. As she says, 'the work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Book, 1987:2007, p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 102.

The concern here is in representing the experiences of an individual as representative of an entire group. Anzaldúa, among other theorists, has countered this idea by suggesting that lesbian texts should not attempt to be universal in their representation but should rather grow from the personal.

The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live, with our inner life, our history, our economics and our vision. What validates us as human beings validates us as writers. What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with ourselves or with others. We must use what is important to us to get to writing. (*No topic is too trivial*). The danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment.<sup>20</sup>

Bonnie Zimmerman in her article 'Lesbians Like This and That' also argues that the lesbian literary tradition should not be taken as universal but rather as, 'a shifting matrix of behaviours, choices, subjectivities, textualities and self-representation that is always situated in a specific historical context', and that 'lesbian space is defined as much by difference as by sameness.'<sup>21</sup> So whilst images of lesbians and lesbian communities in the texts should not be taken as universally applicable or even applicable to all Mexican lesbians, they can be seen to be part of a larger mass of self-representations from which different aspects can be seen to be held in common. This ideology contradicts Benedict Anderson's theory of a nation's subjects being bound by fraternal bonds.

At present I am discussing the act of writing and putting word into printed form in creating a visible, alternative imagined community, a lesbian consciousness. Similarities can be drawn between how Anzaldúa addresses the act of writing herself into her work and how the authors of the texts examined discuss writing within their texts. Writing is

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<sup>20</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues* p. 20, referenced in Roberta Fernández, 1994, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, *Lesbians Like This and That*, *New Lesbian Criticism*, Ed. Sally Munt, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 9-12.

described as a deeply personal experience and evokes Cixous' description of writing the body.

As I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own...My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth through the creative act.<sup>22</sup>

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. *Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre*. I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle.<sup>23</sup>

The novels *Dos Mujeres*, *Amora* and *Sandra*, *Secreto Amor* are all written by openly lesbian authors. The importance of their publication in Mexico is acknowledged by lesbian literary critics; in particular *Amora* is cited as one of the first novels to give lesbians in Latin America a sense of identity outwith the mainstream nationalistic discourse. Mogrovejo states that *Amora*:

[...] al igual que *El pozo de la soledad* en Europa, se ha convertido en una novela clásica porque tiene una estructura novedosa, leve, intrascendente, que la convierte en cercana y cotidiana, y ellos, para cientos de lesbianas latinoamericanas, es el primer contacto que devela una existencia lésbica ya no dramática, sino, gozosa y fresca.<sup>24</sup>

*Amora* was the first lesbian novel published in Mexico in 1989. Nuala Finnegan, in her analysis of the novel, notes that according to Roffiel the book was so popular that the first print-run of 3000 copies ran out and it continued to be shared by readers in

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<sup>22</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987:2007, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987:2007, pp. 93-94.

<sup>24</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, *Un Amor Que Se Atrevió A Decir Su Nombre*, Plaza y Valdes, S.A. de C.V., 2000, p. 47.

photocopy form for ten years until it was re-edited.<sup>25</sup> The following year Calderón's *Dos Mujeres* sparked controversy due to its erotic portrayal of lesbian counters.<sup>26</sup> In particular *Dos Mujeres* broke the sacrosanct roles of heterosexual wife and mother as both women in the relationship are divorcees and one is a mother. *Sandra, Secreto Amor* can be seen to be equally ground-breaking in the way in which it depicts gay love stories, in particular the much less sensational manner in which the same sex relationships are represented could be seen to be representative of the changes in attitude to gay relationships in the ten years that separate its publication from the other two novels. Whilst the mere fact of these lesbian novels being published is an achievement in itself the authors all appear to be particularly conscious of the subversive role that being a female writer, and in particular a lesbian writer, entails. In all three novels the author has not only chosen that the lesbian characters are writers but also as narrators they address the act of writing and its purpose.

In *Dos Mujeres* Calderón's protagonist Valeria emancipates herself from her role of housewife to study sociology at university and follows her desire to be a writer. In an early conversation with her lover Genovesa they are discussing their future plans:

Me preguntó qué me gustaría ser.  
- Escritora.  
- ¿De veras? Qué guardado te lo tenías.  
- Te lo juro, toda mi vida lo he deseado. Me he metido a estudiar teatro, creación teatro, creación dramática, sociología, etcétera. Todo, para un día poder escribir. Pero ya se me pasó el tiempo.  
- Decídete: deja de hacer otras cosas y ponte a escribir – me urgió.  
- Voy a escribir una historia de amor.  
- ¿Sí? ¿Alguna muy importante en tu vida?  
La besé y le dije que la nuestra era la historia de amor más importante de mi vida.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nuala Finnegan, *Ambivalence, Modernity, Power: Women and Writing in Mexico since 1986*, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Elena M. Martínez, *Lesbian Voices from Latin America: Breaking Ground*, (New York) Garland, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 62.



It can be interpreted that Calderón uses Valeria to embody her own preoccupation about writing the novel. She herself had been married and studied sociology before writing the novel *Dos Mujeres*. Her desire to write and to have her love story published is mirrored within the semi-autobiographical text. Valeria does, in fact, start to write her love story during the novel, creating the effect of a novel within a novel and significantly strengthening the image of lesbians as writers, breaking into the male centred literary canon.

*Dos Mujeres* is separated into three parts. Part one begins with Valeria's first encounter with Genovesa, the initial stages of their romance and the subsequent problems it provokes with her family and which ultimately ends in their rejection of her. It ends when Genovesa departs to Paris and Valeria, left alone in Mexico City, begins to write their love story. At this point Valeria becomes narrator of her own life story, beginning with her childhood, her first lesbian and heterosexual romantic relationships and coming full circle again to the point in time in which Part One had ended. In Part Three she continues the story of the love affair with Genovesa but at this point it is not clear to the reader whether this is a continuation of the novel Valeria is writing or if it is Calderón as narrator continuing the story. Towards the end of *Dos Mujeres* the author is ambiguous as to what has been 'true' and what has been part of the novel within the novel. She writes, 'El fin de la novela y la realidad se confundían. Decidí exiliarme.'<sup>28</sup> The cyclical style of Calderón's novel can also be seen to evoke the characteristics of the Latin American Boom literary tradition of the 1960s and 1970s which include Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar among its exemplary

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<sup>28</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 235.

novelists. Doris Sommer in her chapter within Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* states that Boom novelists included the 'denotion, or defusion, of cultural control and tireless formal experimentation, all it seems, directed towards destroying the straight line of traditional narrative.'<sup>29</sup> As the Boom novelists attempted to break with and trivialise the 'mythic' notion of the depiction of national development as organically developing history through 'breaking or bending the traditional straight line of history into vicious circles,'<sup>30</sup> so too does Calderón subvert the imagined nation's idea of how a 'good' Mexican woman should act by including a broken, interrupted narrative of a lesbian love story.

By including themselves within the narrative of their novels and by breaking the traditional gender roles prescribed to women in Mexico Calderón, Roffiel and Barrera are able to name themselves, not only as lesbians but also as Mexicans by including themselves both within and outside the nationalist narrative. As woman writers they are entering what is still largely a male-dominated world and doubly so by writing as lesbians. The act is made significantly more defiant when they depict their protagonists as lesbian writers, almost as if to say that even within our literature other women will continue to write and be heard as women and as lesbians.

In *Amora* Roffiel's protagonist Lupe is also a writer but instead of writing her own love story, like Valeria in *Dos Mujeres*, she is a journalist who writes articles for newspapers and, primarily feminist, journals and magazines. In the chapter 'Bordando recuerdos y palabras' Lupe is writing an article which is centred around a discussion on *hilos* and

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<sup>29</sup> Doris Sommer, *Irrisistable Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America*, *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha Ed., Routledge, 1990, p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> Sommer, Doris, 1990, p. 73.

she uses this symbol to critique the treatment of women in Mexican society as those who hold the society together but who are not recognised for their worth.

Se me ocurre que nuestras abuelas y nuestras madres dejaron buena parte de su vida colgando de hilachos: los del trapo de sacudir que les sacudió las ilusiones, los de jerga que les restregó sus sueños, los de las sábanas de un sexo sinónimo de sacrificio y, sobre todo, de los dolorosos hilos de una existencia a medias. Mujeres cuya vida ha transcurrido y transcurre envuelta entre madejas de estambre, unida a lienzos de tela por un cordón umbilical hecho de hebras, prendido al cuerpo por agujas o ganchos de tejer. Y otras, que lejos de permitir que la costura, el bordado y el tejido las sometieran como esclavas, lograron convertirlos en un arte cotidiano...

De pronto, me surge una duda: ¿será la aguja como la esposa del hilo, que se ocupa de la ardua tarea de traspasar la tela para desaparecer después?...Duda que permanece.<sup>31</sup>

Roffiel's Lupe does not write introspectively of her own love story, as Valeria does in *Dos Mujeres*, but uses the opportunity to further discuss the role of women in Mexican society, to pass judgment on a system that suppresses their freedom and to highlight the lack of recognition of women's labour and sacrifice. In referring to '*nuestras abuelas y nuestras madres*' she is situating her opinion and experiences among those of other women and in a temporality which allows the creation of an imagined community of 'emancipated women' in a more forceful manner than that of Calderón's writing of her own love story. Lupe develops her musings on *hilos* by discussing the act of writing:

También en la escritura hay hilos...en todo relato hay que seguir un hilo. Para escribirlo y para leerlo. En una novela de misterio los hilos son más complicados, en una de amor más sutiles, en una de vaqueros, más burdos. Hay textos cuidadosamente bordados como los de Roa Bastos y Guimarães Rosa; otros llenos de colores, como los de García Márquez y Vargas Llosa. Los hay confeccionados a mano, como los de Elena Garro, o cosidos aceleradamente en una máquina Singer, como los de la China

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<sup>31</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 117. The idea of 'hilos' also has strong mythical connotations for women. In Greek mythology Persephone weaves a tapestry of the universe whilst hidden in a cave and Arachne is a mortal who spins and weaves as well as the Gods and is punished for her conceitedness by being turned into a spider woman.

Mendoza. Los hay escritos con hilos y suspiros, como los de Benedetti y Galeano, o bien con metálicas madejas de angustia, como os de Sábato y Cortázar. Son pocos los cosidos a ovarios, verbigracia los de Rosario Castellanos y Elena Poniatowska.<sup>32</sup>

By including a discussion on the styles of writing and referring to Latin American canonical writers she is situating her lesbian texts within that historical canon. However, when she refers to the fact that very few novels are ‘cosidos a ovarios’ it is two Mexican female authors that she refers to. Accordingly Roffiel situates her novel within a tradition of female writing in Mexico whose critique of women’s traditional roles within patriarchal society is well recognised and celebrated. This has been discussed in detail by Nuala Finnegan in her book, *Ambivalence, Modernity, Power: Women and Writing in Mexico since 1980*. Finnegan approaches an analysis of Roffiel’s work ‘concentrating on the ways in which they continue the Castellanos trajectory, re-writing aspects of Castellanos’s work and forging paths for self-exploration of the Mexican female subject in the late twentieth century.’<sup>33</sup>

In this chapter where Lupe muses on her the importance of *hilos* in the lives of women, Roffiel also refers to the challenges of writing and the constant struggle of the writer to express herself in words. She evokes Anzaldúa’s description of writing as creating a feeling of anxiety as is a result of having to confront the conflicts which she encounters within her, ‘Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being a queer – a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen.’<sup>34</sup> Roffiel’s character Lupe also describes

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<sup>32</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 118.

<sup>33</sup> Nuala Finnegan, 2007, p. 181.

<sup>34</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, 2007:1987, p. 94.

the self-doubt that must be navigated in order for a writer to put down words and her discussion in the following quotation echoes Anzaldúa:

[...] llevo horas preguntándome: ¿y qué tengo yo que decir sobre el hilo si a lo más que llego es a pegar un botón o mal levantar un dobladillo?, ¿si apenas puedo seguir con cierta coherencia este enredo desmadejado que es mi vida en estos momentos?, ¿si me declaro totalmente enmarañada por los hilos de este texto que se me fueron dando vuelta sin llegar a romperse ni por lo más delgado ni por ningún otro lado? Y por último pregunto: ¿alguien tendría una tijera a la mano para ayudarme a salir de esto? A mí, que me siento deshilvanada, muda de repente, nerviosa, cuestionada, víctima de complejas redes literarias, y que del hilo no tengo que decir ya nada.<sup>35</sup>

In discussing the difficulties and confusion that come with writing and the challenge of writing as a woman, Roffiel's voice is much more direct than that of Calderón, whose act of writing a lesbian love story does not discuss the implications of that action upon the writer herself.

In Barrera's *Sandra, Secreto Amor* once again the author's voice breaks through the main narrative. Even in the introductory note Barrera warns us that, 'La novela, como la vida, sufre de una serie de equivocaciones, no son los nombres, ni el lugar, tampoco el tiempo. Es un decir de todo y de nada a la vez.'<sup>36</sup> The narrative voice changes throughout the novel; each of the main characters assumes the role of narrator at some point with Barrera's voice as omnipresent narrator. Barrera interweaves the life histories of each of the main characters with present events happening in the arts festival in Guanajuato along with essays, diary entries and letters written by the protagonists. Barrera's voice as female novelist and poet also enters the narrative at

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<sup>35</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 11.

once describing the writing process and playing with the idea of the writer entering the narrative.

Llevó dónde anotar cuanto se le ocurriera o, por lo menos, comentarios sobre el mejor espectáculo, los nombres de los artistas importantes y tal vez, ¿por qué no?, una novela que sus amigos leerían, unos contentos, otros preocupados, y algunos hasta molestos por ‘el qué dirán’. Pero esas opiniones no le importaban, porque ‘a la literatura nadie la lee y al periodismo nadie le cree’.<sup>37</sup>

Barrera pokes fun at herself as a writer by having the mythically named Eurídice voice the worry of many writers: that no one will read what they have written anyway. She addresses the invisibility of her writing and reminds the reader that, actually, her voice is being heard. It is with humour that she addresses the lack of visibility of lesbian voices which she is breaking with the publication of this novel. But her use of irony is not to say that she does not recognise the importance of her writing the novel but rather a double bluff in which she plays upon the expectation of the male literary canon who might suggest that women’s literature is not to be taken seriously. Barrera has Eurídice state that the narrator should distance herself from the protagonist and yet unashamedly breaks those rules by having her own voice clearly heard.

The fact that Eurídice is writing in her journal the very story that we are being told, and that we are allowed to read glimpses of her writing, is similar in purpose as Valeria’s writing of her love story in *Dos Mujeres*. Lupe proclaims, ‘Escribiría aquellos poemas que rondaban su mente y también historias personales. Pero nunca imaginó que iba a narrar la crónica de sucesos increíbles.’<sup>38</sup>, before beginning to relate the very same scene that Barrera as narrator has just described. There is again the circular writing which was

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<sup>37</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p.32.

apparent in Calderón's *Dos Mujeres* which can be perceived as a homage of sorts to the Latin American literary Boom writers, in particular Garcia Marquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967) and its circular narrative and which is also associated with the non-linear narrative style proposed by Cixous' *l'écriture féminine*.

If the act of women writing is viewed as one of defiance and that of writing as a lesbian a form of breaking the silence and creating an alternative imagined community then the author's inclusion of their protagonists also writing and publishing work can be seen as an extension of this. As if to push the message home each author has given their lesbian protagonist the role which they are performing themselves. Anderson's discussion of the importance of print in disseminating the nation as an imagined community can be seen to be mirrored in the publication of these novels and their stress on the importance of print in circulating each imagined lesbian community. Whilst *Dos Mujeres* and *Sandra, Secreto Amor* discuss the creation of a novel which both the protagonist and the narrator are writing in unison, Roffiel's approach is different in that the protagonist is commenting not on her own story but on her feminist and lesbian experience, which undeniably mirrors Roffiel's own publishing history as journalist and academic.

I will now turn to the representation and creation of imagined lesbian community within the novels. I propose that whilst all three novels offer a critique of the roles proffered within the Mexican imagined nation, their approach in depicting an imagined lesbian community is highly variable in its application.

I will first consider the forms in which Calderón breaks the bonds of familial and male control in *Dos Mujeres* by breaking the heterosexual boundaries inscribed by Mexican

national discourse. In *Passing Lines* the introductory chapter introduces the link between sexual norms and national identity by stating that:

[...] an example of the complicity between ideologies of national identity and the enforcement of sexual norms is the way in which standards for proper sexual conduct can be tied to universal or timeless values belie to be intrinsic to a particular national identity.<sup>39</sup>

By depicting the protagonist as a mother who breaks the heterosexual norm by having a sexual relationship with another woman Calderón opens a space for the creation of a lesbian imagined community. However, as I will demonstrate, the fact that her depiction of this break is confined to the relationship between the two protagonist lovers and their refuge from the patriarchal world means that Calderón does not move to include a model of a wider, alternative community.

A great deal of the novel centres on Valeria's increasing isolation from her parents and sons as a result of her breaking away from the roles prescribed to her by patriarchal dominance and on her subsequent burgeoning relationship with Genovesa. The position of woman as subservient and inferior to man is frequently referenced and criticised by Calderón as Valeria increasingly distances herself from her roles as daughter and mother. Her acknowledgement of her status as a woman is revealed when she declares, 'Soy la misma, padre, la misma que de haber sido macho sería tu legítimo orgullo.'<sup>40</sup> Her struggle against the role of mother forced upon her by her father's insistence that she marries and has children is clear as she rejects that life, divorcing her husband and living independently with her two sons. The competing struggle between her role as consummate mother and of regaining her self-hood as an individual is displayed in the

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<sup>39</sup> *Passing Lines: Sexuality and Immigration*, Brad Epps, Keja Valens and Bill Johnson Gomez Eds., Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 15.



scene where she introduces Genovesa to her two horses. ‘Una se llamaba Madona y la otra Persona: ambas eran obsequio de mi padre por haberle dado dos nietos varones.’<sup>41</sup> Her naming of the horses as Madona and Persona are indicative of her awareness of the double standard which inscribes individual personhood to men and the role of eternal mother to women.

Calderón is highly critical of the traditional roles which women are given within her Jewish-Mexican bourgeois household. Her childhood ‘se definió mi destino: callar, siempre callar.’<sup>42</sup> Valeria creates refuge in an alternate reality in which she constructs her dream house as a child, one which she later makes real and in which she can claim refuge from the outer world:

Mi casa le parecía salir de un sueño. Le dije que provenía de un sueño constante. A lo largo de años había soñado en esta casa situada debajo de mi casa real. Para llegar a ella tenía que cruzar por aterrorizantes pasadizos subterráneos, pero cuando entraba todo lo que veía me gustaba y me sentía feliz. Un buen día decidí construirla.<sup>43</sup>

The house is given a timeless aura, existing within a dream-like space and time where Valeria is able to begin her relationship with Genovesa undisturbed by the outside world. In this way Calderón has created a space in which the rules which apply to her protagonists when they are outside those protective walls, which Valeria herself has constructed, are not pertinent. Her relationship with Genovesa does in some form replace that which she has previously with her family, and in that sense follows Bhabha’s model of community replacing kin. The feeling that is conveyed, however, is not that of a connectedness with other women or other lesbians which we could view as

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<sup>41</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 113.

<sup>43</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 21.

a creation of a wider lesbian community but is limited to the partnership with Genovesa. The idea of community is never broached by Calderón, rather she chooses to confine her vision to the erotic, romantic relationship between the two women and the house in which they find refuge which was constructed with family money and, as such, Valeria is still under the control of patriarchy. This refuge is shown to be only temporary and fragile; it is easily broken by the interference in her life by her sons who also live in the house. It is only through exile to another country that she can attempt to find a true refuge and to fully engage in her relationship without disruption. The construction of an imagined lesbian community within *Dos Mujeres* is limited to the relationship between the two women and whilst it is an important depiction of a lesbian partnership, it does not broach the theme of a wider imagined community. This can be contrasted with the construction of community within *Amora* which is radically different, and the creation of a smaller, queer friendship community in *Sandra, Secreto Amor*.

In *Amora* Roffiel posits the creation of a community within the framework of feminist, lesbian activism. Her depiction of lesbian relationships as successful and emancipating are a strong depiction of an alternative reality within the bounds of the Mexican nation's capital. If we consider that the traditional nation is created and supported by depictions of individuals with a common culture and who enact commonly held images of sexually defined roles, Roffiel's depiction of independent, informed women who act outside this value system but within a community of other women who share the same values can be seen to support and create a lesbian imagined community. Roffiel conceives this sense of community through her portrayal of the lesbian characters who share their lives with each other and who are actively in opposition to the traditional

roles offered to women within national discourse. This can be seen as a manifestation of Adrienne Rich's *lesbian continuum* which she uses to describe 'a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience,' and the 'sharing of a rich inner life'.<sup>44</sup> In Roffiel's depiction of the women the community within which the characters act is almost exclusively female and as a result, the sense of a lesbian community is portrayed in a positive and celebratory fashion.

Roffiel addresses the feminist movement and lesbian existence in a way which argues against the dominant state of affairs and which portrays lesbianism as an enticing community of supportive relationships. A large part of the novel is an attempt by Lupe, self proclaimed feminist and lesbian, to persuade her new lover Claudia of the inequalities suffered by the Mexican woman and the value of feminist politics. Accompanying such political explanation is the depiction of her friendship group with whom she has formed a community as strong, independent, supportive and, crucially, highly politically aware. The setting of the book in Mexico City in the late 1970s is undoubtedly influential due to the active, radical feminist and lesbian movements which were taking place at the time and in which our protagonist participates.

*Amora* can be seen as a defence of the lesbian lifestyle against the hostile reaction to feminism and lesbianism prevalent in Mexico.<sup>45</sup> Lupe, reflecting upon discovering a feminist group in the late 1970s, revels in the feeling of joining a community which she feels represents all of her aspirations and beliefs:

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<sup>44</sup> Adrienne Rich, 1980, Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer, 1980), pp. 648-649.

<sup>45</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, Erotic or Political: Literary Representations of Mexican Lesbians, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. (1996), p. 53.

[...] oí hablar de las feministas por primera vez y me dije – atontada por la sorpresa - ‘!Pero si yo soy feminista, y no lo sabía!’. Qué aturdidor el gozo al descubrir que había mujeres que vivían como yo, que esperaban lo que yo, que hablaban mi mismo lenguaje...  
¡Con qué orgullo empecé a portar el estigma del feminismo! Bola de viejas locas, guangos, desocupadas. Bola de lesbianas, antihombres. Bola de feas y amargadas.<sup>46</sup>

The depiction of feminists is celebratory and in depicting women who *live* like her, *hope for the same things* as her and who *speak the same language* Roffiel creates a lesbian consciousness within the text. Roffiel’s declaration serves the purpose of depicting the lesbian feminist groups as an imagined community in the way that Anderson denotes the construction of nation through the imagined communion held by individuals who they believe hold essential traits and cultural beliefs and practices in common. At the same time Roffiel’s community is imagined as ‘other’ in relation to the traditional norm of compulsive heterosexuality held within the national consciousness.

This community is seen as radically different from the norm which is supported by the national model of Mexican family life. Similarly to Calderón, Roffiel is highly critical of the gender bias apparent in Mexican national cultural consciousness. However she supports the idea of community in a way that Calderón does not. Instead of focusing on the isolated actions of two women, Roffiel celebrates actions of women and situates them within a larger historical context of young women breaking the traditional roles prescribed to them and in this sense continues to foster the idea of a wider imagined community:

Millones y millones de mujeres nacientes a una nueva identidad, buscando dentro y fuera de nosotras mismas, dispuestas a probar una forma distinta a ser, ansiosas de una relación más digna y equitativa con

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<sup>46</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 42.

el hombre o con otra mujer, conociéndonos por primera vez en nuestra vida. La visión de nuestras posibilidades nos tiene sorprendidas, incrédulas. A algunas quizás aterradas. Y ya es demasiado tarde para detenerse. Éste es un proceso que ha comenzado y no dará marcha atrás. Cada vez queda más claro: somos la fuerza del futuro, el motor de la próxima historia, y el hombre lo sabe, y tiembla.<sup>47</sup>

The fact that Roffiel situates her depiction of lesbianism within a specific social and historical context is important in understanding her depiction of the lesbian community. The consequences and influences of second wave feminism are clearly depicted and give legitimacy to the creation and success of the lesbian imagined community she portrays in *Amora*. She also identifies the fear experienced by men that comes with the emancipation of women who represent a threat to the male dominant order.

The apartment which Lupe shares with Mariana and Citlali, who are also lesbians, is seen as a haven where they can live freely in an almost utopian community visited frequently by other similarly liberated women:

Las tres hemos formado una familia y hemos hecho de nuestro espacio un templo...lo llenamos constantemente de buena energía, de olores, de risas...nos miramos cómplices, sonrientes, llenitas de esa hermandad que crece cada días más.<sup>48</sup>

Es mucho más rico vivir con amigas llenas de vida, de ideas, de solidaridad, que con un hombre que insiste en que él es el eje central tu existencia, en una casa que ni siquiera es tuya y la cual tiene que girar alrededor de la magnífica presencia de tu marido...esto es como tener una familia que tú escoges, que amas porque te nace y no porque tiene que...Nos queremos y nos acompañamos sin necesidad de oprimirnos.<sup>49</sup>

The fact that these women are a chosen family, a community created as a response against the heterosexual family that they have rejected, is reinforced by the depiction of

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<sup>47</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 42.

<sup>49</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 38.

demonstrations of solidarity and support and a shared life together. Benedict Anderson's claim that the imagined nation inspires 'a deep, horizontal comradeship'<sup>50</sup> among its members is hereby echoed by Roffiel in the respect to the sisterhood experienced within the lesbian community. This sisterhood is not depicted within Calderón's couple relationship between Valeria and Genovesa which instead relies on the subversive nature of a rejection of the patriarchally controlled family in exchange for an isolated, lesbian coupling.

In considering *Sandra, Secreto Amor* the creation of a lesbian imagined community is represented through the importance of female-female relationships, the lack of homophobia encountered in the setting of the festival in Guanajuato and the queer sexual orientation held in common by the main characters. The queer sexual identities of the characters are not openly revealed to each other but are illustrated to the reader through passages describing their childhood and adolescent experiences which are injected within the principal narrative which itself describes the relationships as they develop during the Festival Cervantino in Guanajuato. Subsequently, the lesbian community is imagined by the reader who can identify the actions of the characters in a way that they themselves are unable to do until nearing the end of the novel when their 'secrets' are revealed. It is at this point that their friendship community, which is indisputably represented as queer, is depicted as being strengthened.

The rejection of the traditional Mexican construct of nation is less essentialist than in both *Dos Mujeres* and *Amora*. There is not the open criticism of the patriarchal institution which prevails in the former novels: instead the imagined community of the

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<sup>50</sup> Benedict Anderson, 1983, p. 7.

Mexican nation, with the father as head of the family and women as subservient, is deconstructed as Barrera reveals the strong, female centred households of the main protagonists' childhoods. Additionally the gay and lesbian relationships depicted are portrayed alongside heterosexual couplings, situating queer Mexico within the national rhetoric and are not distinguished as radically different in the way they are within the other two novels. Whilst the cultural implications of gender roles within national discourse are seen to be imprinted on the characters subconscious, they are similarly demonstrated to be false. Arcelia, unmarried at age twenty-five is described as being resigned 'a vestir santor o desvestir borrachos.'<sup>51</sup> Barrera seems to mock the traditional denigration of unmarried women within national rhetoric. The idea that women are in need in of a husband, or that they should be controlled by a man is countered by Barrera's representation of women-centred households which are successful and which afford much more freedom to the female members.

Within the nostalgic reminiscences of the female protagonists it is their female relatives who are generally the most significant. A notion of an all-female community is represented which recalls Adrienne Rich's notion of the lesbian continuum. Rich's lesbian continuum is the term she uses to describe a range of relationships between women throughout her life which does not only mean that a woman has had or desired sexual relationships with women.<sup>52</sup> Women are depicted as controlling the household under the pretext of obedience and in doing so breaking the norms which are inscribed by the dominant patriarchal discourse:

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<sup>51</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Adrienne Rich, 1980, Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, *Signs*, Vol. 5. No. 4. Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer, 1980), p. 648.

Dentro de esta filosofía estaba claro que la mujer había nacido para obedecer ciegamente al marido, soportar las penas sin quejarse y vivir para su casa y al cuidado de sus hijos, sin protestar ante las adversidades. Pero también para gobernar en la vida de sus vástagos; para determinar la conducta decente de sus hijas y del marido, haciendo con maña su gusto y placer sin dar lugar a las murmuraciones o al qué dirán. Las mujeres mantenían un férreo poder en guante de seda.<sup>53</sup>

The women of the past are depicted as attempting to subversively break the rules of obedience and subservience from within the construct of the family unit. The lesbian characters do not cast disdain on the women who went before them but instead represent them as fighting against the norms and in this way Barrera appears to create a much more inclusive lesbian imagined community and one which is not exclusively accessible to women who have sexual relationships with other women but instead holds more in common with Rich's notion of a lesbian continuum which would include all women.

Barrera's imagined community is created within the confines of the city of Guanajuato. She sets the novel during the annual Festival Cervantino which for one month transforms the city into a place of artistic expression and which is given a mythical quality by her description of the city. Barrera's representation of Guanajuato as a space which is tolerant of transgressions from gender and sexual norms is crucial in her creation of an imagined lesbian community. Her description of the city evokes a space in which a queer sensibility can be evoked without the restraint usually experienced in public Mexican life:

El guanajuatense tiene un profundo respecto por las decisiones personales; éstas pasan a términos de sagradas y la conducta, aprobada o no, se mantiene en la confidencia total, libre de juicios personales.

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<sup>53</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 83.



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son, en su mayoría, discretos; conocen el arte de la tolerancia. Se mantienen abiertos a todas las inauditas posibilidades que llegues del exterior, sean expresiones excelsas, grotescas o hasta infamantes...Están abiertos a toda clase de expresión y por ellos, aman lo humano, por aberrante o excelso que pueda ser.<sup>54</sup>

Within the four romantic relationships depicted throughout the novel only Arcelia's is heterosexual. Interestingly though, Barrera chooses to reveal Arcelia had previously experienced a sexual relationship with another woman in the city of Guanajuato when she lived there with family during her adolescence. It is revealed that it was the space of the female only household where she was living that allowed such a relationship to develop:

No había censura en aquel hogar donde la figura paterna no existía...El ambiente mujeril de trabajo y estudio permitía una tolerancia cuyo significado era inadvertido para Arcelia, quien nunca se preguntó qué pensaba los demás de aquella intimidad.<sup>55</sup>

The absence of overt criticism of homophobia in Barrera's novel is marked in comparison with *Amora's* highly feminist rhetoric. Instead Barrera illustrates this by the contrast between the openness of the gay characters in terms of their relationship within the artistic community and the secrecy of Eurídice in revealing her sexuality to her friends and wider community. This aspect of public secrecy and the implications of passing and coming out will be addressed in the following chapter. Barrera does however at one point directly address the injustice of the heterosexual norms which mean that Eurídice does not feel comfortable in representing herself as lesbian within wider society:

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<sup>54</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 136.

<sup>55</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 102.

¿Por qué las cosas no podían ser abiertos, exhibirse ante la sociedad, establecer una relación de pareja legal, tener un lugar de protección y derechos de cónyuge en los trabajos? Más sencillo: besarse, abrazarse, declarar su amor en público. Sería tan simple y normal como en la antigüedad clásica o durante el siglo de las amazonas: ser tratadas como personas.<sup>56</sup>

This passage appears to break with the language which Barrera has employed in the rest of her novel. Her positive representation of the gay and lesbian characters creates a space in which a lesbian community can be constructed similarly to Roffiel's successful, supportive lesbian community in *Amora*. However, whilst Roffiel and Calderón posit the lesbian relationships as existing in a space which is radically different from the wider Mexican nation, Barrera constructs a space in which homosexual and heterosexual relationships are played out as equally fulfilling, supportive and complex. Thus Barrera constructs a community which *is* positioned as 'other' to the normative, nation as imagined community but which is not *exclusively* lesbian to the extent which Roffiel and Calderón's are.

This chapter has addressed the creation of an imagined lesbian community positing the opposition of the lesbian experience with that of the wider, heterosexual imagined nation. The creation of the imagined nation was seen to be formed as a result of the propagation of an imagined community where commonly held beliefs and customs were seen to represent a larger community among a nation's citizens. The influence of writing on the creation of imagined communities has been discussed and it is revealed that in all three novels the act of writing is seen as vitally important in creating a space for lesbian expression. Not only are the texts themselves representations of this community but within in the protagonists are writers and a sense of continuity and

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<sup>56</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 77.

increased visibility are produced as a result of this. The call of feminist theorist to write their experiences has been approached and given greater continuity within the inner narratives of the novels.

The critique of the proliferation of heterosexual gender norms and the role of women in Mexican society is demonstrated by representing the lesbian characters and relationships as occupying an alternative space in which new forms of relationships could be experienced and supported within a larger community. Calderón's *Dos Mujeres* can be seen to demonstrate this in its rejection of the previous existence of Valeria as unfulfilled and subjugated in her position as wife and mother. It is only through rejecting this position in society, by gaining autonomy through education and by engaging in a lesbian relationship with Genovesa that she opens a new space within which the lesbian individual can be created. However, Calderón's failing in situating the lesbian relationship within a larger context of emancipated women and in not mentioning the feminist movement or community, which would have been created in solidarity with other women living similar lifestyles, falls short of creating a lesbian community. Roffiel's *Amora* does however situate her characters within the political context of 1970s lesbian feminist movement in Mexico and in doing so the possibilities for creating an imagined community are improved. Lupe's friendship group, and the fact that she works within the feminist movement, allow for greater identification by lesbian readers, forming an imagined sisterhood which is evocative of Benedict Anderson's depiction of a bond of fraternity between citizens in the imagined nation. The imagined community within *Sandra, Secreto Amor* can be seen to be more complex. It is not the exclusively lesbian community which is imagined, as in *Amora* but one which has a queer sensibility; where the relationships of gay and lesbian

characters are represented alongside that of a heterosexual relationship in which the woman is depicted as having a queer sensibility. The separation between the heterosexual nation and the queer nation is depicted as broken within the tolerant space of the city of Guanajuato in a form which *Amora's* lesbian community and the isolated lesbian relationship in *Dos Mujeres* does not attempt to create.

The following chapter will address how the characters in the novel negotiate the processes of passing and coming out within their specific situations. The articulation of the visibility of the lesbian protagonists within public, private and familial contexts will be examined within the framework and the concept of coming out as a practical creation of the self and consequently of a new imagined community will be addressed.

## Chapter Two

### PASSING AND COMING OUT

The complexities of the notion of passing as either heterosexual or homosexual in society are most readily understandable if we first identify how sexual identities and gender norms are configured within heteronormative society. I shall refer to Judith Butler's theory of performativity and how the traditional construction of genders as static and natural has produced an opposition between masculinity and femininity which in turn gives rise to the denotation of heterosexuality as norm. The opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality which creates the need for passing and the process of coming out within society will then be discussed within the context of a Latin American understanding of homosexuality and how passing is addressed within *Amora*, *Dos Mujeres* and *Sandra, Secreto Amor*. I hope to demonstrate that the particular understanding of public secrecy within the context of Mexico, where an individual's sexual identity is simultaneously acknowledged in private and publically denied, leads to a representation of lesbianism which is dependent on the historical and social contexts within which the novels are set. The identities of the lesbian characters in the novels are seen to be renegotiated through the representation of their passing as heterosexual in certain situations and the consequences of the action of 'coming out' within particular circles which is different due to the variable imagined lesbian communities in each novel.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity sought to expand on Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gender as explored in *The Second Sex*. de Beauvoir's established theory of gender as a construct relies on the position that naturalized gender is inseparable from

the biological category of sex which links the binary opposition of masculinity as male and femininity as female. Butler thesis is that gender is constructed through performative acts and is therefore changeable. Butler views the normative view of gender as either masculine or feminine as a means of enforcing heterosexuality in which gender is depicted as intrinsically linked to sex within the framework of reproductive sexuality. Butler argues that ‘what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body’.<sup>1</sup> When sex is viewed as natural and biologically produced, gender is culturally constructed around the binary opposition of male and female in order to give the notion of unchangeable and natural genders. However, as much as the link between male and masculinity and female and femininity is inscribed onto cultural consciousness, Butler describes gender as constructed as a result of the repetition of particular acts which are inscribed as relating to a particular gender and thus demonstrates that the production of two opposing and seemingly irrefutable genders is performative. This gender performativity ‘must not be understood as a singular and deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produced the effects that it names.’<sup>2</sup> These acts are recognisably gendered as either feminine or masculine within dominant gender discourse.

Butler asks that we consider gender ‘as a *corporeal style*, an ‘act’, as it were, which is both intentional and performative where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.’<sup>3</sup> She is not saying that all gender is a performance

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, 1999 [1989], *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: London) Routledge, p. xv.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, 1993, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, (New York: London) Routledge, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, 1999 [1989], p. 139.

and therefore not real but rather that the realness of gender is constituted through the repetition of acts written upon the body which are constituted as gender specific:

Gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without these acts there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions obscured by not agreeing to believe in them; the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore gender is something that one becomes through the repetition of acts, gestures and enactments which are performative in the sense that, 'the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.'<sup>5</sup> Gender is an identity which is constructed at a certain time as a result of the stylised repetition of acts which are constituted as masculine or feminine and therefore a man or woman can be viewed as either masculine or feminine at different points in time as a result of their utilization of these stylized acts. Butler points out that the fact that:

gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restority frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>6</sup>

Butler's description of gender as performative undermines the use of the concept of gender as exclusively masculine or feminine and as linked to biological sex in discourse which attempts to undermine and delegitimize gendered and sexual practices which exist outside this binary opposition. The production of specifically masculine or

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, 1999, p.140.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, 1999, p.173.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, 1999, p. 180.

feminine gender identities is necessary in the continuation of heterosexuality as normative practice in so much as ‘normative sexuality fortifies normative gender.’<sup>7</sup> If we are to break with the notion of man as exclusively masculine in gender and woman as exclusively feminine in gender the binary opposition of gender which allows the enforced continuation of heterosexuality and the marginalisation of non-normative (non-binary) sexuality and gender identification will be shown to be false and constructed.

Butler demonstrates that the conception of an original or primary gender identity is ‘often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities.’<sup>8</sup> In these cases the sexual anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed are distinct and are useful in destabilising normative gender identities which support heterosexuality. It is important to consider how non-normative sexual practices question the stability of gender as an identity category. Within lesbian relationships the notion that gender identity as a woman is reliant on a woman’s functioning within the normative gender framework of heterosexuality can be destructive. Butler identifies the crisis suffered by some women in ‘becoming gay’ in that they might feel that by not participating within the dominant heterosexual frame (where normative sexuality fortifies normative gender) they lose their place in gender.

If gender identity is essential to the understanding of non-normative sexual identity then the act of passing as heterosexual can be seen to be demonstrative of embodying a gender identity where ‘being’ heterosexual or homosexual can be seen to be as

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, 1999, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, 1999, p. 137.



malleable a concept as gender identity itself. However, it is undeniable that within the lived world assuming a marginalised sexual identity involves a renegotiation of gender identified actions within social contexts where gender identified actions are crucially important. The influence of tolerance and intolerance of individuals who stray from the institutionalised norms of gender identity and sexual identity practice is fundamental in the examination of the actions of passing and coming out within particular social contexts.

In the same way that gender is formed as a result of the repetition of stylised performances which are gender specific, so too are sexual identities social and historical products, and not natural or self-contained. In *Passing Lines* Norma Mogrovejo describes how, within society ‘lesbians search for collective referents to restructure and redefine out identities; we search for collective spaces of acceptance.’<sup>9</sup> Brad Epps in *Passing Lines* discusses the way in which immigrants passing boundaries assume particular identities in order to be accepted or allowed to enter particular territorial spaces. This thesis can be applied to the traversing of boundaries by lesbians and gays within which they can either pass as heterosexual, within the context of mainstream social spaces, or as homosexual in order to be accepted within another, non-mainstream community, such as the lesbian community spaces created within the novels examined in this thesis.

Epps argues that:

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<sup>9</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, Immigration, Self-Exile and Sexual Dissidence in *Passing Lines: Immigration and Sexuality* Ed. Brad Epps, Keja Valens and Bill Johnson Gomez, Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 44.

To pass a line is thus not only to traverse a boundary, but also to tell a story...which if successful passes as truth itself, it is to play a part or to act in a way that strives to convince, persuade, or 'move' another; and it is to convey a tendency or a trend, a mode of behaviour, a way of being.<sup>10</sup>

Thus passing lines are performative acts by which an individual passes as conforming to certain norms of identity and enacting particular behaviours.<sup>11</sup> In order to pass as belonging to a particular community or within a certain nation a person must involve themselves in negotiations of pre-existing acts and identities by performing particular associated verbal and corporeal actions. As in one situation a person can embody a particular *gender* due to their corporeal and linguistic performance so too can the lesbian perform as *straight* in one context and as *lesbian* in another.

The political act of 'coming out' as homosexual, which breaks with the normative gender identification within a patriarchal society, has consequences which can either be, 'experienced as a source of radical pleasure or intense danger; it can function as a badge of shame or a source of pride.'<sup>12</sup> Passing as lesbian within a supportive lesbian community with a shared identity can be emancipating and protective; we see this perhaps most strongly conveyed in the acceptance of Lupe within the feminist movement and the lesbian community in *Amora*. However, at the same time within the context of a community which does not accept sexual identity transgression it can be dangerous and destructive; Valeria's subjection to violence upon 'coming out' in *Dos Mujeres* is an illustration of this danger. We can observe the need for constant negotiation of visible demonstrations of sexual identity within particular social contexts in the novels examined; where the lesbian protagonists pass as heterosexual in one area

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<sup>10</sup> Brad Epps, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Brad Epps, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Schlossberg in Brad Epps, 2005, p. 5.

of their lives, and as lesbian in another, constantly negotiating these passing lines. Indeed 'coming out' can be posited as part of the process of becoming lesbian or gay; it is part of a practical (re)creation of the self<sup>13</sup> which is linked with performativity in the same way as the creation of a gendered identity.

Social spaces can be highly differentiated and rules for conforming to a prescribed sexual identity or what constitutes breaking that identity is different depending on the social context of the action. Roger Lancaster claims that the inherent, dominant belief that one is either homosexual or heterosexual in sexual cultures which proceed from the principle of homology is simply not applicable within the sexual culture of Mexico, which proceeds from the principle of heterology. If homology decries that 'whoever has sex with someone of the same sex is a homosexual', then within cultures which ascribe to the principle of heterology it so follows that 'it matters not only with whom, but how and in what context, one has sex.'<sup>14</sup> The culture of machismo is less concerned with sexual objects instead focuses on sexual aims, and the sexual world is more likely to be conceived as divided into the difference between active, assertive sexuality and passive, receptive sexuality.<sup>15</sup> The image of the Mexican male who actively seeks out homosexual relations but who portrays the gender identity of a heterosexual male within social situations, and who is usually portrayed as the penetrator within the sexual act, is distinguished from the Mexican male who is penetrated in the sexual act and who may identify openly as a homosexual, who enacts transgressive gender identities and who may be associated as more 'feminine'. This leads Lancaster to declare that the term

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Blasius in Phelan, Shane, 1993, (Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics, *Signs*, Vol, 18, No. 4, Theorizing Lesbian Experience (Summer, 1993), p. 774.

<sup>14</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, 2005, Tolerance and Intolerance in Sexual Cultures in Latin America, *Passing Lines: Sexuality and Immigration*, Brad Epps, Keja Valens and Bill Johnson Gomez Eds., Harvard University Press, p. 261.

<sup>15</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, 2005, p. 258.

homosexual is inadequate for describing the Mexican male who engages in same-sex relations.<sup>16</sup> Lancaster does not address the attitude of the sexual culture within Mexico to the activity of lesbians and solely discusses the situation of men, whether he labels them 'gay' or not. I would however state that the situation for lesbians cannot be posited in the same way. Simply due to the fact that women engaged in same-sex sexual relations cannot be reduced to the status of penetrator or penetrated in the same way that men can be, a symptom which Lancaster relates to the culture of machismo and active/passive roles. Indeed, if within the sexual culture women are generally perceived as passive, or rather that femininity is associated with passivity, then the situation of lesbians can be demonstrated to exist outwith his discussion. It would be easy enough to assume that homophobic reactions against women who engage in same-sex relations would be directed at both women in the relationship. Evidently, however, many lesbian relationships can be viewed as enacting the learned rules of gender relations which might see one partner assuming a more dominant role or displaying traditionally masculine gendered attributes and in these cases often it is the less feminine woman who is targeted due to her lack of capability to pass as a heterosexual (feminine) woman.

Another point which Roger Lancaster makes in differentiating Mexican from Eurocentric understandings of homosexual relations is that he suggests that the usual dialectic of concealed and revealed present in European and North American imaginings of 'the closet' are more complex within Mexico due to existence of public secrecy and a subsequent tolerant intolerance. In public secrecy:

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<sup>16</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, 2005, p. 262.

[...] one is neither completely hidden nor, short of catastrophe, completely exposed, but always, it would seem, on the cusp of the two: concealed within what is revealed, and revealed within what is concealed; installed in a liminal space of magical transformation and creative spectacle but also of terror, madness and paranoia.<sup>17</sup>

This notion of public secrecy describes the way in which within the wider community the knowledge that an individual is homosexual can be a 'secret' which is widely known but which is only acknowledged in private. There are spaces within which the person can be open about their sexual identity, yet public acknowledgement of their queerness is not tolerated. There is an imagined frontier between what is acknowledged in private and what is publically tolerated. Lancaster illustrates this by reporting that Mexican public culture is said to support, 'a 'walk-in closet', that is to say, 'a space big enough to hold you and your whole family'''.<sup>18</sup> The implication is that an individual's coming out would effect not only themselves and so coming out is not only a personal affair. As Mogrovejo states, 'when one comes out, one' entire surrounding also 'come out'. A public lesbian also implicates her family, which could mean repression against the entire family, and, consequently, not merely personal risk.'<sup>19</sup> Therefore the relationship between public and private secrecy and the renegotiation of identity which assuming a non-normative sexual identity are pertinent to the discussion of the creation of community within the novels.

The actions of the women in *Dos Mujeres*, *Amora* and *Sandra*, *Secreto Amor* to renegotiate their sexual identities and the resulting consequences of their coming out or passing within certain situations address the complexities of coming out and passing within the particular contexts of each novel. The dialectics between public and private

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<sup>17</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, 2005, p. 263.

<sup>18</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, 2005, p. 263.

<sup>19</sup> Norma Mogrovejo, 2005, p. 413.

demonstrations of gender and sexual identity are key to this renegotiation of boundaries.

In Calderón's novel *Dos Mujeres* the character of Valeria is depicted as having to renegotiate the positioning of her sexual identity due to her involvement in a sexual relationship with Genovesa. The very first time that the two women kiss they see the image of themselves reflected in the mirror in Valeria's bedroom:

Nos perdimos en el espejo frente a la cama. Nuestras miradas se desprendieron como dos pájaros en fuga. Alrededor de nosotras miles de ojos rellenos de azul y mar, gusanos y despojos. En medio dos mujeres, una hincada frente a la otra; alrededor de ellas un panteón de ojos. Caímos en un silencio inhóspito....

-No es fácil hacer añicos a los fantasmas genitores – le dije – Lo nuestro significa romper con los símbolos más antiguos: símbolos aprendidos desde antes de nacer.<sup>20</sup>

The two women see themselves in the mirror and feel the weight of societal expectations of gender performativity upon them as they break the gender norms of femininity. Seeing themselves as two embracing women shocks their senses as within their minds they should only be seen in such an embrace alongside a man. According to the gender norms disseminated in dominant social discourse, they are constructed as feminine in part due to opposition to masculine man. In this moment they are acutely aware that they are shattering the symbols of dominant gendered imagining and partaking in a renegotiation of their gendered selves. The image of a thousand eyes surrounding them, representing the weight of the gendered norm instilled within them as 'ancient symbols', is significant as it demonstrates that even within the ultimate private space of the bedroom they must pass boundaries in their own self

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<sup>20</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 60.

representations of what constitutes their gendered selves. It is revealed that Genovesa, ‘Le preocupaba terriblemente que su gran historia de amor fuera con una mujer.’<sup>21</sup> She is concerned with the response of wider society, the eyes which bore down upon them from the bedroom mirror. Valeria’s claim that, ‘Nadie nos puede impedir seguir juntas, amarnos, desearnos. Los valores introyectados nos afectan más que ni las prohibiciones reales’<sup>22</sup> is seen to be of little comfort. The fear of judgement and shame is crucial in the depiction of the renegotiation of these women’s sexual identities and their practical recreation of the self.

This feeling of judgment is recalled in another scene, which is set in the public sphere, where the two women walk together in the streets of Mexico City:

Genovesa me tomó de la mano, soltándola de inmediato. En ese momento nos percatamos que la gran familia viajaba con nosotras. Algunos venían metidos en la cajuela, otros se habían colgado de las portezuelas. Todos nos señalaban con sus deditos:  
- Han ido demasiado lejos – parecían decir.<sup>23</sup>

The way in which the women perform their sexual identity is seen to be distinct between the private and public spheres. Whilst they are affectionate and openly express their desire for one another within the private refuge of their own domestic spheres, usually within Valeria’s home as imagined refuge, in public Genovesa holding Valeria’s hand is imagined as a step too far. They are ignoring or breaking with the unspoken rules of private secrecy: ‘*han ido demasiado lejos.*’ Having previously conformed to the laws of public secrecy, upon breaking them they experience negative results of being too open in their transgression. The liminal space which Lancaster

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<sup>21</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 68.

describes as a porous frontier is seen to be broken, and the passing of the line from private performativity of lesbian centred identity to public manifestation is revealed as potentially dangerous. It is depicted as preferable that the women continue to enact their relationship in private and not to pass over the boundary: ‘¿Crees que tu papá sabe de nosotras?’ asks Genovesa, ‘Sí, pero sólo a medias: así lo prefiere.’<sup>24</sup>

In Calderón’s description of the process of coming out or passing within particular social contexts she chooses to concentrate on the results of passing that line which exists on the boundary between protecting public ‘propriety’ and private ‘transgression’. The announcement by Valeria of the joy she felt in discovering that she could love another woman is presented as revelatory, ‘Para mí descubrir que me gustaba una mujer fue como para Cristóbal Colón descubrir las Américas. Nunca antes se me había ocurrido la posibilidad.’<sup>25</sup> Yet, despite this, Calderón presents the action of assuming this new identity as inherently dangerous and the violence enacted against lesbians as a direct result of their public manifestation of this new identity and gender performance. Roger Lancaster describes how developments which promoted queer visibility and gay self-representation broke with the pact of silence and invisibility inherent in public secrecy and released violence which was previously held beneath the surface.<sup>26</sup>

In *Dos Mujeres* this violence is embodied in the reactions of Valeria’s family when she breaks the taboo of secrecy and openly presents herself as lesbian by not continuing to hide her relationship with Genovesa. There are two examples of familial rejection

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<sup>24</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 162.

<sup>25</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, , 2005, p. 265.



which I would like to call attention to. In the first, Valeria is bathing with Genovesa and the tenderly erotic scene is interrupted by a call from her son on the intercom:

Era Ricky que quería saber el significado de la palabra discrepancia.

- No estar de acuerdo con algo – contesté después de meditarla.

- Pues discrepo – me dijo contundente – y además te quiero avisar que nosotras vamos a comer fuera – agregó.

- ¿Nosotras? ¿Quiénes nosotras?

- Marcos y yo.

Su lapsus me paralizó.

Ricky pasó por el comedor. Se le quedó mirando al candelabro de siete velas que me regaló mi madre el día de mi boda. Lo quiso sacar de la vitrina pero no pudo abrir la pequeña puerta. Buscó la llave y no la encontró. Con el codo rompió el vidrio y sacó el candelabro. Lo observó detenidamente. Escuché sus pasos subiendo las escaleras que llevan a mi recámara. Todavía mojada salí a su encuentro. Levantó el regalo por encima de sus ojos y me lo estrelló en la cabeza.<sup>27</sup>

Significantly Ricky uses a candlestick which was given as a wedding present in order to punish Valeria for having disassociated herself from the identity of married, heterosexual woman. The consequences of no longer passing as homosexual within the context of this family are clear. Similarly in the second example it is Valeria's mother's reaction to the discovery of the novel which she is writing about her lesbian relationship which causes the confrontation. The visibility of the printed word is an irrefutable manifestation of Valeria's self representation of herself as lesbian:

Ella temía, sobre toda las cosas de esta vida, que se hablara de la familia. Decía que hablar mal de la familia era ensuciarse una misma y, evidentemente mi novela le preocupaba. Con gran esfuerzo logré callarme pero mi silencio la desesperó.

- Además quiero decirte que sabemos todo – irrumpió agarrándose la cabeza y...

Sentí que la sangre se me escapaba.

- ¿Qué saben? – pregunté tratando de que no se me notara el terror que estaba sintiendo.

- Que haces el acto sexual con Genovesa.

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<sup>27</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 88.

Dicho por ella parecía lo más sucio del mundo. Aj, qué capacidad de convertir lo bello en algo abyecto. Y no había quien la pudiera callar. Les había clavado un puñal a ella y a mi padre, pero sobre todo a mis hijos: ‘Lo que tú hiciste ni un animal lo hace, ay, con todo lo que te dimos’.  
Decidí irme...  
- Aquella niña mía, mírenla en lo que se convirtió – alcancé a oírla antes de cerrar la puerta de su recámara.<sup>28</sup>

The inference in both these examples is that coming out to one’s family will result in ostracism, shame, rejection and, in the worst case, violence. As previously discussed, the ‘coming out’ of a lesbian within the context of a traditional gendered family which supports heterosexuality will not only affect the individual but also the wider family. It is the continuity of the reputation of the family’s name and standing in their social circle that is most important to Valeria’s mother.

Whilst Valeria and Genovesa are portrayed as sexually fulfilled within their relationship, this erotic fulfilment being pointedly contrasted to the lacklustre sexual relationship that Valeria had with her ex-husband, the framework around which they construct their relationship does not reflect a reimagining of sexual hierarchies as one might imagine within a lesbian relationship. Deborah Shaw in her examination of the novel notes that, ‘Valeria has internalized the rules she has grown up with to the extent that she is unable to entirely break with the gender roles she has learnt.’ Shaw goes on to argue that, ‘Her knowledge of gender relations is limited to male domination and female submission, and rather than seeking to deconstruct this domination/submission dichotomy she chooses to place herself on the phallic side of the power divide.’<sup>29</sup> Valeria constructs her lesbianism within this framework, she assumes the dominant role and depicts herself as dangerous in opposition with Genovesa who assumes the

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<sup>28</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 219.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, p. 58.

submissive feminine role and who is much more passive in the relationship. Valeria derives a sense of power from her control over Genovesa:

Me preguntó, sin desprender sus ojos de los míos, si se trataba de un raptó...la idea me parecía sensacional...  
- ¿Y obtienes placer en hacer prisioneros a tus huéspedes?  
- Sí, es muy excitante – le aseguré con sonrisa apenas dibujada.<sup>30</sup>

When Genovesa wishes to leave Valeria's house after their first sexual encounter Valeria's aggressiveness is demonstrative of her wish to control the situation, and her taking on of the dominant, more masculine role:

Le aseguré que su huida era un pretexto para no enfrentar lo que había sucedido entre nosotras. Dejó la maleta y vino a sentarse a mi lado. Me miró y supe que iba por buen camino...  
¿Tu crees que de eso se trata?  
Metí mi mano por su camisa blanca. Me detuvo la mano...  
-Eres peligrosa – opinó.<sup>31</sup>

The dominant role which Valeria assumes in the relationship is not only limited to sexual contexts. Economically she assumes the traditional masculine role as her opulent house becomes the luxurious refuge within which they can enact their love affair and her family's money allows her to pay for them to go on trips abroad to New York and San Francisco. The lack of feminist discourse within the novel allows for a representation of the lesbian relationship within the framework of heterosexual power relations in way which is not possible within the feminist rhetoric of Roffiel's *Amora*.

The subtleties of public/private passing and being out within *Amora* should be considered in light of the feminist discourse which pervades the text. Similarly to

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<sup>30</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 66.

Valeria in *Dos Mujeres* Lupe finds the first time she made love with a woman to be an ecstatic revelation:

- Andaba levitando de felicidad. Tenía la sensación de haber descubierto un secreto muy importante, de haber recuperado la mitad del mundo.

...

Me moría por abrazar a la gente en la calle y gritarle: '¡También se puede amar a las mujeres!' Obviamente, no sólo nunca lo hice sino que pasaron muchos años antes que pudiera confiárselo a alguien.<sup>32</sup>

However, it differs from Calderón's description as Lupe not only reconsiders her sexual identity as a result of discovering that it was possible to love women but at the same time her gender and sexual identities are being influenced by her involvement in the feminist movement. She is discovering a new way to live and love which breaks the norms with which she had grown up in a way that is impossible within Valeria's closed, non community centred world. Her involvement in feminism is clear within the rhetoric utilised in the novel which, as Finnegan has previously noted, was critiqued by some at the time of the novel's publication as being little more than a feminist pamphlet.<sup>33</sup> Indeed Roffiel does employ feminist discourse to support her depiction of the successes of Lupe and her friends in practising independent, supportive, woman-centred lifestyles. In the following quotation Lupe counters the accusation that homosexuality is not natural by discussing the historical proof that lesbianism has existed throughout history and in some societies has not only been tolerated but considered as divine. Her discussion is reminiscent of Butler's counter that gender is not a natural state but must be constructed through the performance of gender normative practices:

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<sup>32</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> Nuala Finnegan, 2007, p. 217.

[...] a mí me gusta estar abierta a ambas posibilidades, y si hubiera siete sexos, me encantaría probarlos todos.  
...¿qué es natural hoy en día?  
Lo que te condiciona la piel y los sentimientos es la educación. Si desde chiquita te dicen que quienes tienes que sentir es de los hombres, pues hacia allá diriges todo tu ser, y te cancelas otras posibilidades.<sup>34</sup>

Within *Amora* the lesbians in the imagined community are seen to renegotiate their gendered identities within a feminist framework. Within this community the fear of rejection from wider society due to their sexual identity as lesbians is not considered to be pertinent in the same way that it is by Valeria and Genovesa, who are acting out with the protection of the group. When Genovesa reveals to her friends that her lover Claudia is considering leaving her due to her fear of passing as homosexual it is feminist centred response that her friends react with:

- Claudia le tiene pánico al rechazo social, al mundo de afuera, al *qué dirán*.  
- ¿Y entonces va a dejarte pasar por miedo a la opinión de gente que ni conoce y que no le da lo que tú sino que la juzga y reprime? Eso que lo deje para los espíritus pusilánimes, como ella los llama. Nosotras, los seres vivos y comprometidos, dictamos nuestras propias reglas e inventamos nuestras propias formas de relacionarnos, porque las que existen ni nos alcanzan ni nos convencen.<sup>35</sup>

They are shown to represent their difference as breaking out of the gender norms and have successfully renegotiated their identities by utilising feminist rhetoric which asserts that the traditional rules which exist are not capable of encompassing their gendered realities. Within their group they no longer feel the need to conform to traditional expectations of gender norms and can create a self representation specific to the way they live.

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<sup>34</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 172.

Roffiel criticises lesbians who do not break from the norms learnt within the heterosexual framework, but who attempt to replicate them as in the case of Valeria and Genovesa in *Dos Mujeres*. Instead, she describes an alternative way to love which breaks with the prescribed notion of gendered relationships. In this way she is seen to articulate the difference between those lesbians who do conform to gendered norms and those who, like the women in her community, disengage with them:

Habría que aprender a amar de otra manera...Cómo me gustaría sacar un desplegado en todos los periódicos, algo así como un a invitación a las lesbianas que aún repiten los patrones de dominación tan comunes en las relaciones amorosas heterosexuales: amemos diferente, sin cortarnos las venas, sin amenazar con tirarnos desde un puente en el periférico, terminar vomitando en Garibaldi o bajándole la novia a la amiga nada más para que vean qué chingona vengo este año, es decir, no amemos así como dicen que amamos las lesbianas, como si fuéramos la versión femenina del Charro Negro...Existimos unas que todavía pensamos que el amor puede ser distinto, que no es necesario enamorarse apasionadamente para construir una relación de pareja, que hay otras formas además de la convivencia y la posesividad.<sup>36</sup>

This separation between lesbians who might pass within the feminist framework of Roffiel's imagined community and those who exist outside it can also be seen to be articulated in their definition of the *buga*. The women within Lupe's lesbian friendship group class the *buga* as a 'mujer que, en apariencia, se relaciona sexualmente sólo con hombres'.<sup>37</sup> These women may have sexual relationships with other women but pass as heterosexual within wider society. We can see the acknowledgement of their passing as performative within the description – it is through their repeated feminine associated actions that they reinforce their inferred heterosexuality and they are seen to deny their lesbianism by conforming to stereotypical notions of gender relations. These women are

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<sup>36</sup> Rosamaria Roffiel, 1989, p. 45. This passage has echoes of Castellanos's poem *Meditación en el umbral* which talks about another way of being a woman – 'Debe de haber otro modo que no se llama Safo... Otro modo de ser.' <http://www.poemasde.net/meditacion-en-el-umbral-rosario-castellanos/>

<sup>37</sup> Rosamaria Roffiel, 1989, footnote p. 15.

not included within the imagined lesbian community which Lupe and her friends create but rather are criticised for their ‘limited’ conception of their gendered reality. *Bugas* are seen to be dangerous to fall in love with as they might experiment with other women but they are unable to break with the heterosexual norms which they see as inherent to their gender identity. They may pass as homosexual when they are engaged in a relationship with a woman but this is seen to be a temporary state after which they return to heterosexual gender activity:

[Dice qué] le causa conflicto hacer el amor conmigo porque en realidad tiene ‘exceso de núcleos heterosexuales’

...

- Pinches bugas culeras me encabronan deveras – se enoja Mariana.

...

¡Es increíble! Cogen con los tipos, no tienen orgasmos, les molesta la penetración y se sienten vacías, pero eso sí, les conflictúa andar con una porque, aunque les supermovemos el tapete, resulta que ellas sí están muy definidas.<sup>38</sup>

The strong political feminist leanings of the created lesbian community allow them to identify freely as lesbian in a way which is not posited within Calderón’s *Dos Mujeres*. Whilst Roffiel allows the lesbians in *Amora* to draw strength from their position within their close-knit community and their application of feminist principles Calderón’s women are isolated and their apparent lack of awareness of alternative forms of gender expression and relationship models makes them less able to cross the boundaries between public and private expression of lesbian identity without resulting violence. We can contrast Valeria and Genovesa’s fear of being identified as lesbian when they inadvertently hold hands in public to the reaction of Lupe when she and Claudia are confronted by men whilst out in the city:

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<sup>38</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 147.

- ¿Qué onda, güeritas? ¿Por qué tan abrazaditas? ¿Apoco son lesbianas? ¡Qué desperdicio, si están retebuenas...!
- Con tipos como ustedes, a una no le cuesta nada decidirse – replico midiéndolos con la mirada y tratando de sonar muy tranquila mientras conduzco a Claudia al otro lado de la acera.
- ¡Pinches tortilleras!
- ¡Manfloras!<sup>39</sup>

Lupe does not attempt to pass as heterosexual in this situation but counters the attack by using humour, yet it is clear that she is acknowledging her identity as a lesbian woman. This results in insults being thrown at them, but not in violence as happened to Valeria when her lesbianism was made public in *Dos Mujeres*. In addition the insults of *tortilleras* and *manfloras* are given less power as insults when Lupe proclaims that ‘[...] la palabra me gusta. Manflora. Es como una yerba olorosa, un ser mitológico, o el nombre de un hada.’<sup>40</sup> The power of the word as an insult is reclaimed by Lupe as something attractive, even mythical, with which she can identify and which she can claim as representative of her lesbianism as ‘other’.

Lupe’s apparent openness of her lesbianism within the novel is seen as a direct result of her involvement in the feminist movement and her place within the imagined lesbian community created with her friends and in her work for the women’s refuge. However, within the depiction of her close relationship with her adolescent niece Mercedes she passes as heterosexual, even though she is supportive of the role of emancipated women and lesbians in discussions with her and her best friend Verónica.<sup>41</sup> Although Lupe’s mother and siblings are aware of her lesbianism she chooses to hide it from her niece, which is an interesting change from her attitude in the rest of the novel. In this passage

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<sup>39</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 109.

<sup>40</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, pp. 133-137.



Roffiel uses the adolescents questioning of what lesbians are like to express the idea that they are just like other women, except they happen to love women:

Mi querida Verito, las lesbianas son mujeres comunes y silvestres, de todos los colores, edades, nacionalidades y profesiones que simplemente aman a otras mujeres en lugar de amar a los hombres.<sup>42</sup>

Whilst Lupe is seen to be fully engaged with open public and private expression of her lesbian identity this interaction with her niece shows that, despite her general attitude, she is still held to some extent within the bonds of public secrecy. This is not a failure by Roffiel in her representation of strong, positive lesbian women but rather a realistic portrayal. There are situations where even the most militant lesbian feminist experiences the bind of public secrecy and must negotiate when and for how long is the moment to pass as heterosexual.

Reyna Barrera approaches the theme of public secrecy, passing and coming out in a manner quite distinct to *Amora's* proud community setting and Calderón's apprehensive depiction of coming out within *Dos Mujeres*. The issue of secrecy is not necessarily a response to the issue of coming out publically but of revealing a burgeoning relationship within the friendship group. It is an interesting subversion of the normal representation of queer lifestyles where a person might be out within a smaller community but passing within the wider social context. Two of the three lesbian characters in the *Sandra, Secreto Amor*, Ramona and Sandra, are publically 'out' within the social world of the theatre, similarly Luis is openly gay, but it is Eurídice who struggles with the renegotiation of her sexual identity when she falls in love with Sandra.

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<sup>42</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 134.

The city of Guanajuato is built around the base of a mountain within a network of tunnels and passages that were excavated during the search for precious metals during the mining era. Barrera frequently refers to underground city as a secret space which is difficult to navigate if one does not possess specific knowledge and understanding of the intricate network. We can view the underground city of Guanajuato as a metaphor for homosexual identification, where a whole other world is present underneath the surface of visible, heterosexual society. This world is underground and is only navigable by those who are in the know – in the same way that queer identity is similarly hidden from the majority and common knowledge for those who can identify its queer signifiers. It is a confusing place but is also one which contains perfect moments, glorious secrets as is seen by the metaphor of the precious minerals which are contained in the depths of the tunnels. It is a space uncontrolled by the laws of everyday life, the lack of linear routes and absence of civil control within the network of roads which run through the underground tunnels can be seen to represent queer existence which itself breaks with heterosexually gendered control and which exists in less visible spaces which might be described as forgotten:

- En las calles de abajo de la ciudad no hay semáforos, tampoco policías de tránsito...
  - Nadie podría transitar sin un guía por tan intrincado camino en el que además, hay ciertas incisiones, desahogos y vestíbulos oscuros que llevan al peatón a la luz, a las calles, al gentío...
- Caminar por las entrañas de una montaña en cuyas faldas han sido construidos iglesias, casas y edificios, es una experiencia única; recomponer el paisaje equivale a ir destrenzando con sigilo, hilo a hilo, el tapiz de la memoria, para recobrarlo del almacén al que suele llamarse olvido.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 112.

It is a forgotten land, lost within the cultural imagination. This passage recalls Lupe's recollection in *Amora* of a mythical space in history within which lesbianism was accepted, 'La homosexualidad ha existido siempre y en algunas sociedades no sólo ha sido permitida sino considerada como algo divino.'<sup>44</sup> When the principle characters take a shortcut through the underground passages they are led to imagine that, 'sus pasos emprendían extraños viajes por los meandros de una ciudad invisible, dentro de otra, con moradas sin cerraduras, para olvidar secretos y desperdicios que consigo arrostra la memoria.'<sup>45</sup> The city of Guanajuato as depicted by Barrera is one in which a secret life exists below the surface. Eurídice states that, 'A mí se me hace que un día se les va a caer la ciudad que está encima, de por sí parece que éstas es el asiento de una olla.'<sup>46</sup> The implication is that the visible social world which constructs itself around the framework of dominant heterosexuality and binary gender norms will one day be shattered by an uprising of currently less visible homosexual and queer identity to mainstream consciousness.

This separation of the visible world and the invisible underworld can be viewed as indicative for the need for passing. Culturally imagined static gender configuration is broken within the depiction of the principal characters in Barrera's text. As previously mentioned Arcelia, our one protagonist who is currently in a heterosexual relationship, is revealed to have previously had a positively depicted sexual relationship with a woman. Although currently she passes as heterosexual by her engagement in a relationship with Armando her previous relationship with a woman demonstrates the falseness of this conclusion of compulsive and static heterosexuality.

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<sup>44</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 86.

<sup>45</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 15.

The relationship between Sandra and her ex-partner Ramona is particularly interesting in examining Barrera's depiction of coming out. The two women are seen to have significantly less statically configured genders than in the traditional representations of women that we see in *Dos Mujeres*. Ramona is born to parents who believed they were having a boy. In what can be seen as a homage to the masculine named protagonist in the seminal lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*, before she is born she is baptised Ramón López. Ramón is called by the more feminine names Ramona or Romy throughout the novel but she is portrayed possessing both masculine and feminine qualities. Even as a child she is portrayed as performing as both genders and although this does not seem to result in any rejection from her family, her experience with her peers is different:

Si vestía como muchacho, las adolescentes la rechazaban; pero ellos la adoptaban de inmediato como un camarada más para completar el equipo de béisbol, por ejemplo. Si vestía como ellas, se sentía acosada por quienes se declaraban sus amigas y protectoras.<sup>47</sup>

Ramona as an adult assumes a more masculine gender identity and this is apparent in the way in which she treats Sandra when they are in a relationship together. Ramona and her friends are described as having masculine qualities and she is the only butch character in all three of the novels. This representation of the women in the novels as primarily fulfilling the characteristics of 'femme' lesbians will be discussed in the following chapter. What is important in relation to the discussion of passing is how Ramona does not pass as heterosexual but instead is openly gay and her concentration is not on hiding her sexuality but on concealing her failing relationship with Sandra by continuing to construct the image of a model gay relationship in public.

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<sup>47</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 53.

Sandra is also described as never having to have passed as heterosexual; there is no ‘coming out’ moment which was so pivotal in reconfiguring the identities of the lesbians in *Dos Mujeres* and *Amora*. Instead as Ramona’s gender was defined at her birth so too is Sandra’s sexuality prophesied by her grandfather when she is a child:

En tu camino sólo habrá una pasión dominante, no te niegues a ella. Una mujer, mayor que tú, te acompañará en los días de felicidad y también enjugará tus lágrimas. Es tu ángel que estará contigo por siempre.<sup>48</sup>

This prediction of her future becomes a well known story within her family and so, ‘para toda la familia estaba claro que ella se iría con una mujer, sencillamente porque ya estaba dispuesto.’<sup>49</sup> The final message in *Sandra, Secreto Amor* is similar to that of *Amora* as when Eurídice finally reveals her secretive relationship with Sandra to her friends there is no resulting confrontation or violence but the message is rather one of accepting love in whichever form it appears:

A nadie tiene que importarle tu preferencia, sino la propia felicidad. Creo que tenemos derecho a esa rebanada, por lo menos una vez en la vida. Sí, yo también lo creo. Se ama a la persona por quien es y como es, su alma, su espíritu.<sup>50</sup>

The inference is that for the characters in *Sandra, Secreto Amor* there is not the shame or threat of violence associated with assuming a lesbian identity which so pervades the text in *Dos Mujeres*. At the same time, however, the protective all female (and principally lesbian) community which is portrayed in *Amora* and which posits the experiences of heterosexual and homosexual women as oppositional is not present in

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<sup>48</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 167.

<sup>49</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 169.

<sup>50</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 171.

Barrera's novel. The decade which separates the publication of the novels is significant in explaining this difference. Whilst we can see *Amora*'s feminist message as indicative of Roffiel's involvement in 1970s feminist movement, by the time Barrera is writing *Sandra, Secreto Amor* in the late 1990s the need for essentialist depictions of lesbian communities in order to claim their legitimacy within Mexican society is not as strong. This allows for more subtle configurations of queer society, where gender and sexual identity norms are viewed as more malleable. Barrera plays upon the idea of coming out and public secrecy with Mexican society. In her novel Guanajuato is a space within which the less visible queer society can come to the surface, leaving their secret underworld. Her characters do not conform to sexist societal standards of femininity and the lack of societal judgment upon the characters is highly subversive in its tacking of the heterosexual order. Hers is not however a perfect society where 'anything goes' and all queer relationships are successful and empowering. She still acknowledges the difficulties that Eurídice has in reconfiguring her sexual identity in light of her relationship with Sandra and she addresses conflicts within lesbian relationships in a way which is different from *Amora*. Barrera does not shy away from depicting lesbian relationships as flawed and as possessing unequal power dimensions and this makes her novel distinctive from *Amora* which at times can be seen as somewhat utopian and essentialist in its depiction of lesbian existence.

*Amora* and *Dos Mujeres* tackle the issue of coming out as necessary and liberating, contrary to the social tolerance of transgressive sexual identities depicted in *Sandra, Secreto Amor*. There are great moments of revelation when the women 'discover' that they can have successful, romantic sexual relationships with women and the triumph of these lesbian relationships is posited in direct opposition to heterosexual relationships in

the novels which are depicted as either unfulfilling, denigrating, destructive and, in extreme cases, violent. The success of *Amora* is in Roffiel's depiction of community as essential to renegotiating identity. Lupe passes into the social world of lesbian identification as a result of her inclusion in a community which lives within the framework of lesbian feminist discourse in a way which Valeria and Genovesa simply cannot do due to their isolation and lack of lesbian or feminist perspective. For them the rite of passing as heterosexual is essential to their survival, as is demonstrated by Valeria's ostracism from her family and the violence enacted upon her when she publically assumes a lesbian identity. Gender identity is shown to be constructed and performative and can be renegotiated in order to reconfigure the women's identities as lesbians within the novels. Public secrecy is demonstrative of the boundaries upon which passing becomes so vitally important in this reconfiguration and, in the case of *Amora* and *Dos Mujeres* in particular, 'coming out' is an element of the performative acts which are necessary in assuming a lesbian identity.

## Chapter Three

### SUBVERTING NORMS IN REPRESENTING THE LESBIAN SUBJECT

In the previous chapters I have discussed the creation of a lesbian community by comparing its configuration to that of the imagined nation and by addressing how the authors have articulated the reconstruction of identity within the contexts of passing gendered boundaries and representing oneself as lesbian within a wider social context. This chapter will deal with the representation of lesbians within the novel considering the expression of butch/femme identities, the subversion of myths and symbols to encompass a lesbian sensibility and the reference to literary figures within the novels. I will also consider how the authors deal with male characters within the novels and what this says about how they represent their lesbian characters. I am aware that lesbian identities cannot be reduced to the binary butch/femme and is indeed much more complex existing along malleable scale and changeable within contexts. However, I have chosen to focus on the butch/femme binary as I believe it is expressed within the novels and as a useful tool for the purpose of examining the imbalance that I have detected within representations of lesbian identities by the authors.

Within mainstream cultural representations of lesbianism there is one figure that tends to loom large in the mainstream cultural imagination: the mannish lesbian or the butch lesbian. Ann M. Ciasullo addresses the lack of representation of the butch lesbian in North American mainstream media in her article 'Making Her (In)Visible'.<sup>1</sup> Ciasullo argues that her findings demonstrate that mainstream representations of lesbians in the media have almost exclusively represented the lesbian as feminine and that

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<sup>1</sup> Ana M. Ciasullo, 2001, Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 557-608.



representations of butch lesbians are usually ignored. Ciasullo found that within the mainstream media lesbians are ‘normalised, heterosexualised or ‘straightened out’ via the femme body.’<sup>2</sup> The lesbian femme body is both desexualised and sexualised through its representation. The femme lesbian can be made into an object of desire for straight audiences by representing the lesbian as embodying a hegemonic femininity and therefore as consumable within the heterosexual framework. At the same time, the desire between the two women is generally desexualised in its representation; men can imagine away the individual’s lesbianism and see her as an object of heterosexual desire. Ciasullo argues that the butch body is made invisible within the dominant media as it rarely figures in portrayals of lesbians in mainstream media.<sup>3</sup> She argues that although the butch is traditionally the lesbian signifier within the mainstream cultural landscape, by only representing the femme lesbian within media representations of lesbianism she is rendered more invisible. The femme body can be ‘de-lesbianised’ and can pass as heterosexual; as a result she is marked simultaneously as both lesbian and non-lesbian. The butch body cannot be de-lesbianised as her body is already marked as lesbian by her association with traditionally masculine physical appearance and behavioural attributes. The butch lesbian is able to disorder the notion that masculinity is an inherently male attribute. It is useful to recall Judith Butler’s position that the butch body is capable of parodying the conception of a primary or static gender identity.<sup>4</sup> Ciasullo sees the increasing representation of lesbianism by the femme body as inherently dangerous to lesbian visibility. She views the body or image of the ‘butch’

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<sup>2</sup> Ana M. Ciasullo, 2001, p. 578.

<sup>3</sup> Ciasullo refers to magazine covers representing lesbians which appeared in Time, Newsweek and Vogue as well as representations of lesbians in mainstream film and television such as the gay marriage on Friends. See Ciasullo’s article for full examples.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: London: Routledge, 1989:1999, p. 158.

lesbian as a figure ‘better able than a ‘femme’ body to challenge mainstream cultural fantasies about lesbianism.’<sup>5</sup>

If Ciasullo describes the butch body as much better able to challenge mainstream heterosexual views of lesbianism, and Butler describes the butch performance as capable of subverting normative gender performances then why is it that in *Dos Mujeres* and *Amora* there is a distinct lack of more masculine or butch figures and in it is only in *Sandra, Secreto Amor* that a butch lesbian appears? I hope to demonstrate that this perceived lack of butch characters can be seen as from two distinct viewpoints. On the one hand there is a sense that the lesbian is articulated as femme in order to break with the stereotypically negative imagining of the lesbian as butch, and by depicting the lesbians in the texts as feminine there is an attempt make lesbianism more accessible, understandable and ultimately desirable to a mainstream audience. It may also be an attempt to make the invisible femme lesbian (who is able to pass as and therefore be re-imagined as heterosexual) more visible through her depiction in text. On the other hand it could be argued that whilst Roffiel and Calderón might imagine that their representations of femme lesbians break with dominant images, the choice of the authors to exclude images of butch lesbians limits the representation of a significant percentage of the lesbian population. Positive depictions of butch lesbians alongside femme lesbians (and of course the many different manifestations of lesbian identity which exist between these binary identifications) may have created a more successful imagined lesbian community.

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<sup>5</sup> Ana M. Ciasullo, 2001, p. 578.

I have, I hope, previously demonstrated the way in which the isolation of the two lesbian women puts limits on the creation of a lesbian community in *Dos Mujeres*. Deborah Shaw states that ‘by emphasising the fact that Valeria and her lover have nothing to do with the women’s movement, they do not have to face the consequences of ‘the stigma of feminism’.’<sup>6</sup> The images we are presented with are of women who might easily pass as heterosexual due to the emphasis on heterosexually defined notions of feminine beauty in descriptions of the women. However, the fact both women were previously married and living within an exclusively heterosexual environment is obviously a main factor in their compliance with heterocentric imaginings of their selves and of love. Their romance is articulated with sentimental language and stereotypical images of romantic love. Valeria decorates her house with vases of red roses and dresses seductively in a red silk blouse to await Genovesa before their first meeting alone.<sup>7</sup>

The use of clichéd sentimental language in describing the theme of lesbianism, especially considering this was only the second lesbian novel published in Mexico, can feel awkward and unsatisfying. The women are depicted within the boundaries of heterosexual constructions of femininity in all instances except their sexual experiences. They are unable to break from the codes of heterosexuality which have moulded their personal identities as feminine (heterosexual) women throughout their lives. Valeria is mother to two sons and Genovesa is also associated as a maternal figure though her work teaching art to young children. The language employed by Calderón is particularly sentimental and limited in her depiction of lesbianism to traditional stereotypes. For

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah Shaw, *Erotic or Political: Literary Representations of Mexican Lesbians*, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. 1996, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 51.

example she does not consider that the two women could raise a family together but instead Valeria is reduced to stereotypical, sentimental and heterocentric imaginings of lesbianism as excluding motherhood, ‘Pensé que viviendo conmigo estaba perdiendo la oportunidad de ser madre. Tenía toda la fuerza y la ternura para ser una mamá adorable. Sentí que alguien me agarraba por dentro del cuello y tuve ganas de llorar.’<sup>8</sup> The two women are not depicted as strong and emancipated, as the lesbian characters in *Amora* are imagined, but disturbingly the relationship is depicted as leaving them weak and emotionally unstable:

Después de una eternidad Genovesa volvió al cuarto, estaba terriblemente pálida. Se recargó sobre el muro y lloró. Quise abrazarla pero mis músculos no obedecían. Sentí tal desesperación que estuve segura que mi cerebro iba a explotar en mil pedazos. Genovesa se acercó a mí. Nunca ha sido fácil lo nuestro – dijo acariciándome la cara. Aullé como un animal herido.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst in general it can be posited that the images of the lesbians in *Dos Mujeres* conform to heterocentric, sentimental images of feminine women, the depiction of erotic scenes is valuable in the manner in which it does not reduce the moments to voyeuristic or pornographic illustrations of sex but celebrates the way in which the two women can be sexually satisfied without the need for a man.<sup>10</sup> The language is sentimental yet the descriptions of oral sex between two women break with the taboo of silence on the subject in a way which is direct and does not rely on insinuation:

Mi boca se detuvo en su cuello. Bajé por su vientre, retuve sus caderas. Ella acercó sus senos a mis senos, a mi cara, a mi boca; lamió con su lengua mi cuello...  
- Deseo hacerte mía: volverte tuya – musité a su oído.

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<sup>8</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, pp. 59-60.

Mi lengua perturbada recorre sus senos, sus pezones inflamados, su vientre liso, se interna en su vulva: está hecha de musgo fresco. Destellos plateados caen sobre un mar plúmbago...La tierra se vuelve líquida....Reconoce su sabor a través de mi boca...nuestras voces se dicen coplas. Una voz urbana clama: te amo. Esa voz es mía y de nadie más.<sup>11</sup>

This depiction of lesbian sex is liberating in its sensuality and the erotic potential of love between two women disrupts the dominant discourse of heterosexuality. However, the lack of representation of lesbian characters which would disrupt the idea of women as inherently feminine means that *Dos Mujeres* does not depict a non-singularly feminine identified lesbian community.

In *Amora* the lesbian protagonist Lupe is also depicted as overtly feminine but Roffiel attempts to demonstrate how this portrayal is part of an attempt to break with the stereotypical representation of lesbianism. Lupe argues that her representing herself to others as a feminine lesbian is a subversive act by which she can break the traditional image of the lesbian body as butch and raise the consciousness of lesbianism within dominant heterosexual society:

La gente tiene una imagen muy estereotipada de la lesbiana: marimacha, de pantalones, chamarra de cuero y pelo rasurado. Cuando te les presentes, femenina, dulcecita, cariñosa y amable, pues les rompes los esquemas y, a veces, hasta llegan a agarrar cierta conciencia.<sup>12</sup>

Her objective is that, 'lo clandestino y 'terrible' deja de serlo cuando se habla de ello y se vuelve lo que es: parte de nuestra cotidianidad.'<sup>13</sup> Roffiel's intention appears to be to present the lesbian characters as different to the stereotypical representation of the

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<sup>11</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 111.

mannish woman, ‘la versión femenina del Charro Negro’,<sup>14</sup> which is so potent within the dominant imagining of the lesbian woman. Similarly she presents feminists outside of this depiction, ‘*Bola de viejas locas, guangas, desocupadas. Bola de lesbianas, antihombres. Bola de feas y amargadas.*’<sup>15</sup> However, I would argue that by representing her lesbians as ‘femmes’ – sweet, friendly and caring women – she further supports the idea that butch lesbians might not also fulfil those internal characteristics and that they might do so in a body which would break with the heterocentric notions of gender in a much more visible form than the lesbian femme.

Within the novel it is interesting that Roffiel neither chooses to identify any of the lesbian women in her friendship group as overtly butch, nor does she even give them masculine qualities. The women are not described as physically attractive unless they are fulfilling heterosexual standards of feminine beauty. It is the *buga* figure of Claudia to whom the descriptions of physical appearance are generally limited. Upon seeing her play the flute Claudia is described as evoking the image of, ‘una pequeña hada descalza, con el pelo alborotado y la mirada humedecida.’<sup>16</sup> It is a romantic image of a mythical creature, simultaneously a lesbian and not a lesbian, as Ciasullo described the femme images of lesbianism displayed in North American magazines. Heterosexualism seems to be associated with fashion to some extent within Roffiel’s novel. Claudia’s up to date fashion choices are contrasted with Lupe’s. We see Claudia described in one passage as arriving for a date with Valeria:

[...] con unas botitas blancas al estilo Peter Pan (creo que están de moda), una blusa – blanca también – y una minifalda de mezclilla! Al verla pienso que no voy a atreverme a caminar públicamente a su lado,

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<sup>14</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 50.

pero las ganas de ganar la calle con Claudia son más grandes que mi pudor.<sup>17</sup>

We can contrast this with Lupe's description of herself and her lesbian flatmate:

Mariana y yo somos más bien fachosonas. A mí no se me quita ese especto de feminista de los setenta. ¡Ay, Santa Flora Tristán! ¿Será para siempre? Ya anuncié: no acepto más ropa india de regalo. Mariana es más sobria, más tradicional, con sus pantalones de pana, sus blusitas y sus suéteres de colores....parece estudiante de alguna universidad inglesa.<sup>18</sup>

Lupe does not present herself or her friends as anything nearing the butch figure but does fall back on the stereotypical image of the unfashionable feminist. What is interesting is her reference to her use of 'ropa de india'. This reflects the trend by feminist women to wear indigenous clothing in order to symbolise their solidarity with another marginalised group. In Mexico this trend was perhaps most famously embodied by the use of indigenous dress and jewellery by Frida Khalo and can makes us recall Chicana identification with the indigenous women of Aztlán and La Malinche. The usually strong and empowering feminist rhetoric which Roffiel employs to imagine an alternative way of representing lesbian love seems weakened by her lack of representation of the butch figure. Roffiel's lesbians could pass as heterosexual if they wished, although it is obvious that they generally don't as is demonstrated by Lupe's reaction to homophobic taunts as described in the previous chapter.<sup>19</sup> The butch lesbian does something which the femme lesbian cannot do; by claiming masculine identifiers for her own use, the butch sets herself apart from the 'average' heterosexual woman by failing to present herself as traditionally feminine in order to appeal to the male gaze

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<sup>17</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Lupe responds to homophobic taunts, not by avoiding the situation but by answering back to the men. Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 109.

and so is a more visible disrupter of the heterosexual matrix. By representing the lesbians as more feminine in her novel Roffiel appears to attempt to counter the negative associations of the butch woman within dominant imagining of lesbianism. However, it is clear that by avoiding any masculine signifiers in her depiction of the women she loses the potential power which only the butch woman possesses to be able to break heterocentric associations of innate femininity as associated with female gender.

Barrera's depiction of women in *Sandra, Secreto Amor* is more inclusive in its depiction. Heterosexual women are not depicted as singularly submissive, sexually unfulfilled and downtrodden by patriarchy in the same way that is suggested in the description within *Amora* and *Dos Mujeres*. They are given a much more active role in society and Arcelia's description of her female relatives is of how they, 'mantenían un férreo poder en guante de seda.'<sup>20</sup> Despite this, Barrera does not ignore the inequality existent within the heterosexual framework and situates these strong women within a tradition in which women were imagined solely as wives and mothers. In her portrayal of lesbians in the novel Barrera is much more open in her portrayal of the lesbian community including a butch/femme couple, and also addressing inequality within the lesbian relationships. That Barrera moves to represent lesbians as capable of rage and jealousy can be contrasted with Roffiel's community of solidarity and equality. The unsatisfying relationship between butch Romy and femme Sandra is described in some detail with Romy taking the role of masculine aggressor, and, in an interesting twist, presented as the most macho character in the novel.

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<sup>20</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 83.



Sandra and Romy's relationship is depicted as multifaceted and tempestuous. Romy is presented as consumed by jealousy and possessiveness and her fear of being alone is explained by the fact that her mother, grandmother and Indian nana all died when she was an adolescent. Barrera addresses Romy sympathetically; she is not just a singularly violent and oppressively dominant character, but her actions are explained (although not justified) in the description that:

[...] en el fondo no era más que una inseguridad disfrazada, una llamada de atención de su persona, caprichosa y autoritaria, que se volvía odiosa debido a que no encontraba respuesta.<sup>21</sup>

Barrera gives Ramona as the singular butch character in the novel a complex character and legitimises her portrayal by including her childhood memories in the novel (a method which she only employs for the principal female characters in the novel). It is revealed that Romy's baptised name of Ramón López is imagined by her as having powerful masculine qualities, 'no se llamaba Ramón [in her daily life] ese nombre lo pensaba, lo repetía, era su nombre de batalla, su nombre de héroe.'<sup>22</sup> And it is in masculine terms that Romy is presented by Barrera: she becomes the macho hero (or villain) of the novel.

Eurídice describes her fear of Romy as though she is the typical Mexican macho character, gun in hand trying to save her (his) dignity:

El carácter de Romy era un obstáculo, se trataba de una mujer de armas tomar. Se imaginaba perseguida por Ramona a bordo de su automóvil a lo largo del periférico, pistola en mano, disparándole a plena luz del día como hizo con Maquis, una dizque rival de amores.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 77.

We can view this scene alongside a similar passage describing Romy's reaction to a waiter addressing her as a man:

Sin saber cómo o de dónde, sacó una pistola e injuriando al comisionado de la entrada le dijo:  
- ¡Cómo carajos me pide usted a mí una cartilla de servicio militar, pendejo! ¿No ve que soy mujer? – al tiempo que hacía un disparo al aire.<sup>24</sup>

Barrera gives her the ultimate macho role, gun in hand she is fighting for the love of a woman. She is assuming the masculine attributes which she associates with her childhood *nombre de batalla* Ramón. What is powerful about this image is that it is a Mexican woman that Barrera is describing and this representation of the lesbian butch is highly subversive, especially within the contexts of traditional Mexican images of gender identity. Romy as butch lesbian is at once man and woman; she breaks the imagined natural state of gender and makes the lesbian highly visible within *Sandra, Secreto Amor*. However, even more interesting is the fact that Romy is revealed to be shooting blanks.<sup>25</sup> Romy may be configured as the masculine signifier but she is impotent, her masculinity can be seen as performative.

That Romy as butch woman is also the symbol for violence within Barrera's novel is also meaningful within the creation of the lesbian imagined community. Her portrayal of a masculine woman as violent is different from the suggestion by Roffiel and Calderón that men are the sole perpetrators of violence in Mexican society.

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<sup>24</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 63.

In *Dos Mujeres* the men are portrayed as singularly violent and destructive. All significant instances of violence are perpetrated against Valeria as a result of her crossing the imagined boundaries of how a woman should behave as constructed within a heterosexual relationship. The men in the novel, as exemplified by Valeria's father and her two sons, are unable to understand the lesbian relationship which she is engaged in. This appears to be demonstrative of a homophobic reaction to lesbian sexual activity but at no point does Valeria attempt to explain to her family the change in her actions or her own reimagining of her sexual self. Rather the men are presented as simplistically violent, angry betrayers. We can see this demonstrated in phrases that Calderón has her male characters utter. For instance, 'Soy hombre y nadie se burla de mí.'<sup>26</sup>

Their violent nature is established in events such as when Valeria's son smashes a candlestick over her head because he disagrees with her relationship with Genovesa, when her husband beats her while she is pregnant and when her father brutally attacks her with his belt when she is revealed to have been giving sexual favours to the boys at school as an adolescent.<sup>27</sup> The male violence is always enacted as punishment against women who are seen to have deviated from the expected chaste, subservient roles of daughter, wife and mother: 'lo esencial, que yo no había aprendido a ser mujer.'<sup>28</sup> The inference is that as a heterosexual woman Valeria is not meant to enjoy sex. It is her sexual freedom and satisfaction which results in the male perpetrated violence. After her father beats her Valeria is left alone in her bedroom: 'cuando se fueron puse la mano en mi clítoris: no sentía nada...'<sup>29</sup> Calderón contrasts this violence with the ultra-feminine,

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<sup>26</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, pp. 88, 152-153, 125.

<sup>28</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, p. 126.

romantic and sentimental way in which she presents the female characters and by presenting the sex scenes between the women as erotic and satisfying experiences.

Whilst Calderón depicts heterosexual men within a patriarchal framework as violent and sexually unsatisfying, the representations of men in family roles in Roffiel's *Amora* are conspicuous by their absence. The lack of father figures in the novel is addressed by Roffiel when Lupe venerates her mother in a list of significant women in her life: 'Mi madre que no se derrumbó cuando la dejó mi padre. Que aunque repitiera que una mujer necesita de un hombre para existir, en la práctica me demostró lo contrario.'<sup>30</sup> Living alone as an independent woman is celebrated and Roffiel emphatically criticises those women who live for their husbands and who deny their own self worth. In a passage which celebrates the community aspect of their lives this feminist influenced philosophy is laid bare:

Es mucho más rico vivir con amigas llenas de vida, de ideas, de solidaridad, que con un hombre que insiste en que él es el eje central de tu existencia, en una casa que ni siquiera es tuya y la cual tiene que girar alrededor de la magnífica presencia de tu marido.<sup>31</sup>

In this statement Roffiel not only criticises the patriarchal repression of women but also the women who support male dominance by fulfilling their roles as subservient wives and mothers.

In taking such a critical tone in much of the discussion about marriage relationships and indeed heterosexual relationships in general the novel is positioning itself in opposition

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<sup>30</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 68.

to the heterosexual model and reveals new possibilities through the proliferation of images of well adjusted, liberated individuals who are both lesbians and feminists.

The most powerful images of men displayed in Roffiel's novel are figured through graphic descriptions of the rape of women whose experiences she is aware of due to her work with the Grupo de Ayuda para Personas Violadas (GRAPAV). Lupe's work with GRAPAV exposes her to some of them most violent examples of patriarchal dominance and violence. Shaw argues that by focusing on the image of heterosexual male as rapist Roffiel:

[...] inserts herself within radical feminism for which, in the words of Sylvia Walby: "male violence against women is considered to be part of a system of controlling women, unlike the conventional view (and that of liberal feminism) which holds that rape and battering are isolated incidences caused by psychological problems in men."<sup>32</sup>

The figure of the rapist represents the violence of the patriarchal world which the women have separated themselves from by creating their protected community and are violent ruptures into the utopian depiction of the feminist movement which they live within. Nameless, threatening figures, they are indicative of the threat of violence and male dominance which pervades the outside world and from which the women are not impervious. Whilst much of the anti-men sentiment depicted in the novel is generally addressed with a humorous tone the descriptions of rape which break into the novel's cosy, communitarian aspect are shocking and violent interruptions:<sup>33</sup>

Le metió su miembro en el ano y después en la boca.

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<sup>32</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996, p. 57 citing Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Cambridge: Blackwells, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Nuala Finnegan, 2007, p. 227 also Deborah Shaw, 1996, p. 57.

- Toma, cómete tu propia mierda, ándale, eso es lo único que saben hacer las mujeres: comer mierda. Ándale, hija de puta, abre bien el hocico, mámamela sabroso, cabrona.  
De los insultos pasaba a una ronda de ‘te quiero, hija de la chingada, perra inmunda, quiero hacerte un hijo, quiero tener un hijo tuyo, puta desgraciada, te amo te amo.’ Y de nuevo a los golpes.<sup>34</sup>

The graphic, violent and misogynistic language used in this description is shocking to the reader and is starkly contrasted with the images of feminist equality and understanding which Roffiel employs throughout the novel. Whilst Calderón uses violence to demonstrate the results of breaking with traditional sexual roles Roffiel’s depiction of rape is even more shocking due to its indiscriminate application. As a result of her description of males as rapists the status of lesbians and their ability to form protective communities against this threat of violence is heightened and legitimised.

Barrera does not utilise this method in order to give status to her depiction of lesbian women in *Sandra, Secreto Amora*. There is little violence depicted within the novel at all and there is no resulting ‘punishment’ for the women who break the boundaries of traditional gender representation. Her depiction of Romy as the most violent character, capable of rage and extreme jealousy, appears to demonstrate that the image of men as dominant and violent, or even as masculine is constructed and can be performed by anyone. The threat of violence is employed as a masculine associated action by the one butch lesbian character yet even in this case its result is impotent and imagined. Romy’s threat of violence is never fulfilled; she is shooting blanks. Barrera goes against the feminist strategy employed by Roffiel and even, to a certain extent, by Calderón which depicts all men as violent and creates an imagined world in which not only is the

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<sup>34</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 36.

compulsory heterosexuality demonstrated as false but also where it is a woman who portrays traditionally masculine characteristics.

The manner in which the authors address gender and violence can be considered alongside the method by which they subvert traditional symbols and myths in their novels in order to situate lesbian orientated work within a traditional framework. By positioning traditional figures or symbols within the lesbian framework they can break heterocentric assumptions. Likewise, references to well known literary icons or styles can situate their lesbian text within dominant forms of discourse.

Bonnie Zimmerman in 'Lesbians Like This or That' writes that:

[...] in order to disrupt heterosexuality (or patriarchy or gender dualism) one must engage with/in it. But one must also maintain a separateness, a difference, an 'outsideness', or simply be devoured by the dominant term, or culture.<sup>35</sup>

Lesbian authors can reclaim symbols and historical figures as their own by working simultaneously within and against dominant cultural codes. In order to eliminate masculine dominion over discourse women writers must reappropriate symbols and myths for themselves. Diane Crowder cites this reasoning to explain the extensive use of mythology and allusions to literature in women's writing and states that it is, 'a radically subversive act to rewrite the myths of our culture in the feminine voice.'<sup>36</sup>

In Calderón's *Dos Mujeres* it is the symbol of woman as mother which is most obviously subverted in her portrayal of the Valeria's lesbianism. The role of mother is

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<sup>35</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, 1992, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Diane Crowder, *Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and Theories of Women's Writing*, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 2, L'Écriture Féminine (Summer, 1983), p. 130.

perhaps the most important that any Mexican woman can assume. Her association with the Virgin of Guadalupe is particularly potent in Mexican cultural imagination and in the creation of normative roles for women. Gloria Anzaldúa explores the importance of Guadalupe in *Borderlands* and declares her, ‘the single most potent religious, political and cultural images of the Chicano/mexicano.’<sup>37</sup> The Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron saint of Mexico and synonymous with the Virgen María within Catholic religion. She is representative of motherhood and defender of the nation. The fact that Valeria rejects her role of mother is important within the narrative of *Dos Mujeres*. She is seen as both loving her sons and rejecting the role of motherhood:

Albert resultó mi única alegría en la vida. Sus risas, primeras palabras, sus primeros pasos: todo me tenía maravillada...  
Cuando cumplió diez meses fui a ver al ginecólogo.  
- Sí, sí estás embarazada – me anunció el doctor Kuwatti con su voz gangosa – Un hermanito es el mejor regalo que puedes darle a Albert – agregó al ver que no sonreía.  
Salí del consultorio mareada y con ganas de llorar. ¡Otro hijo!

After Valeria admits to her relationship with Genovesa she does not see anyone in her family for months and it appears that she gives up her role of mother. She does not appear to miss her sons, which is perhaps indicative of her upper class lifestyle. Indeed even when she describes her life when they were children and not young adults they do not appear often in the narrative – the nanny which we can safely assume Valeria’s children had is also ignored in the description. Significantly there are no references to the women who have supported her lifestyle by working as maids or nannies, her connection is to a male servant who is her right hand man but who dies of a mysterious illness when she leaves with Genovesa. It could be read that Calderón is breaking with the traditional image that all women must want to become mothers by representing

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<sup>37</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria, 1987:2007, p. 52.



Valeria in such a manner. However, on the whole Valeria is depicted as inward looking, her world becomes obsessed with her relationship with Genovesa and her family are depicted as only there to oppress and constrain her. She does not search for a sense of community, neither within her family, who reject her nor by situating herself within a friendship group or even the wider framework of the feminist or women's movements.

Similarly, references to cultural figures within Calderón's text does not situate her novel within the context of women's writing or Latin American cultural traditions. Her references are instead limited to male canonised figures of European descent. She refers to Rembrandt, Barthes, Juan Goytisolo, Francis Bacon, Beethoven and Cortázar.<sup>38</sup> Shaw notes that, 'the fact that the lovers appear among the idols of principally male and European 'high culture' is an attempt to gain legitimacy by association.'<sup>39</sup> However, the fact that all of these male figures never married and were either gay or had problems with male relationships means that the references are queer, despite being male and European.

The symbol of Guadalupe has been re-envisioned frequently in the Mexican cultural imagination and by many who have reappropriated her within their representations of lifestyles and practices which are seen as alternate within traditional figuring. Gloria Anzaldúa described how Guadalupe as another figure of the Virgin Mary within the Catholic Church is itself a reimaging of the pre-conquest, indigenous deity Coatlalopeuh. Anzaldúa traces the history of the figure of Guadalupe in *Borderlands* where it is revealed that, '*Coatlalopeuh* is descended from, or is an aspect of, earlier

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<sup>38</sup> Sara Levi Calderón, 1990, pp. 43, 52, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Deborah Shaw, 1996.

Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses.<sup>40</sup> According to pre-Aztec Mesoamerican beliefs this female deity possessed both upper and underworld aspects and was a figure who, ‘contained and balanced the dualities of male and female, light and dark, life and death.’<sup>41</sup> Anzaldúa charts the changing symbolism of Coatloapeuh throughout pre-Columbian history and reveals that eventually the dark and light aspects of the deity were split, which she views as revealed in the duality expressed in the opposed symbols of Guadalupe as ‘good’ Mexican woman, the chaste, eternal mother figure and Doña Malinche as betrayer and ‘bad’ woman.<sup>42</sup>

In *Amora* Roffiel’s naming of her lesbian heroine as Guadalupe is highly significant. By giving her the name of the most potent figure of womanhood in Mexican culture Roffiel is situating her lesbian protagonist within the Mexican tradition and simultaneously subverting the symbol of heterosexual mother of the nation by portraying her as a proud, lesbian woman. The positioning of Guadalupe as lesbian allows Roffiel to reappropriate the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe and to reclaim and reinvent the symbol of Guadalupe in order to also include a lesbian identity. It is a method which has been employed by many Chicana theorists and authors who would claim that, ‘La Guadalupe, que bajo cualquiera de sus denominaciones es siempre Nuestra Madre, no es propiedad de nadie, salvo de aquéllos que la aman.’<sup>43</sup>

Guadalupe in Roffiel’s *Amora* supports a new way of living for the Mexican woman, existing outside of the bonds of patriarchy and heterosexual existence. She takes the lesbian woman, often situated as ‘bad’ woman within Mexican culture as she does not

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<sup>40</sup>Gloria Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 54.

<sup>42</sup> See Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 1989 pp. 46-60 for a full explanation of how Coatloapeuh became reimagined as Guadalupe.

<sup>43</sup> Ana Castillo, 1996:2000, *La Diosa de las Américas: Escritos Sobre la Virgen de Guadalupe*, Vintage Español: Una división de Random House, Inc. New York, p. xx.

conform to heterosexual modes of conduct, and gives her more cultural power by naming her Guadalupe. Guadalupe as lesbian also breaks with her association with motherhood; Guadalupe does not express an interest in having children, although we cannot exclude this possibility which would be even more powerfully subversive. We might also view this positioning as a form of claiming the original aspects of Guadalupe as Coatloapeuh as possessing both male and female qualities and where the gender divide was not formulated in heterocentric terms.

Throughout *Amora* Roffiel takes aspects or figures associated with sinful women, feminist movements, tabooed pleasure and subversively represents them within traditionally revered religious rhetoric. We see among these ‘Santa Malinche Mártir’, ‘Santa Marilyn Monroe’, ‘Santa Flora Tristán’, ‘Virgen del Orgasmo Perpetua’ and ‘Virgen del Mil Especies’.<sup>44</sup> The camp figure of Marilyn Monroe is equally as exalted as the feminist heroine Flora Tristán and this injection of humorous irreverence is a lighter way of introducing the double standards of traditional, heterosexual, cultural-religious norms than the, at times heavy, feminist rhetoric that Roffiel generally employs. The cultural figures that Roffiel utilises are exclusively female, which further emphasises the female focus of the novel. These references are also powerful reclamations of female figures as heroines, raising their status to tongue-in-cheek Saintly status. This contrasts with Calderón’s use of male, European figures which appear to attempt to raise the status of her novel and perhaps to point to the bourgeois society within which the characters are situated.

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<sup>44</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, pp. 188, 186, 84, 204.

Barrera's novel employs traditional canonical literature and her frequent references to plays and literature within the context of the Festival Cervantes do not feel contrived but demonstrate how the city of Guanajuato fills with performers of whom the majority are Mexican but who include theatrical productions for all different parts of the world. There may be an element of name-dropping in the references to so many great canonical figures but they are contextualised by the protagonists' roles as theatrical producers and actors. References to queer cultural icons such as María Felix and Federico Lorca appear alongside allusions to Cervantes, Diego Rivera, Benito Juárez, Pablo Neruda and Brahms.<sup>45</sup> There is particular emphasis on Latin American and in particular Mexican figures in *Sandra, Secreto Amor* which positions it within the Mexican space despite its lesbian theme which simultaneously places it outside of the traditional canon.

Barrera also makes reference to the Laura Esquivel's celebrated novel *Como Agua Para Chocolate* whose use of magical realism echoed the style of the Latin American Boom writers and has been seen as a satirical comment against the magical realist canon which excluded women writers. Arcelia describes a fantastical dinner held to celebrate the birthday of the actress Regina Torné, who starred in the film version of Esquivel's novel. She recalls that the main dish at the party was 'chiles en nogada', the dish which Esquivel's heroine Tita makes for her sister's wedding and through which her love for Pedro is displayed. Barrera parodies Esquivel's insertion of recipes into the text by having Arcelia declare that the recipe as it appears in *Como Agua Para Chocolate* is incorrect; she then repeats the recipe as if it is being recounted by her grandmother: 'Entonces, en voz baja, como si estuviese rezando, le repitió la receta de los 'chiles en

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<sup>45</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, pp. 23, 50, 29, 90, 93, 72, 73.

nogada' que había escrito en su cuaderno.<sup>46</sup> Esquivel's novel is highly successful and well known both inside and outside of Mexico and by almost mimicking Esquivel's writing style in this passage Barrera places *Sandra, Secreto Amor* within a tradition of women's writing in Mexico.

Elsewhere in her novel Barrera employs magical realism when describing the characters' childhoods and familial histories. Magical realism can be posited as a writing style within which fantastical events occur alongside everyday, realistic affairs in such a way that the fantastical is to be accepted as truth. Three examples of the employment of magical realist style by Barrera a passage describing Arcelia's dead great grandfather, a memory her grandmother's wedding dress and the story which relates Sandra's birth.

The first two examples appear within a chapter which gives a detailed account of Arcelia's family history by way of reported history, anecdotes and mythical memories, which brings to mind the confusing, non-linear descriptions of the family tree in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The great-grandfather is curiously named Matías de la Barrera; once again Barrera is seen to write herself into the novel and there are frequent references to the Barrera lineage and its relation to the city of Guanajuato, to Arcelia's family history and even the villa turned hotel which the protagonists are residing in during the festival. We might also see this as a homage to the Buendía lineage in Márquez's work. Matías de la Barrera's body is exhumed from his grave in the Panteón Civil and is found to have been mummified. The discovery results in his being displayed in a kind of catacombs alongside other mummified bodies which,

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<sup>46</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 117.

‘parecían una larga hilera de hojas secas o gigantes mariposas apolilladas en un desfile pantagruélico.’<sup>47</sup> Matías is displayed in the panteón:

[...] con su barbilla apoyada en su bastón y estirada hacia adelante la pierna coja. Con las botas mineras puestas, mantendría por siempre ese mirada triste humedecida por un lágrima que no acaba de disolverse...con su traje de fiesta y su olor a naftalina.<sup>48</sup>

Arcelia’s female relatives visit the catacombs regularly, as family would visit a graveside, to recite the rosary. The catacombs are open as a tourist attraction with people paying to visit the site. Barrera describes the positioning of traditional beliefs alongside modern voyeurism when she reveals that the tourists imagined her relatives as ignorant and superstitious people. ‘Se preguntaban qué sucedía con aquellas criaturas que se arrodillaban ante una de las momias y le encendían veladoras. - ¡Qué gente tan supersticiosa e ignorante! – exclamaban.’<sup>49</sup> The connection between past and present and the simultaneous celebration of tradition and history as figured in the creation of a museum setting is questioned alongside the labelling of the women as ignorant and superstitious as Barrera imagines this scene.

The second example which recalls magical realist literature is in the description of her great grandmother’s wedding dress which appears to have a never ending train of lace which fills rooms and spills over furniture. As it is brought out of its storage chest:

[...] la recámara se llenaba con la prenda extendida sobre la cama, la piecera, el buró, el tocador y las sillas: nubes de un perfume desconocido imperaban a grado tal que provocaba mareos y las bisnietas mas pequeñas se dejaban caer en aquel mar sedoso orlado de espuma, donde

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<sup>47</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 84.

<sup>48</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p.84.

<sup>49</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 84.

flotaban innumerables hilos de perlas entre los marfiles de sus botonaduras.<sup>50</sup>

The almost mythical ambiance that Barrera creates in her novel is perhaps most strongly represented in her account of Sandra's birth which is supernatural in its description:

[...] vio que del cielo descendía una bola de fuego, una luz blanca y cegadora que parecía venir directamente hacia ella...aquel bólido cambió de dirección y se fue directo hacia la iglesia...

los pájaros en bandadas volaban hasta los rincones más oscuros de las frondas, cuando los murciélagos a su vez, salían por miríadas de sus escondrijos, cuando una luz más fuerte que el sol hizo de aquel atardecer un mediodía espectacular...

La atmósfera se cargaba de electricidad, mientras su madre y la comadrona realizaban el trabajo de parto. Cuando Sandra hacía su entrada a este mundo, después de su viaje de nueve meses, dicen que se oyó un trueno terrible, pero no había nubes ni rayos.

Una lluvia de chispas multicolores danzó en el cielo y la centella atrató justo en la torre milenaria, conmoviendo al edificio desde sus raíces.<sup>51</sup>

I have quoted such a long passage in order to demonstrate the extensive use of magical realist stylization within Barrera's novel, in particular where she is describing scenes set in the past. The use of magical realism allows her to situate her novel within the Latin American tradition and may also be viewed as a statement against the canon's exclusion of female writers. Additionally, her reference to a more traditional and mythical past connects her novel to the indigenous peoples and cultural history which continues to be influential in Mexican life. Hers is a much more obviously Mexican novel than either *Amora* or *Dos Mujeres* and appears to depict a more modern Mexico within which people of different genders and sexualities remain linked to their traditional customs

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<sup>50</sup> Reyna Barrera, 2001, p. 86.

<sup>51</sup> Reyna Barrera, p. 166.

and acknowledge the past literary and cultural traditions within which they have been formed.

Within the three novels we see a progression in the way in which the lesbian characters are imagined. In the novels the representation of the femme lesbian is not de-lesbianised as her sexuality is impressed through her actions and in particular through the representation of lesbian sex scenes. However, the lack of butch lesbians may be seen as a result of the authors being aware that butch lesbians are seen as significantly 'other' in the way that they cannot pass in society as straight. The women in Calderón's *Dos Mujeres* do not attempt to seek out other lesbian women or to be involved in any form of feminist or lesbian community. They are unable or perhaps Calderón is unwilling to have them break fully from the confines of heterosexual constructions of femininity apart from in their romantic, erotic sexual encounters. On the contrary Roffiel depicts her female characters in *Amora* within a feminist community where success and fulfilment is a result of emancipation from the heterosexual framework and solidarity with other lesbian women. Her depiction of the lesbian community at times lacks a variety of lesbian images as the only women described in depth ascribe to heterosexual notions of femininity or, if it is not so, their alternate manifestations of gender are not addressed. Roffiel allows her feminine lesbian characters to shatter stereotypes of the butch, angry feminist-lesbian but in doing so singularly I believe she loses some of the power which the butch lesbian might hold. Barrera harnesses the power of the butch woman as lesbian signifier in *Sandra, Secreto Amor*. Romy becomes the signifier of masculinity in the novel and Barrera is able to break the norms of masculine/feminine gender identity. The fact that she addresses some of the failings within lesbian relationships also differentiates her novel from the other two. Her lesbian



characters are not held in a utopian visioning of lesbian community but lesbianism is celebrated alongside heterosexual relationships as equally legitimate.

The subversion of traditional roles and mythical images is also important in the depiction of lesbianism in the three novels. In *Dos Mujeres* the image of woman as natural mother is subverted in Valeria's apparent rejection of and distancing from her sons but the novel is still grounded in heterocentric imaginings. The men are singularly violent and homophobic, illustrating their lack of understanding about lesbianism and lack of acceptance of Valeria and Genovesa's relationship. Allusions to literary figures who despite being queer figures are exclusively male, European and canonical does allow *Dos Mujeres* to relate to the queer community. In *Amora* however the depiction of the principal lesbian characters as rich, multi-faceted characters is contrasted with the nameless male figures that enact violence through rape without cause and are a threatening presence. Roffiel allows their assumed violence to justify the creation of the exclusive lesbian community which is positively depicted as fulfilling, successful and based on notions of equality. Her naming of our lesbian heroine as Guadalupe permits her to situate lesbians within the Mexican cultural tradition as having the ultimate figure of heterosexual Mexican woman subversively depicted as liberated lesbian. Barrera again appears to be much more subversive than the other authors in her depiction of violence. Romy is the sole bearer of violence within *Sandra, Secreto Amor* and her violence is portrayed in stereotypically macho terms. Her impotence is important as it appears to infer that within Barrera's created community gender identities are malleable and traditional heterosexual frameworks are dismantled. Her use of particularly Mexican and Latin American literary and cultural references allows her to situate the

lesbian characters in her novel within the fabric of traditional Mexican cultural imaginings whilst being subversive in her portrayal of queer identity.

It is obvious that the authors are attempting to create quite different imagined communities by employing subversion of myths and figures, by identifying their lesbians as feminine or butch (or neither) and by making reference to particular historical, literary and cultural figures. Calderón excludes feminist rhetoric from her novel, whilst Roffiel focuses heavily on the positive qualities of a feminist based lesbian community of solidarity. Barrera chooses to position her lesbian characters within an accepting community where the female characters can be as masculine as the male characters and where there is a lack or failure to follow through with threats of violence. They work within and against traditional cultural discourses to insist on the inclusion of lesbianism within the Mexican cultural landscape, lesbianizing the signifiers of Mexican culture and positing alternatives to dominant heterosexual images. Calderón falls short in her attempt by remaining within the traditional heterocentric framework but Roffiel and Barrera are much more subversive in their employment of these techniques in order to situate their lesbians within a community, either quite exclusive in *Amora* or more inclusive as illustrated in *Sandra, Secreto Amor*.

## CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with the aim to analyse the creation and articulation of lesbian community within three contemporary Mexican lesbian novels: Sara Levi Calderón's *Dos Mujeres* (1990), Rosamaría Roffiel's *Amora* (1989) and *Sandra Secreto Amor* (2001) by Reyna Barrera. The analysis of these texts is impossible without considering the historical and social contexts in which the novels were written and published. It is perhaps not surprising that *Amora* relies heavily on the articulation of second wave feminist discourse popular in Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s which emphasised separation from the violent patriarchal structure considering that the author was herself highly involved in the movement in the time leading up to the publication of her novel. Calderón situates her lesbian love story outside of a feminist or lesbian discourse but instead focuses on the subversive power of representing erotic love between two women as fulfilling and contrasting it with the violence of the male figures in the novel. Barrera does create a sense of community within her novel but it is not exclusively lesbian or even female. Instead her community is formed around a liberal arts scene where gay, lesbian and heterosexual relationships are depicted as equally accepted and equally confusing, problematic and, ultimately, fulfilling and within which the lesbian characters are those who are most successful in breaking dominant gender identity roles and stereotypes.

I began by examining the notion of community as created as posited by Benedict Anderson in his study of the nation imagined community. It is apparent that the lesbian imagined community is formed partly as a result of the dissemination of texts which are seen to hold similar themes and images held in common by the community's imagined

inhabitants. The importance of the act of writing is central to the lesbian novelist's creation of community. The authors break through the imposed silencing of lesbianism within Mexican society through writing novels with the theme of lesbian love and whose principle characters are lesbian. Their protagonists must negotiate paths which are situated within Mexican traditional boundaries whilst reconfiguring their identities as lesbian women. By writing, women are actively making real their experiences and viewpoints in a way which is permanent, which increases visibility and which allows contact to be made (however imagined that contact may be) between women who may in reality never meet each other. A community is created through the identification of women with characters and themes presented in literature which break through the invisibility of women on the literary landscape. This breakthrough is made even more significant by the fact that they are addressing the subject of lesbianism which is considered taboo within dominant, heterocentric Mexican society.

The increased visibility of lesbianism within Mexican literature is indicative of a changing cultural climate within which the feminist movement was highly influential. The opportunity for lesbian women in Mexico and in wider Latin American to connect through academic and activist circles of feminist and lesbian-feminist *encuentros* which began in the 1970s and 1980s brought greater visibility, if not acceptance, of lesbian issues within wider society. Many of the feminist groups formed around this time opened publishing houses and encouraged writers to publish novels which had lesbian protagonists who supported feminist influenced lifestyles. The authors of the three texts examined in this thesis are seen to be highly aware of the power that writing had in breaking with the heterosexual framework and traditional roles which were supported and maintained within Mexican national discourse. Each of the principle lesbian

protagonists in the novels is also a writer whose work is highly influenced by her lesbianism. This demonstrates that even within her literature the lesbian as writer cannot be silenced. She writes about her experiences, breaks with traditional, heterosexual roles and subverts images of the 'good' Mexican woman.

I have demonstrated throughout my discussion of Calderón's novel *Dos Mujeres* how the characters of Valeria and Genovesa are more isolated in their expression of lesbian community than the characters in *Amora* and *Sandra, Secreto Amor*. Accordingly, Valeria does write within the novel but it is her own relationship with Genovesa that she describes. Her expression of lesbianism is quite introspective and she does not attempt to include other women in her depiction of lesbianism or include feminist rhetoric in order to justify her character's decision to break from the heterocentric matrix. However, her depiction of a strong, romantic lesbian love is powerful in its figuring of lesbian partnerships, positioning them as comparable with monogamous, heterosexual relationships. In *Amora* our protagonist Lupe is a journalist, writes articles for feminist journals and magazines and also works in an organisation which works with women who have suffered sexual violence at the hands of men. She is eager to share her experiences with other women and celebrates her lesbian feminist identity living alongside other women who share similar beliefs and ideals. It is not only an imagined community between her readers that Roffiel creates but she successfully depicts the sense of lesbian community formed between her principle characters. The idea of a community of friends within which lesbianism is celebrated and women are depicted as successful and happy without men as sexual partners is also displayed in Barrera's imagined community. She situates her lesbian characters' stories during an arts festival in the city of Guanajuato, a city which is described as open, accepting and within which

deviation from the heterosexual norm is not reacted to with violence. The city becomes the imagined community within which Barrera's lesbians can enact their relationships, reimagine their identities and break traditional gender roles. How it differs from Roffiel's imagined community of lesbians in *Amora* is that the sense of community is not exclusively lesbian, but includes gay men and heterosexual partners.

The notion of passing and negotiating the process of coming out was also found to be central to the creation of community in the three novels. Passing and coming out were shown to be performative acts and could thus be linked to the creation of gender identities as performative as proposed by Judith Butler. Brad Epps developed the theory of passing within the field of immigration and border crossings where an individual assumes a particular identity in order to be accepted or allowed to enter particular territorial spaces. I have attempted to demonstrate how this idea of assuming an identity through performative acts, whether it is a particular gender identity or a sexual identity, could be developed as a form of passing lines. The lesbian characters shared experiences of passing either as straight in order not to suffer discrimination, imagined or otherwise, or passing as lesbian in order to be accepted within the protective imagined community. Coming out as a performed action can be posited as a mode in which a new identity is assumed and as a part of a performative action which assumes a particular sexual identity.

Within the novels it also became evident that the issue of public secrecy was negotiated in a subject's passing and coming out. Roger Lancaster highlights the influence of public secrecy on the action of coming out and passing within the Latin American social context. Public secrecy can be described as a social rule which denotes that an

individual can be open about his or her homosexuality only within particular spaces. There is an imagined boundary between what is perhaps common knowledge in private (people may even gossip about the individual's sexual conduct) and what is publically tolerated. Public and private demonstrations of sexual identity must be renegotiated as the individual assumes a lesbian identity and their gendered and sexual performance changes according to the social situation. It has been demonstrated that in *Dos Mujeres* the women are extremely aware of the restraints upon their lesbian relationship due to dominant heterosexuality within Mexico and the role of public secrecy. There is a distinction made between public and private manifestations of their lesbian identities and the women frequently pass as heterosexual in public situations. Any digression from this rule results in violence enacted upon the women for having publicly acknowledged their non-normative sexual identities. In *Amora* the participation of the principal character Lupe in a strong lesbian community of friends allows her to assume her lesbian identity more publicly. She does not attempt to pass as straight and indeed by passing as lesbian within her community she derives power from the situation of solidarity and prefers to be seen as gay in public in order to gain societal acceptance of her lesbian performativity. Barrera employs a similar technique in *Dos Mujeres*. There are no great dramatic 'coming out' scenes as we see in *Dos Mujeres* but the issue of public secrecy is addressed in the novel. In the city of Guanajuato where the action of the novel takes place there exist two worlds, that of the world above ground and the underworld which consists of passages and tunnels running below the city as a result of past mining activity. Barrera describes the underworld as a place where normal rules don't apply and as only navigable by those who are 'in the know'. We can see this underworld as representative of the secretive, hidden experiences of the homosexual community which people know exist but which is never made fully visible. However

Barrera subversively breaks with the idea of public secrecy by then depicting her characters as free to express their sexuality without fear of violence, if only within the imagined space of the city of Guanajuato during the festival period. The depiction of passing within the three novels can therefore be seen to be essential in the depiction of lesbianism within these Mexican novels both in the sense of protecting the protagonists from violence within the heterosexually dominant public sphere and in constructing a sense of imagined community with other lesbian and gay individuals.

I have attempted to explain the use of butch/femme identities in the representation of lesbianism in these novels. I demonstrated how in popular media representations the femme lesbian can be seen to be desexualised and made to pass as heterosexual due to dominant images of femininity as linked to the heterosexual woman. The butch body which is less visible in popular media representations can be seen to be more effective in combating gender stereotypes and is marked as lesbian due to her association with traditionally masculine physical appearance and behavioural attributes. The absence of a representation of butch characters alongside femme lesbians in both *Dos Mujeres* and *Amora* affects their representation of a multifaceted lesbian community. Roffiel claims that her protagonist Lupe uses her femininity to counter stereotypical views of lesbians as masculine, unattractive (to heterosexual men) and uncaring women. Her attempt to represent lesbians as feminine, sweet, caring and friendly women who happen to love other women does attempt to create a space for lesbians in dominant society but it also weakens her creation of an equality driven lesbian community. Her reliance on the femme lesbian denies the existence of a butch, masculine woman who might also fulfil these characteristics in a much more visible manner.



Barrera is the only of the three authors to represent a butch character in her representation of lesbian community. In *Sandra, Secreto Amor* Romy is an openly lesbian woman who takes on traditionally masculine associated roles and behaviours. She is the aggressor, masculine in appearance and threatens violence: in the other two novels it is only male characters that are associated with violence. However, Romy is not the successful lesbian protagonist: she does not 'get the girl', that role is reserved for the femme lesbian characters. It is interesting that the most positive images of lesbians within the novels are of femme lesbians and it is only in the most recently published novel that a butch character is portrayed. Whilst this may be in order to represent an alternative view of lesbian women which can break the negative stereotypical image held in the dominant cultural imagination, it might also be as a result of the author's writing not only for a lesbian audience but also for a heterosexual audience. The butch lesbian is distinctly 'other' in a way which the femme lesbian is not and so femme lesbian more easily passes into dominant society. She can both be part of dominant society by conforming in a way to heterosexual notions of femininity but in being lesbian she breaks with the assumed heterosexuality inherent in that femininity. Thus the link between femininity and heterosexuality can be broken.

There is a trend to subvert mythical figures and popular images and to reference famous historical and literary figures in order to position the lesbian communities as existing both within and outside traditional Mexican society. The sacred figure of Guadalupe, traditionally associated with motherhood and the 'good' Mexican woman, and religious and historical figures are lesbianized within the texts. There are frequent references to Latin American figures and Mexican figures in particular in *Sandra, Secreto Amor*. The references to cultural figures in *Dos Mujeres* are to male, European, canonical figures

which only serves to accentuate the extent to which the novel distances itself from feminist and lesbian rhetoric. *Amora* has various references to female icons which is indicative of its feminist centred discourse. In its turn, *Sandra, Secreto Amor* makes frequent reference to Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* and evokes Garcia Marquez in her use of magical realism. These references situate the novels both within the tradition of Mexican literature and simultaneously as existing outwith this canon due to their tabooed subject matter.

The novels are quite different in their portrayal of lesbian romantic relationships but can be shown to evoke similar themes in their depiction and creation of the imagined lesbian community. Whilst *Dos Mujeres* is important in the manner that it breaks with heterocentric notions of motherhood as natural and the novel allows for an erotic relationship between two women to be fulfilling without the need for a man. It's depiction of the women as enacting traditional heterosexual roles in the relationship and the manner in which references to feminism or a wider lesbian community means that the women are insular and exist in a world of indulgence and fantasy which serves to isolate them further from an imagined lesbian community. The women in Roffiel's *Amora* live outside dominant heterosexual society instead living alongside other lesbian women in an exclusively female orientated community. The dominant feminist rhetoric used in the novel is indicative of the social and political context of the publication. Barrera's *Sandra, Secreto Amor* allows for a critique of some lesbian relationships in its presentation of Romy and Sandra's partnership. Whilst the other two novels present lesbian relationships as ultimately successful and fulfilling, Barrera does not shy away from showing the difficulties that lesbian, in the same way as heterosexual couples, encounter in their relationships. Sex scenes between the women are presented as

erotically fulfilling and are sensually represented but the lesbian relationships are not presented as existing on a higher plane than those of the heterosexual or gay relationships. The lesbian protagonists are seen here to be situated as part of a queer imagined community which is not exclusively lesbian, contrasting with the lesbian centred community depicted in *Amora*.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study if it were to be applied to other contemporary lesbian novels. The novels are all told from the viewpoints of privileged, university educated, economically emancipated women within urban Mexico. They do not give a voice to the underprivileged Mexican woman, to the lesbian who cannot leave her family home or follow the lifestyles supported in the novels due to economic restraints or lack of education. There is not a focus on the experiences of the women who facilitate this lifestyle, the nannies and maids who have served their mothers or, in the case of Valeria in *Dos Mujeres*, cared for their own houses and children. Furthermore, the issue of race and ethnicity is not addressed in any of the three novels despite their being situated in the ethnically diverse country of Mexico. The conclusions of the thesis must therefore be considered in relation to the specific situations of the authors and their urban dwelling, highly educated protagonists. I am also aware of my own voice as a British lesbian from a supportive community and acknowledge my personal cultural distance from the particular Mexican understanding of these novels.

Whilst this thesis analyses the representation of lesbian community within literature, its findings could also be applied in relation to the evocation of lesbian community online, through blogs, online community sites and social networking. I have discussed in this

thesis the problems related to access and distribution in relation to the lesbian novel in Mexico. The lack of availability of lesbian texts by Latin American authors in libraries and bookshops coupled with an apparent reluctance by publishing houses to release new editions of texts limits the dissemination of the lesbian text and the creation of imagined communities among its readers. It would be interesting to analyse the writing published online, for example on well established Mexican lesbian sites such as LesVoz and LesMexico<sup>1</sup>, in order to compare their imagined lesbian community with the texts being produced in print.

The invisibility of Latina lesbian texts in United States libraries is an issue being addressed by self proclaimed Chicana lesbian writer/librarian tatiana de la tierra. tatiana immigrated to the United States from Columbia when she was a child and is a poet/writer/activist/librarian in California. Not only does she advocate guerrilla publishing in order to bypass homophobic, conservative publishing houses (she publishes her own poetry collections on chapbooks which she makes and sells herself) but she also advocates for change in library cataloguing which makes texts invisible by lack of keyword and subject cataloguing, by not naming all contributors in anthologies (a great deal of queer work is in the more accessible form of poetry, short stories or articles) or by using outdated signifiers such as ‘Hispanic’ versus ‘Latino’ or ‘Latina’.<sup>2</sup> Further study of this lack of visibility and accessibility of lesbian focused literature would add a valuable addition to the themes addressed in this thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lesvoz.org.mx/> and <http://www.lesmexic.org/> accessed 11/10/10.

<sup>2</sup> tatiana de la tierra, 2001, Latina Lesbian Literary Hersotry: From Sor Juana to Days of Awe, *The Power of Language/El poder de la palabra: Selected Papers from the Second REFORMA National Conference*. Ed. Lillian Castillo-Speed and the REFORMA National Conference Publications Committee, Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, pp. 199-212.

The findings of my work open up new ways for critics to study new spaces being created by lesbian authors through their literature. Further study could offer a comparative study with my work and some more recently published Mexican lesbian novels. The study has demonstrated that the gap of over a decade between the publishing of *Amora* in 1989 and *Sandra, Secreto Amor* in 2001 means that the type of lesbian community depicted is quite different. As previously stated, *Amora* relies heavily on feminist rhetoric popular in the 1980s Mexican *feminist* movement and it is an essentialist view of lesbianism separatism. *Sandra, Secreto Amor* exists within a more tolerant environment where there is not the same need to separate the lesbian community from heterosexual males to the same extent in order to give it visibility within mainstream cultural imagination. It would be interesting to do a comparative study between these texts and ones which have been published within the last few years in order to analyse the effect of recent social changes in Mexico, in particular the legalisation of gay marriage and gay adoption which came into effect in December 2009. With the impact of these changes in the law and the ever increasing acceptance and visibility of lesbianism with Mexico it would be interesting to examine the impact upon literature. Similarly a comparative study could be offered between my examination of Mexican novels and lesbian texts which have been published in other Latin American countries.

The lesbian imagined communities created in *Dos Mujeres*, *Amora* and *Sandra, Secreto Amor* reveal the relevance of the lesbian community in Mexico and their existence marks a recognition of those women who refuse to conform to the gender and sexual roles imposed upon them by traditional, heterosexually defined cultural understandings.

In so doing they emancipate the characters in the novel and give form to an imagined community space for lesbians within a Mexican literary and cultural context.

Cada vez queda más claro: somos la fuerza del futuro, el motor de la próxima historia...Habrá muchos que compartan nuestro amanecer...Los que estén dispuestos a renuncias a sus privilegios, serán los que construyan la nueva sociedad a nuestro lado.<sup>3</sup>

Qué importante aprender a valerte por ti misma. Qué rico aprendizaje el de la libertad. Costoso, sí, es cierto, pero tan gratificante.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Rosamaría Roffiel, 1989, p. 30.

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