

VIOLENCE AND EMOTION: FEMININE PERSPECTIVES IN THE WORKS OF
SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH, LUISA VALENZUELA, LYDIA CHUKOVSKAYA, AND
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Emotional Impacts of War: The Oral Histories of Svetlana Alexievich.....	6
Chapter 2: Censorship and Violence: Prevailing Feminine Voices in Luisa Valenzuela’s “Cuarta versión”	20
Chapter 3: Through the Eyes of Lydia Chukovskaya: Terror and Daily Life in <i>Sofia Petrovna</i>	37
Chapter 4: Bodies in the Kitchen: Lingering Violence in the Short Fiction of Claudia Hernández.....	50
Conclusion.....	65
Works Cited.....	67

Introduction

Over the past few years, I have found that I have become increasingly desensitized to violent acts occurring in the United States. Every few weeks, another mass shooting is announced, such as the recent event in Parkland, Florida where seventeen people were killed. Seventeen seems small compared to the thousands killed in conflicts throughout the world. However, upon reflecting on these events, I have to remind myself that acts of violence are always horrific, no matter if they occur to one or many. This experience is what drew me to the authors I discuss in this project. Svetlana Alexievich, Luisa Valenzuela, Lydia Chukovskaya, and Claudia Hernández attempt to understand the violence that surrounds their lives through narratives. They do not become desensitized nor settle for mere statistics—rather, they utilize emotions, absurd imagery, and the blending of voices in a narrative approach to evoke a strong emotional impact in the reader. The impact is one that remains burned into one’s memory, emphasizing the effects of violence on a human level. A narrative, emotionally focused approach reminds readers that violence is more about the individual than a statistic.

In this project, I traverse different geographic regions, eras, and times of violence, focusing on very different authors and forms of prose. Each of these women emphasizes the integration of emotion into history and literature, with the purpose of preserving some aspect of their culture or memories. In Chapter 1, “Emotional Impacts of War: The Oral Histories of Svetlana Alexievich,” I discuss Alexievich’s use of documentary prose in *U voiny—ne zhenskoe litso* (*The Unwomanly Face of War*) to share the stories of many Soviet women during World War II. Her emphasis on multiple female voices speaking about wartime violence and small details of ordinary life conveys the importance of a feminine perspective in situating historical events. In Chapter 2, “Censorship and Violence: Prevailing Feminine Voices in Luisa Valenzuela’s ‘Cuarta versión’” I analyze

Valenzuela's novella "Cuarta versión" ("Fourth Version"; my translation), again looking at the appearance of multiple versions of stories and several voices working to tell them.¹ I look at censorship, both self-imposed and enacted by the government, as well as violence associated with silence, particularly forced silence. In Chapter 3, "Through the Eyes of Lydia Chukovskaya: Terror and Daily Life in *Sofia Petrovna*," I examine Chukovskaya's novella *Sofia Petrovna* (*Sofia Petrovna*), analyzing how motherhood and feminine voices function under oppressive Stalinist rule. Chapter 4, "Bodies in the Kitchen: Lingering Violence in the Short Fiction of Claudia Hernández" examines two short stories by Hernández. Through "Hechos de un buen ciudadano" ("Acts of a Good Citizen") and "Manual del hijo muerto" ("Manual of a Dead Child"), I focus upon the absurd and violent imagery within Hernández's short fiction, utilized to jar and force the reader to consider how violent acts become acceptable and ingrained in daily life. Finally, I offer my conclusions on feminine approaches to the portrayal of violence. Through comparing two Russian language authors and two Spanish language authors, I strive to demonstrate the cross-cultural ties that exist between the women who write about and attempt to understand violence. Their emphases on narrative structures, strong emotional effects on the reader, and daily human life allow these narratives to frame historical events related to war and violence more accurately than a strict historical and factual perspective.

¹ Spanish-English translations are mine, unless otherwise noted in Works Cited.

1. Emotional Impacts of War: The Oral Histories of Svetlana Alexievich

In post-World War II Soviet society, there were many books about the war, but most were written by men, about men. This skewed the popular view of the war, as a vast number of women fought for the Soviet Union (Alexievich xv). In her 1985 work of documentary-style literature, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Russophone journalist Svetlana Alexievich from Belarus attempts to piece together the stories of women who participated in the war and experienced its effects firsthand. She states that “men hide behind history, behind facts; war fascinates them as action and a conflict of ideas, of interests, whereas women are caught up with feelings” (xxiii), and that “‘women’s’ war has its own colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words” (xvi). In her writing, Alexievich strives to remember and preserve the stories of these women, as her own postwar generation struggles to understand their experiences as well. She explains that “we were the children of victory” (xiii), and although they did not actively participate in winning the war, they “didn’t know a world without war” (xiv). War and violence were ingrained in their daily lives through violent village burnings and deaths (xiv). These were horrific acts that affected everyone, designating the universality of war and violence. What interests her is “history through the story told by an unnoticed witness and participant” (xxi). Alexievich believes that writing about human beings in war transcribes the history of feelings, as these emotions are reality (xxi). These feelings, coming from women and from feminine perspectives, allow the reader to make an emotional connection that is not possible through the retelling of statistics or mere facts alone.

Alexievich won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2015, praised for her “polyphonic writings” (Jaireth). Her works utilize the experience of suffering, bringing together stories of hardship and pain in an attempt to understand human nature. Through focusing on the feminine perspective in

The Unwomanly Face of War, Alexievich places women into a public sphere that has traditionally belonged to men, allowing female participants of the war to share their stories. Her perspective as an author challenges the assumed masculine approach to war, arguing that war has unique effects on women.

Alexievich works to display the reality of war by allowing women to tell of their own experiences. In “Women, Wars and Militarism in Svetlana Alexievich’s Documentary Prose,” Alaiksandr Novikau expresses that war has been a constant occurrence in Soviet life, either in real or symbolic form, with over 800,000 Soviet women serving on the front lines during World War II (317). Although Soviet-era publications about women in war existed, the discourse remained within the bounds of national heroism, leaving narratives of women’s emotions unpublishable (317-318). In Alexievich’s quest to gather “knowledge of the soul” (Alexievich 19), she looks precisely at these emotions, giving a voice to women who have remained in silence for decades. Through emotional stories, the impact of war and violence is stronger than it would be in a fact-centered, emotionless approach. On war, she states:

There have been thousands of wars on earth...but war remains, as it always has been, one of the chief human mysteries. Nothing has changed. I am trying to bring that great history down to human scale, in order to understand something. To find the words. (139)

In order to humanize history, Alexievich groups the stories of women together to demonstrate how they follow similar themes of love and death, yet are strikingly unique. Furthermore, she emphasizes the terror of traumatic experiences, which prolongs the living effects of war and provokes horror at the possibility of another terrible war (Brintlinger 200). My goal in the following pages is to examine the presence of the author’s voice within *The Unwomanly Face of*

War through the analysis of select stories of participants in WWII. In addition, I investigate the dehumanizing nature of violence and its incorporation into daily life, as well as the humanization of history through storytelling.

Alexievich's Own Narrative

The Unwomanly Face of War utilizes a plurality of feminine voices in order to examine a narrative of female experience during and following World War II, analyzing not only the “Soviet woman,” but attempting to make sense of a modern “postwar” culture in the Soviet Union. This approach differs from an attempt to understand history from a removed, fact-based approach as it emphasizes the personal and emotional with regard to feminine voices. In her role as a collector of stories and a journalist, Alexievich’s presence is clear. She strives to provide an oral history where her own narratives are intentionally limited (Novikau 319). However, her presence throughout the book as an active narrator and storyteller is clear. While the main stories are told from different perspectives and individuals, Alexievich is present as both author and narrator in her italicized introductions that begin chapters, the way she groups stories and the selections she pulls from them, the titles and subtitles selected for certain themes, and her presence within narratives, in the ellipses, pauses, and additions.

In Angela Brintlinger’s article, “Mothers, father(s), daughter: Svetlana Aleksievich and *The Unwomanly Face of War*,” Alexievich’s work is analyzed as a piece of documentary prose, with special emphasis given to its existence as a dynamic text and the presence of the author as a shaper of stories. In its “polyphonous” nature, the many voices within *The Unwomanly Face of War* are intertwined with the author’s own personal point of view, as she comments upon and selects the literary material presented to the reader (199). The meshing of the author’s voice with those of her subjects is something that is developed further in Valenzuela’s fiction in Chapter 2.

In her overall thesis, Alexievich equates “women with life and peace” (Brintlinger 200) and works to distinguish women’s history from that of men’s. She incorporates herself in the stories of the women—she is their audience, sometimes brought into their homes as a “daughter.” As these women recall their own girlhood, they are reliving it through Alexievich, who then portrays it in her writings (201). As an author and narrator, Alexievich functions as a transgenerational bridge. She connects the narratives of the women but also serves as a connection to emotions regarding the experience of war, allowing emotional experience to operate as a historical account. Her introductions to chapters and the work itself not only emphasize her own personal reasons for being interested in recording these oral histories, but integrate Alexievich as an author within the stories, showing her own thoughts and reactions. Although she remains neutral throughout the work, allowing for a multitude of voices to be heard, her presence is undeniable in her goal of demonstrating women’s war. Her voice is present as a listener and as a commentator, giving a platform to the many women who wish to share their own experience of war.

Stories are grouped by overall themes—beginning with the first woman she interviewed for the project, Alexievich then progresses to speak about why women entered the war, and their perceptions upon entering this male-dominated space. The chapters that follow range from themes of love to telling the stories of women who were not on the front lines, but instead laundresses, cooks: maintainers of daily life in war. Alexievich artfully collects excerpts of stories in order to allow these voices to build upon each other, at times overwhelming the reader with the multitude of experiences. The key factor here is that Alexievich is compiling stories in an often-overwhelming manner in order to portray these women as the “repository of memory” (205). By writing their memories down, Alexievich is active in defending life itself. As a preserver of memory, her presence within the work is clear. Although the stories she is collecting are from a

different time, it is evident that this book is not only about female veterans but Alexievich's own life, as her family and those around them too suffered through the war (Brintlinger 201).

In grouping these narratives around similar themes, Alexievich plucks the chapter titles from the narratives of the women. These are pieces of dialogue, spoken by the interviewee to Alexievich, which demonstrate the communicative nature of the overall work. By selecting certain quotations from the memories of these women, Alexievich exhibits her own understanding of women's experience (201). The titles almost always end in ellipses, as do many of the conversations within the text. In these pauses, Alexievich attempts to transcribe as much of her personal exchanges as possible, and utilizes ellipses to designate moments of thought, but also moments of continuation (201). This lends itself to the idea that the war and its impact are ever-changing in their effects and historical view.

The Importance of Memory and Preservation

The stories within *The Unwomanly Face of War* leave a strong emotional impact, with collective feminine voices working to narrativize the culture and society following the Second World War. This impact is accomplished through an emphasis on the retelling of stories, focusing on small details and the memories of Soviet women directly impacted by World War II. One such instance occurs while underground fighter Maria Vasilyevna Zhloba transports wounded individuals out of Minsk, wearing high-heeled shoes as she is embarrassed by her short height (Alexievich 42). When detailing her own story, she states, "One heel broke just as they shouted 'Assault!' And I ran barefoot, the shoes in my hand; a pity, they were beautiful shoes" (42). When remembering, it is not the wounded individuals Maria focuses on, nor the fear of war, but rather the delicately human insecurity of how short she was. In an attempt to retain a semblance of ordinary life during such unordinary times, she continues to wear impractical shoes that help her

overcome her insecurity and is saddened when they break. There is a strong desire to retain elements of normalcy such as beauty, elegance, and grace, juxtaposed against the call of war. In addition to the retention of normalcy, there is a need to cling to familiarly feminine objects and associations. While a high-heeled shoe is associated with femininity and beauty, it is also a dangerous object. Difficult to walk in and sharp at its point, the shoe is a symbol of delicacy and hazard, representative of the tensions between femininity and the masculine and violent realm of war. Its breaking is a violent image, demonstrating the loss of not only a familiar and comforting object, but of one's ability to retain feminine aspects during war. The image of a high-heeled shoe breaking is not something that one typically expects from war stories. Instead of gory details or heroism, Maria highlights what was important to her in that moment: her insecurity over her height, and the loss of the shoes that helped her overcome it. Her emotions demonstrate the experience of war on a personal level, focused on smaller details that are familiar and crossing the border between ordinary and wartime life.

Maria is not the only woman to emphasize emotional details in her story. Alexievich writes of a couple who both participated in the war, revealing the differing views between masculine and feminine perspectives of war. Sergeant Major First Class Olga Vasilyevna Podvyshenskaya tells of her desire to return to peaceful, familiar activities. For example, during moments of leisure in the middle of the war, she and her female companions would spend time embroidering. The image of women spending time together, weaving thread and stories to regain normalcy within the harsh landscape of war, is one that demonstrates the desire to find comfort in companionship and familiar, peaceful activities. The typical idea of a soldier does not evoke feelings of softness, but rather of strength. Through the emotional focus of the stories, it is clear that these women were comprised of both. These tensions are visible in the act of embroidering itself, with the softness of the thread

and cloth contrasted against the sharp and harsh nature of the metal needle. As female warriors, these women exist within the hard landscape of war, but retain this soft nature.

In another instance, one of Olga's comrades received a medal and was granted leave to return home for a few days. Upon her return, all the women lined up to smell her, to get a whiff of home (Alexievich 94). As a reward for her contribution to war efforts, this woman was granted the pleasure of returning to peace and the smell of her own dwelling. Her return to her homeland impacts all of her comrades, as they too yearn for this experience. A whiff of a familiar and safe scent is something that comforts the women, while also reminding them of the world outside the harsh landscape of war. Olga's husband Saul Genrikhovich, a sergeant in the infantry, comments on this story, saying that he had experiences like the scent of home as well, "but I don't remember it... It flitted past me... It seemed like a trifle at the time. Nonsense" (95). Here, a divide between masculine and feminine approaches to memory is clear, as these emotional moments passed by in Saul's mind, but stayed vivid and at the forefront of his wife's. Alluding to the title of the chapter, "Two Wars Live in Our House..." he states that sometimes it seems as though she remembers her war, and he remembers his. However, when he tells their grandchildren of the war, he speaks only about her war, having noticed it was more interesting for them. He says "I have more specific military knowledge, but she has more feelings. And feelings are always more intense, they're always stronger than facts" (95). The feelings and emotions associated with Olga's experience in the war better allow her grandchildren to understand and comprehend her history, while emphasizing the difference between "men's" and "women's" war. The grandchildren are intrigued by their grandmother's stories, not by the names of forts or commanders. Olga's experience exhibits the ability of stories and narratives to better demonstrate the effects of violence, particularly from a feminine perspective.

When Alexievich was working to transcribe the stories of women on the front line, not everyone was so eager to share their stories. Nina Yakovlevna Vishnevskaya, a former medical assistant of a tank battalion, shared her story with Alexievich, beginning with the initial denial of war, “None of us understood then what war was; for us it was some sort of game, something from a book. We had been brought up on the romanticism of the revolution, on ideals” (Alexievich 78). Very young at the start of the war, she and other children stood and watched as machine gun fire fell down upon them, unafraid and curious of the war until those around them were shot down (79). Eventually, Nina snuck off to war, with “mama’s blouse tied on my head instead of a kerchief. As if I was not going to war, but to an amateur concert” (80). Her innocence as a young woman is juxtaposed against the adult and dangerous nature of war. In her young eyes, war is a mythological abstract. She heads toward war as if it were an exciting concert, not understanding the horror and violence that awaits her. Eventually, that innocence is lost. After experiencing the deaths of her comrades, she reflects, “Why was I left alive? What for?... I think... As I understand, it’s in order to tell about it...” (88). However, when Alexievich later transcribed this woman’s story from a recording and sent her the transcript, it was returned, much of it crossed out. Nina protested the publishing of the version of the story that she herself had told, saying that “I am a heroine for my son. A deity! What is he going to think of me after this?” (88). Here, the wish to replace life with an ideal is evident. This desire was not only apparent in Nina’s experience, but in the larger cultural experience of the time. These Soviet women were the victors of war, and as such were fictionalized as heroic, pure women. To contrast this and complicate the image of them as real beings, emotional and heroic, would be to go against the great Victory and its nationalizing effect. Although she wishes to tell her story, and does so to Alexievich, Nina is unwilling to compromise her heroic

image for her son. In this case, Nina's feminine voice is silenced by self-censorship and a desire to maintain the heroic dialogue surrounding the mythological patriotic war.

This forced silence is something that affects the women in *The Unwomanly Face of War* as well as its author. In her introduction to the work, Alexievich includes conversations with the censor of her book, who argues that Alexievich humiliates women with "a primitive naturalism" (xxxiii), while also participating in the "dethroning of heroic women" (xxxiii), making them ordinary, no longer saint-like. Instead of praising the Victory, she makes it terrible; the censor argues that what is needed is a history of heroism and success, rather than a more nuanced portrait of reality, stating that "Truth is what we dream about. It's how we want to be!" (xxxv). Alexievich clearly disagrees and must overcome the censorship of the government, as well as the self-censorship she and her interviewees face, in order to share the stories of Soviet women who participated in the war. Through the collective feminine voices that share their stories and feelings, Alexievich is able to construct a nuanced picture of Soviet women, who were both soldiers and women. The utilization of many voices adds strength in battling against censorship. With so many individuals desiring to share their stories and experiences, it is impossible to silence them all, and Alexievich attempts to best demonstrate the lives of these women.

Sounds and Senses of Violence as Daily Life

Small, ordinary details return throughout the written memories: beautiful and awful sounds, senses, images. These vivid snapshots of daily life help the audience to better connect with the women's experiences. Although those telling their stories told Alexievich not to worry about small details, instead focusing on the "Victory," she emphasizes that these details encapsulate the warmth and vividness of life (xxv). Alexievich states in her introduction that "Victory had two faces—one beautiful and the other terrible, all scars—unbearable to look at" (xliii), and that as

time goes on history “humanizes” itself, becoming like daily life (xvii). Even the terrible aspects of war become part of ordinary life. Through discussing the normalization of violence, Alexievich draws attention to the fact that many parts of daily life during wartime were unordinary. She emphasizes that war leaves nothing untouched, not even the basic human senses. These senses, which often go unnoticed in everyday life, were warped by war. They were transformed into something terrible as violence became the new normal while beautiful, peaceful senses were surprising and unordinary.

In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, experiences of senses differ between masculine and feminine perspectives. For women, it seems that simple senses are brought up often in the remembrance of war and violence. In addition, these senses have a strong association to daily, routine life that often stem from a feminine perspective. For a man, the smell of blood might indicate the loss of life or a wound, but for a woman it could indicate menstrual fluid. Another example of differing perspectives is that of darkness. Women are much more aware of their surroundings and those around them, especially walking around at night. This state of vigilance is necessary for one’s safety and protection, and is socially conditioned in women. Men might not give a second thought to a stranger standing nearby, or walking behind them, whereas women are acutely more aware of sounds and sights that surround them. That is not to say that men are incapable of recognizing these senses as important, but they are a common thread in remembrance that appears in the many stories contained in *The Unwomanly Face of War*. From a social perspective, men are often portrayed as isolated individuals, while women are associated with community and togetherness. War and its impacts can be understood more fully through this feminine connection with the world.

One basic human sense altered by wartime violence is that of sound. In recounting her own memory of violent sounds, one interviewed woman states that “the German submachine guns go rat-a-tat-tat—then silence. All you hear is the wheat rustling. Then again the German submachine guns go rat-a-tat-tat... And you think: will you ever hear again how the wheat rustles? This sound...” (Alexievich 46), juxtaposing the quiet calm of the wheat with the jarring blare of weapons. The wheat rustling is what should be ordinary, but those who fought in the war were put into a position where the machine fire became the new normal, forcing them to wonder if they would ever hear “natural” sounds again. Another woman recalls “the sounds of the war. Everything around booms and clangs, crackles from fire... In war your soul ages” (139), describing war as a clamorous experience, one that wears on its participants not only externally, but internally. But with these violent sounds of war come peaceful ones as well. A former medical assistant states, “the last days of war... I remember this... We were driving and suddenly there was music somewhere. A violin... For me the war ended that day... It was such a miracle: suddenly music. Different sounds... As if I woke up...” (157). The sudden appearance of music designated a shift for this woman, one of hope and love, placed against a memory of violence and death. The violin surprises her, as the sudden flow of music is out of place in her adopted reality of war. This vestige of peacetime, a beautiful song, is one that marks a shift in atmosphere, as the return of music sounds over the violent sounds of war.

This song is not the only one that appears throughout the work. Stanislava Petrovna Volkova, the commander of a sapper platoon, spent another year after the Victory demining fields, lakes, and other areas of earth. At her farewell party, the officers presented her with a blue shawl. She states that “I had to redeem the shawl by singing a song about a blue shawl. I sang for them the whole evening” (223). With war over, she is able to sing a silly song, based not in political or

ideological meaning, but simply joy. This experience is set apart from the landscape of war; in peace, she is able to create and enjoy the company of others. While singing during war could be viewed as frivolous, many women wrote verses at the front. These would be later transcribed into war albums, holding photos and verses, memories from the war. Alexievich observes that these albums bear resemblance to the diaries of young women, only here, in place of love, they showcase death (Alexievich 87). Instead of being able to grow up in peace, these young women were forced to develop into adulthood in the masculinized and violent sphere of war. Robbed of their girlhood, the documentation of their experiences demonstrates the recording of the brutal violence they experienced in war albums, instead of recording loves, gatherings, and losses in diaries.

Striking visuals have perhaps the greatest effect upon the reader, with an emphasis on colors and traditionally feminine belongings. Sniper Klavdia Grigoryevna Krokhina states, regarding the four years she spent at war, “I don’t remember any birds or flowers. They were there, of course, but I don’t remember them. Yes, yes... strange, isn’t it? Can they make a color film about war? Everything was black. Only the blood was another color, the blood was red...” (16). The images of nature, beautiful birds and flowers associated with peacetime, do not exist in her mind, replaced by the darkness of war. This emphasis on color, of red being the only color to stand out in her memory, emphasizes the violence experienced at the front but also the violence that remains with her, lodged in her memory. For the commander of a medical platoon, the color of red and its association to blood is something she can no longer tolerate:

I sewed a blouse from a piece of red cloth, and by the next day some sort of red spots had spread all over my hands. Blisters. No red cloth, no red flowers—roses or carnations, my body wouldn’t accept it. Nothing red, nothing that had the color

of blood... Even now I have nothing red in my house. You won't find anything.
(Alexievich 318-319)

Here, something as ordinary as red cloth elicits a frightening reaction from this woman, unable to incorporate the color red into her postwar ordinary life. Even something beautiful and peaceful, such as flowers, is unable to exist in her life as it elicits such a violent reaction based on its association to the color of blood. This woman remains forever altered and impacted by the sensations of violence she experienced during the war, to a degree that infiltrates her daily life. In this instance, violence has become ingrained in her memory, continuing to impact her even in times of peace.

During wartime, extreme acts of violence become normalized, in some cases founded in a desire to survive and continue with life. This often means creating a new “normal” or form of everyday life:

There were five of us, one a very young boy, just called up for the army. At night my neighbor whispers to me: ‘The boy’s half dead, he’ll die anyway. You get me...’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘An ex-convict once told me... when they escaped from the labor camp, they purposefully took a young man with them... Human flesh is edible... That’s how they stayed alive...’ (xxxvi).

Although the speaker reacts with horror to the possibility of consuming the young man, the idea of cannibalism is voiced, and regardless of whether or not anyone consumes the child, an important question is raised—how far can violence go until it is totally acceptable? At this point, the speaker is aghast when cannibalism is brought up, but would her response be the same after experiencing further violence, starvation, or exhaustion? Would it become part of the “new normal?” The issue of cannibalism demonstrates how much violence has already become a part of reality, as it leads

people to consider consuming another human being to stay alive. This violent concept shocks the reader, emphasizing the terrible nature of war.

Conclusions

It is easy to get overwhelmed by Alexievich's world of plural, blending voices, or lost in the horrors that the Soviet women of the WWII era had to encounter. Alexievich exists as a guide, leading the reader through her own personal experience—that of collecting and piecing together oral histories in order to understand the past of her people, but also her own past. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich places the ordinary, mundane details of wartime as paramount. Women recount their own memories of their occupations, friends, and deaths, demonstrating how powerful a narrative approach to violence can be. In her overarching narrative, Alexievich displays the emotional impact of violence, presenting its relationship with the humanization of history. In the Soviet Union, where nearly everyone lost a family member to WWII, statistics on a page cannot come close to explaining inherently personal sorrow. Through feminine perspectives of stories that emphasize this personal and emotional nature, such as the ones included in Alexievich's work, one is able to better understand the experiences of the participants of war on a human level.

2. Censorship and Violence: Prevailing Feminine Voices in Luisa Valenzuela's

"Cuarta versión"

In "On Reading as a Woman," Jonathan Culler discusses a traditional view of women's literature as a single feminine voice representing many feminine voices. By using several narrators to demonstrate a singular feminine language, named by Argentinian author Luisa Valenzuela as a "lenguaje hémbrico" ("feminine language"), Valenzuela's 1982 novella "Cuarta versión," ("Fourth Version") demonstrates a singular work with a plurality of voices. However, this narrative differs from Culler's idea in that Valenzuela is the intentional creator of these voices. In order to speak about the horrors of la Guerra Sucia, or the Dirty War (1976-1983), that Valenzuela experienced firsthand in Argentina, these plural voices are utilized in expressing feminine perspectives of violence.² Equally important as what these voices say is what they do not utter.

During and following Argentina's Guerra Sucia, Argentinian authors spoke out against the oppressive government through art and literature, working to eliminate censorship and creating works of literature that intended to combat and understand this violent horror. These authors were confronted with the task of writing about actions that appear to belong to a completely different world than that of human beings. They were forced to consider whether or not it was even possible to communicate the violence, pain, and fear that was forced upon the population (Grijalva Monteverde 10). Throughout her narrative, Valenzuela emphasizes censorship, so prevalent in Argentina's oppressive regime. Much can be gained from analyzing the feminine voices within the text, but also from the times in which they are silent or are silenced by external forces. Although

² Argentina's Dirty War occurred when military generals seized power of the government, killing thousands of Argentines who were seen as a threat to the government (*The Economist*). The prominent group "Madres de Plaza de Mayo," consisting of mothers whose children had disappeared, marched weekly to protest the violent actions of the government (Robben 121).

“Cuarta versión” is not a story that outwardly fixates upon violence, aside from the female protagonist Bella’s tragic death at the end of the novella, the ideas of censorship and oppression remain overwhelmingly violent in their impact upon the feminine voices within the text. This chapter analyzes the manner in which feminine voices function as a collective voice in Luisa Valenzuela’s work “Cuarta versión,” incorporating how instances of violence affect these voices.

The Singular as a Collective: Feminine Voices in “Cuarta versión”

Valenzuela’s “Cuarta versión” hinges on what is not said. It forms a narrative of that which is unspeakable, censored, and hidden. When Valenzuela began working on “Cuarta versión,” the story was intended to be a three-hundred-page novel. She then scrapped the longer work in an attempt to find a different way to express the story of protagonists Bella, an Argentinian woman, and Pedro, a foreign ambassador. Out of a desire to find a narrative strategy that would spell out the reality of repression, Valenzuela utilizes a structure that lends itself to the expression of the intangible, in order to “create a language that would capture what resists being told” (Medeiros-Lichem 189). This stems the creation of a “lenguaje hémbrico,” emphasizing the feminine voice through multiple female narrators. Valenzuela allows this feminine language to manifest itself in her statements of resistance against patriarchal structures, such as that of the authoritarian government.

The narrative’s structure incorporates several voices, each serving as a different “versión” of the story. The complexity of the voices at times makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish who is speaking, demonstrating the blending of voices into a collective voice (Trevizan 96). These voices comprise the first three versions of the text: an anonymous narrator, set apart through the use of italics and first person, another who identifies herself with Bella, telling the story of Bella’s involvement with the ambassador Pedro, and Bella herself. As the title suggests, a fourth version

persists: that which is the interpretation and retelling of the reader. With regards to her usage of multiple narrators, Valenzuela stated in an interview that a first-person narration often makes the reader assume that narration is the truth, “the truth is neither here or there, it is here and there. Possibly that perspective of a narrator behind another narrator is my way of setting things straight, but above all, of putting things in their place which is no place at all” (cited in Trevizan 96). By using multiple narrators, the author is able to directly place the reader within the narrative, therefore affecting the sense of finality at the end of the story—the ending will remain open, as the reader’s own interpretation is what allows the text to exist as a living and changing document.

Through her usage of multiple narrators and different versions of the same events, Valenzuela’s work forms an act of preservation. By portraying atrocities throughout Argentina’s Dirty War, her novella emphasizes memory and its importance. In Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), he states that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history,” and that as such, those that preserve and chronicle historical acts cannot distinguish between major and minor acts (254). Valenzuela’s creation of multiple versions allows for feminine writing that demonstrates the importance of all events—from the romance of Pedro and Bella, to the underlying thread of political corruption. What the narrators and authors focus upon is the telling and reconstruction of Bella’s story, which involves a preservation of her everyday life. Bella’s story is disjointed, with parts of her life having been removed. When examining her memories, the narrators and readers are able to read between the lines and view the historical preservation of the fear and violence that Valenzuela has laid out. Benjamin further theorizes that “to articulate the past historically...means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). In Valenzuela’s use of multiple feminine voices in order to form a collective voice, she seizes hold of these memories—of conversations, descriptions, minute

details—and between them allows for the capture not only of Bella’s fleeting reality, but of the panic and emotions present during Argentina’s Dirty War. This collective feminine voice is also evident throughout Alexievich’s work, with the plural memories of the women allowing for a deeper preservation of their collective reality.

“Cuarta versión” begins with the voice of an anonymous narrator attempting to make sense of the disjointed tale of Bella and Pedro, “hay cantidad de páginas escritas, una historia que nunca puede ser narrada por demasiado real, asfixiante. Agobiadora” (“there is a quantity of written pages, a history that cannot be narrated as it is too real, asphyxiating. Tormenting”; Valenzuela 3). The narrator struggles to find the manner in which to piece together the story of Bella, just as Valenzuela endeavors to find language through which she can speak of unspeakable acts of violence. This struggle is important in understanding Valenzuela’s creation of a “lenguaje hémbrico” meant to overcome the fears of censored expression, while openly confronting a patriarchal society and challenging a repressive dictatorship. The collectivization of feminine voices promotes an emphasis on memory, with the narrator citing her goal of stamping “en alguna parte la memoria congelada de los hechos para que esta cadena de acontecimientos no se olvide ni repita” (“the events into some part of a frozen memory so that this chain of events is neither forgotten nor repeated”; 3). The desire of the narrator, Bella, and the author to write down what they have seen, what acts of violence they have encountered, is an act of preservation. By writing down memories, they are active in an attempt to prevent such events from happening again through confronting the reader, both directly and indirectly, with instances of violence.

Writing down inherently violent acts does not effectively archive acts of violence. Instead, Valenzuela records smaller details—those of everyday life, such as an exchange of glances. These details, spread throughout multiple voices and narrators, lead to confusion in those trying to piece

together a story of love and inexplicable violence. The author finds herself in “este mar de papeles y de falsas identificaciones” (“this sea of papers and false identifications”; Valenzuela 2). Valenzuela’s approach to the novella, one that emphasizes several feminine voices, does not rely on shock value or terrible imagery. In classrooms, students learn the gruesome details of genocides or world wars so that “history doesn’t repeat itself.” But often, they are faced with simple statistics, numbers of individuals killed or maimed by war. Through a feminine voice, Valenzuela confirms that often art illuminates reality better than other methods (Grijalva Monteverde 10). In creating a fictional narrative and including Bella’s love story, Valenzuela’s novella revolving around fear, violence, and censorship becomes infinitely more real and personal to the reader.

Following the anonymous narrator, the next voice the reader is introduced to is that of the italicized narrator who identifies herself with Bella, saying “yo soy Bella, soy ella” (“I am Bella, I am her”; Valenzuela 4). The experiences of the narrator, author, and characters blend, having lived through the same events. This voice carries the reader throughout the story, with the third voice, that of Bella and her journey into political action, coming in shortly after. Bella is described as an actress and is portrayed at the start of the novella to be someone concerned with appearances, as she stands filing her nails (5). Playing off of her profession as an actress, phrases such as “preparada para ir a la fiesta, dueña ya de sus actos—el primero y el segundo acto al menos” (“prepared to go to the party, the owner already of its acts—the first and the second act at least”; 6) and “mi papel es estar viva” (“my role is to be alive”; 7) are used to describe her. The narrator characterizes her as “alguien que le habla al espejo porque la otra alternativa sería mirarse, y mirarse exige muchas concesiones” (“someone who speaks to the mirror, because the alternative would be to look at herself, and looking at oneself demands many concessions”; 5). In this passage, the reader can see Bella’s tendency to avoid that which is uncomfortable or has consequences. She

avoids looking at herself just as she avoids acknowledging any sort of fear she feels towards the political climate—to acknowledge it would make it real, just as looking herself in the mirror would. Although Bella is described as a woman capable of making her own choices, her ability to do so is soon suppressed due to the violent government and a romantic entanglement. She becomes involved with the ambassador Pedro, and due to his position of power, her voice is often silenced and censored in some way by him, as well as by the government.

Bella and Pedro begin their relationship after meeting at the ambassador's welcome party. For a while, their relationship is one of unconsummated love. Valenzuela writes of "las manos no tomadas, las bocas no besadas" ("hands not taken, mouths not kissed"; 15), building tension between the two characters. In addition to this tension, the author introduces the idea of silence. While dancing, Pedro says many things he would like to do but cannot, while "las manos apilaban elementos invisibles, juntaban, acariciaban, las manos sí podían y Bella se preguntaba dónde estaría la verdad y optaba por creer en los gestos" ("his hands stacked invisible elements, gathered, caressed, his hands could [do the things he wanted] and Bella wondered where the truth was and chose to believe in the gestures"; 19). In this scene, Pedro's desire for a physical relationship is not voiced. Instead, Bella chooses to believe in his actions, which demonstrate what he is not saying. Here, Valenzuela again lays meaning in what is unspoken, or silent.

Another moment in the novella finds Bella and Pedro standing on the balcony at a friend's house. They feel between them a strange sense of vertigo, described as "la imperiosa necesidad de saltar y el pánico de ceder a esa imperiosa necesidad suicida" ("the imperative need to jump and the panic of ceding to this imperative suicidal need"; 15), gesturing towards the danger of their romantic entanglement, something that eventually leads towards Bella's death. As she becomes further involved with him, she must submit to Pedro. He refuses to confide in her regarding what

exactly is happening politically, and Bella must trust in his knowledge of the political climate. At one point, she questions him, pressing for information about the fate of her friends, Celia and Navroni. Instead of giving her any information he knows, he attempts to placate her with compliments, saying “Basta. Bella, bella, bellísima, criatura adorable. Ya te dije todo lo que sé...Olvídate del problema por el momento. Bórralo” (“Enough. Bella, beautiful, so beautiful, adorable creature. I have already told you all that I know... Forget the problem for a moment. Erase it”; Valenzuela 39). In this way, she is kept in the dark by him, and further confronted with the fear of not knowing what is happening around her. Rather than fulfilling her request, he pushes away the problem, assuring Bella he has told her all that he knows. Furthermore, Pedro’s command to “erase it” from her mind emphasizes the point of forced silence in the novella. Bella is not allowed to voice her concerns and questions—it is only through Valenzuela’s preservation of her voice that her own desires shine through, in what she does not say. This unspoken violence permeates itself throughout the whole novella, demonstrating implicit violence narrated by a feminine form of writing.

When speaking of feminine voices within the narrative of “Cuarta versión,” it is important to take into account the voice of the author as well. As the novella begins, the narrator states that there are “momentos de realidad que de alguna manera yo también he vivido y por eso mismo también a mí me asfixian” (“moments of reality that in some manner I also have lived, and because of this, they also fascinate me”; 3). In a similar manner to the narrator, Valenzuela not only crafts a story, but writes of her own personal experiences during this time period. Like Alexievich does in the previous chapter, Valenzuela incorporates her authorial voice into the narrative, blending with the narrators to create a collective. As a woman who lived through the Dirty War, her

experiences allow her to better understand certain moments and permit for her voice as an author to be blended with those of her narrators and characters.

As an author, Valenzuela functions as a “nombrador” or a “namer,” defining that which is unspeakable within this political atmosphere, and therefore overcoming her self-censorship (Medeiros-Lichem 168). Perhaps the reason Valenzuela chose to incorporate several versions or voices throughout the text, including that of the reader, was to overcome an inability to name and understand this violence. Through the act of naming, the power of the writer is demonstrated in her ability to recapture her censored image, as she works to seize hold of that which “resists being verbalized” (168). Censorship, both self-imposed and enforced externally, is important within the discussion of feminine voices, as well as that of political violence. When feminine voices are censored, they are silenced by masculinity within an inherently patriarchal system. This censorship demonstrates implicit violence, as it oppresses feminine voices.

The patriarchal system, manifesting as an oppressive regime, is not the only factor acting upon Bella; she is also faced with self-censorship. There are many examples of Bella censoring herself. She describes herself as “sólo una actriz, nada más” (“only an actress, nothing more”; Valenzuela 7), but at the same time is illustrated by the narrator with the phrase “la mujer es como un indio, se pinta cuando quiere guerra” (“the woman is like an Indian, she paints herself when she wants war”; 7), painting herself with makeup like a warrior preparing for battle. In this image, Bella falls into the same tensions that faced the Soviet women of WWII, trapped between harsh violence and femininity. Here, Bella is shown capable of choosing when to activate this warlike side of her. Instead of war paint, she paints her face with makeup, retaining aspects of femininity. The refusal to describe herself as anything but an actress demonstrates an act of self-censorship, as in this statement she hides the warlike aspect of her. She does not outwardly acknowledge the

part of her that works to combat political injustice. Bella also leaves out much of the political and violent aspects of her life in her writings. The narrator comments on this, stating “páginas enteras pueden desaparecer tragadas por las otras mientras ciertos papeluchos menores afloran a cada instante para reestructurarla a B” (“entire pages can disappear, swallowed by the others, while certain minor pages emerge at every instant to restructure the life of B”; Valenzuela 35). Here we see attempts at reconciling what the narrator knows of what is written, versus all of Bella’s life. The narrator is striving to restructure Bella’s life, but is confronted with so many moments left unsaid, as much of Bella’s recorded life has been the subject of self-censorship. Instead, what is left behind are absurd dialogues that leave the reader struggling to make sense of them (34). These memories and dialogues contained within Bella’s personal pages face the same repressive problems that Soviet citizens faced in chronicling their own realities. Out of fear of her story falling into the wrong hands and of further violence, Bella omits and erases parts of her own life, leaving just enough for great meaning to be found in her silence.

Perhaps the most prevalent instance of self-censorship throughout the narrative is that of the love story between Bella and Pedro. Underneath the erotic connection between Pedro and Bella, the reader is able to view something else. Their attraction is clear, but the usage of metafiction and different versions throughout the novella allows for the interjection of the narrator, alluding to the political subtext of Bella and Pedro’s relationship and Bella’s involvement in political activity. The testimonies the narrator has to restructure, ones that Bella has left behind and ultimately all that remain of her voice, are not those centered upon political action, but upon an idealized love story, “las papeles narran su historia de amor, no su historia de muerte” (“the papers narrate her love story, not her death story”; 23). The author writes, “los papeles escamotean el otro plano de esa realidad donde Bella es apenas una pieza más, un peón en el juego” (“the papers whisk away

the other plane of reality, where Bella is one more piece, a pawn in the game”; Valenzuela 23), further demonstrating the masking effect this self-censorship has. The reader is forced to find meaning in the silences and gaps in the narrative; the love story of Pedro and Bella serves as a surface story, and underneath lies the harsh reality of the *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons), those who were victims of torture and terror, silenced by censorship during the Dirty War. The narrator chronicles the first instance in which Bella and Pedro’s relationship turns more politically oriented. She tells him she has a pair of friends, lawyers, who seek asylum, and he agrees to do what is possible to help them. The narrator then states, “pienso que Bella estaba mucho más comprometida políticamente de lo que jamás había querido admitir, ni siquiera a sí misma” (“I think that Bella was much more politically compromised than she would have wanted to admit, much less to herself”; 23). Just as Bella avoided looking directly in the mirror, something which would cause her to confront her own image, she does not admit to herself her own political involvement. By not acknowledging what is really occurring, instead focusing on a love story, Bella is able to partially ignore the fear she feels.

The voices of the author, narrator, and characters are each individually present throughout the novella. However, their presences are subject to blending as these feminine voices collectivize. Each voice serves as a different “versión” in Valenzuela’s story, allowing the reader’s voice to be incorporated and validated as the fourth version. Though these voices are subject to self-censorship, Valenzuela’s creation of multiple versions of Bella’s story allows for the reader to comprehend the novella as a preservation of a memory with regards to political violence, but also as a way in which unspeakable violent acts can be understood. In addition, the incorporation of the reader as a “fourth version” of the novella acknowledges the potential of a story (and history) to continue to adapt and change based on the interpretation of the individual reading it. Through the creation of

a feminine language, one that circumvents the pitfalls of external and self-imposed censorship, Valenzuela is able to better communicate the violence associated with political conflict.

Violence in Silence: Censorship and the Unsayable

In Valenzuela's decision to leave censorship as a part of her narrative, she brings light to the idea of silence—to what remains unsaid. Mexican author Rosario Castellanos offers important insight into silence, and what it signifies from a feminine perspective. Silence offers “ámbitos privados donde es posible pensar, madurar espiritualmente, transmitir un mensaje e incluso hablar” (“private spaces where it is possible to think, mature spiritually, transmit a message and speak”; Estrada 66). In this light, silence is not necessarily negative; rather, it offers a space for thought and maturation. With regards to Bella, she does mature over time and becomes more daring politically; however, the silence she experiences differs in its forced nature. In the beginning of “Cuarta versión,” Bella gets ready for a party by herself, quietly. This is an example of a space of silence that is not imposed, but instead one for channeled thought. In Castellanos's own works, characters develop “entre líneas, en el límite mismo de lo no-dicho o dicho...expresa miedos y pasiones, define pensamientos subversivos y prelude acciones” (“between lines, in the same limit of the unsaid or the said...they express fears and passions, and define subversive thoughts and foreshadow actions”; cited in Estrada 68). The same can be said for Valenzuela's characters. As the reader is only given partial glimpses into the lives of the characters within “Cuarta versión,” much of their characterization is shaped within the reader's mind—further emphasizing the importance of the reader's fourth version of the story. Silence functions in a communicative manner, as Valenzuela utilizes it in order to speak about what cannot be said, between the voiced and unvoiced.

When discussing censorship and silence, the desaparecidos must be further discussed. Of the events surrounding the Dirty War, these missing persons have been the most significant mark left by Argentina's oppressive government. The impact of disappearances on the population transcended that of torture or death. It produced a collective terror, as constant disappearances seemed to be a sort of culturally accepted ritual, becoming normalized, and therefore normalizing death and a state of unknowing. As many bodies were destroyed in some way, families could not find closure in identifying their loved ones, even in burying them. There was not only an intense pain in missing a loved one, but also extreme pain in having to hide that emotion (Grijalva Monteverde 11). Those that disappeared remained in a transient state, unable to retain identity as they were confirmed neither dead nor alive. This is something which Valenzuela directly confronts in "Cuarta versión." The embassy that Pedro operates functions as an in-between for those seeking political asylum. During the period of one's refuge:

El asilado queda suspendido en el no-lugar de la embajada. Ya no está más en su propio país—asiento de la embajada—y por lo tanto no está en ninguna parte. Entre esas paredes que no son de cárcel no puede recibir correspondencia, ni llamadas telefónicas, nunca más podrá ver a sus amigos que quizá vivan a pocas cuadras de distancia, sólo a escondidas leerá los diarios.

The asylee is suspended in the non-place of the embassy. They are no longer in their own country—in the seat of the embassy—and therefore they are nowhere. Between those walls that are not prison, you cannot receive correspondences, nor phone calls, you could never see your friends who may live a few blocks away, only secretly read the newspapers. (Valenzuela 24)

Like the desaparecidos, these asylees have no sort of identity. They are forced to remain in the world of the embassy, separated from the outside world. Valenzuela emphasizes the divide between the world of the embassy and the outside throughout the narrative, stating that “los que están dentro quieren salirse ya de ese precario asilo, pasar a la verdad del exilio. Los que están fuera desesperadamente necesitan entrar, cuestión de vida o muerte” (“those who are inside wish to leave this precarious asylum, moving on to the truth of exile. Those that are outside desperately need to enter, question of life or death”; Valenzuela 52). For those that gain political asylum, they give up their freedom for safety. Remaining trapped in the embassy, the asylees yearn for their previous life, disregarding that such a reality no longer exists. In turn, those that remain outside crave to have even a remote semblance of security, not realizing that the embassy is a dangerous place as well.

This divide of two different worlds is further shown between Bella and Pedro and the secrets he keeps from her. It culminates in the party that Bella throws for all of the refugees,

mientras se iba desarrollando la fiesta, en el mundo exterior empezaban a correr rumores de un operativo rastrillo: casa por casa eran pasadas por el cedazo en busca de probables opositores al gobierno. En la residencia, a salvo de los rumores, sólo corrían los litros de champán y todos festejaban emborrachándose con un sentimiento de libertad ya casi olvidado.

While the party was going, rumors of a search operation began: house by house was passed through a sieve in search of probable opponents to the government. In the embassy, safe from the rumors, only the liters of champagne ran and everyone feasted, getting drunk with a feeling of freedom that had almost been forgotten.

(Valenzuela 60)

During the party, the outside world is entrapped in the terror and fear of the government. This sharply contrasts with the world of the embassy, where people happily down champagne. They feel free, not realizing this freedom, which has not been felt in the confined space of the embassy for so long, will soon come to a violent end. As the party progresses, more and more attendees loosen up, with men removing their ties and women their shoes, in order to feel fresh cut grass under their feet. This happy and festive gathering eventually dies down, resulting in a peaceful and quiet atmosphere. Children sleep, languid guests smoke, and exhaustion lurks. The sharp sound of the head guard walking down the hall jars both the guests and the reader, and Pedro is told that everyone must leave. However, as he says, “De aquí no sale nadie” (“No one leaves from here”; Valenzuela 63) the narrative culminates in its most directly violent event—a single shot rings out, and Bella falls.

Liliana Trevizan argues in her essay “Luisa Valenzuela: Los riesgos de una versión plural y democrática” (Luisa Valenzuela: The Risks of a Plural and Democratic Version”) that, as characters are often aggrandized and martyred in their deaths, so is Bella in hers (Trevizan 101). Upon facing death, another narrative element is added. In her graceful fall, during which Pedro holds her close, she appears to merely drift out of being. In Rosario Castellanos’s essay “La mujer y su imagen” (“The Woman and Her Image”) many ways in which women are reduced to ineptitude are mentioned. One of these manners is the transformation of a woman into a “pure spirit.” Bella’s death can be interpreted as such—in her fall she is purified and reduced to a love story. Even if Bella falls and fades away, the story prevails—but it is not necessarily the love story that continues. The story carries on in the head of the reader, demonstrating Valenzuela’s attempt to create an impactful story that does not end when the book is closed.

Throughout Valenzuela's work, the central theme of political persecution of opponents of the military regime is abundantly clear, telling of dissidents, in this case Bella, who attempt to help those in danger. The effects of power and how they play into violence are evident. Bella is brought into the horrors of power after aiding friends seek asylum in Pedro's embassy (Medeiros-Lichem 189). As Bella becomes further entrenched in political danger, she discovers that, with regards to the embassy and Pedro, she holds no true power. Instead she, like the other asylees, has given up part of her freedom and power in order to gain security. This discussion of power is particularly interesting with regards to Valenzuela's personal beliefs, as she believed that "empowerment comes through language and that self-representation can be achieved through the articulation of the intricacies of power relations" (168). Through chronicling her story, even in its broken state, Bella is empowered. The papers she leaves behind, what she cannot say and what is left in silence, serve not only as a historical preservation of her life, but as a circumvention of an oppressive power. In a conference paper, Valenzuela wrote:

I want to know what this madness of power is all about, and I write a book, trying to get under the skin of those who covet power, who have it, or who believe in it. I give them power over words, and suddenly, with language they begin overwhelming even I who created them. It is exciting and terrifying at the same time. It is language that conveys power, and those who manage to freeze it master others. (cited in Medeiros-Lichem 168-169)

She then goes on to talk about the madness of power, stating that it "resides in its idea that it can control fiction, that is to say, the imaginary expression of desire. The madness of fiction is to believe that it doesn't" (169). Forces of censorship, led by power, worked to oppress voices and individuals in Argentina's Dirty War. In a desire to navigate around them and an inability to put

these horrific violent acts into words, Valenzuela's multiple "versions" find meaning in the unspoken.

Through Valenzuela's work, the reader can see an ultimate purpose of her fiction: to preserve the reality of violence within fiction as a source of memory. In the military government of Argentina, those in power attempted to censor any opponents; however, it is shown through works by Valenzuela, as well as other authors writing under an oppressive regime, that the circumvention of oppressive regimes through art is possible, and made stronger through this utilization of feminine voices.

Conclusions

In Valenzuela's "Cuarta versión," the collective voices tell not only the story of Bella, but of the atrocities faced during the Dirty War. The combination of the voices of narrators, characters, and author permits the creation of a feminine language, in both its voiced and voiceless aspects. This language prevails against censorship, instead existing in silence and deriving meaning from what is left unsaid. By allowing for the fourth version of this story, Valenzuela ensures the direct participation of the reader, but also makes certain that, however closed the story might seem with the violent death of Bella, it will continue to change and grow with the retelling of the reader's version of the narrative.

Throughout this story, the theme of political action is thinly veiled underneath the love story of Pedro and Bella. Bella becomes more politically involved than she lets herself admit, and is forced to combat censorship, placed upon her by both an oppressive government and herself. The narrators too struggle with understanding violence, attempting to demonstrate the feminine voice as it circumvents measures of censure. In Valenzuela's "Cuarta versión," the reader is given insight into the feminine language and its indirectly combative nature, as it struggles against

constraints set by authoritarian, patriarchal structures. The many feminine voices within Valenzuela's narrative function as a collective voice, demonstrating and preserving the effects of violence during Argentina's Dirty War.

3. Through the Eyes of Lydia Chukovskaya: Terror and Daily Life in *Sofia Petrovna*

Lydia Chukovskaya's novella *Sofia Petrovna*, published in France in 1965 and in the Soviet Union in 1988, was composed in secret. If the novella were found, its mere existence could mean a death sentence for its author, as well as anyone else aware of the work's existence. Written in the winter of 1939-1940 in the midst of Stalinist repressions, Chukovskaya found herself unable to destroy the dangerous novella. It was not so much a story, but a piece of evidence of what she experienced during the Great Terror, or Great Purge of 1936-1938 (Chukovskaya 1). Chukovskaya had recorded her story in an old school exercise book and became anxious to share it as time went on. Although she originally had no hope of seeing this story published, Stalin's unexpected death in 1953 changed this prospect. Speeches made at the twentieth and twenty-second party congresses spoke of a "better present and denounce[ed] the darker aspects of the past" (1), beginning to unveil the human rights violations that occurred under Stalin. Censorship and repression lessened, and Chukovskaya sought to publish *Sofia Petrovna* in 1962 and 1963, receiving a contract. However, in 1963 the discourse surrounding the Terror changed. The labor camp and prison survivors were considered rehabilitated, provided with jobs, and the governmental focus was now on the future and projected societal achievements, rather than on the consequences and impacts of the Terror.

This desire to forget the past caused the author's novella to be pushed to the side by the government. Chukovskaya fought tirelessly to have her story shared in her own country, to demonstrate the impacts of fear and violence that she and her countrymen underwent and understood on a visceral level. Since *Sofia Petrovna* was written as the author experienced this same terror, a snapshot of ordinary life is given, revealing the causes and consequences of this terror. In this chapter, I discuss Chukovskaya's utilization of *Sofia Petrovna* as an example of a Soviet citizen who was unable to wrap their heads around the terror that clouded their daily lives,

surrounded by ideology and a severe restriction of information. In addition, I examine how Chukovskaya attempts to capture through fiction the violence and fear that she herself experienced with regards to censorship, silence, and the state of not knowing.

Daily Life under Stalin: Women, Family, and Diaries

In her article, “Dreams of Terror: Dreams from Stalinist Russia as a Historical Source,” Irina Paperno discusses the use of narratives based upon dreams to capture the reality of terror (817). Although everyday experiences and ordinary life were recorded in diaries, these were often unable to capture the reality of the time. If one was arrested, Soviet officials would look through diaries immediately, leading citizens to omit parts of their daily life out of fear (Figs 118). In order to avoid incriminating oneself, diaries were bland and mundane, leaving out any dissenting thoughts. Chukovskaya, an avid diarist herself, recorded dreams and their narratives in order to express the terror she experienced:

Reality was beyond my powers of description; moreover, I did not even attempt to describe it in my diary. It could not have been captured in a diary, and anyway could one even conceive of keeping a real diary in those days? (cited in Paperno 798)

Chukovskaya refers to the keeping of a real diary as something out of the realm of possibility—especially one including unedited thoughts and opinions—therefore leading to self-censorship. Much like Luisa Valenzuela, Chukovskaya faced a society that enacted violent censorship upon its citizens. Forced to remain in silence out of fear for one’s life, it is only through fiction that these authors are able to find the words with which reality can be understood. The flexibility that comes with writing *Sofia Petrovna* allows Chukovskaya to not only share her experience of violence and repression but permits the reader to understand it. Like Valenzuela, Chukovskaya also enlists

meaning in what is not said. Throughout her novella, people live in silent denial of the disappearances and executions happening around them. Vocal dissensions lead to the danger of the same fate, forcing people to remain in silence and carry on as normal. I discuss this situation later on with relation to Sofia Petrovna's inability to withstand these conflicting ideologies and subsequent fall to madness.

The terror and loss experienced in the novella is not unique to Sofia Petrovna. In the Stalinist terror of the 1930s, many people lost one or both parents, leaving little reliable information from which to reconstruct familial history (Figs 123). In addition to seizing diaries, officials would confiscate many other documents that kept a record of who these people were and what happened to them. In historical terms, the state itself revealed nothing. For many years there were lies about the fates of people shot by firing squads or worked to death in labor camps (123). This situation impacted Chukovskaya directly, as her husband was arrested under false charges and executed, unbeknownst to her at the time. The remaining relatives of families would often maintain a "self-protective silence" surrounding arrested members of the family. In this silence, people would create their own narratives of a "happy family," based on a few childhood memories or stories told to them (123). Sofia Petrovna does this type of fictive reconstruction after her son's disappearance takes a massive toll on her health, creating stories of his release from prison. These stories and narratives demonstrate an attempt to uncover a past that creates a basis for these people's own identity; the emotional emphasis leads to greater significance, especially within a society that has repressed truth for generations (124). Under Soviet society, the human desire to place one's identity within a broader familial history was taken away, causing individuals to find alternative ways to piece together their identities and histories. In these situations, fictional narratives are created but remain grounded in the few facts and memories that people retain.

Chukovskaya's novella focuses on Sofia Petrovna, a central female character and single mother of one. In order to better understand this character, it is necessary to discuss the role of women within Soviet Society. Susan E. Reid's article "All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s" examines the role of women under Stalin. In Soviet society, women were to model the ideal attitude of "love, honor, and obedience" (Reid 133). Women's rights were promoted, with certain articles of the Constitution guaranteeing equal rights to vote, work, and rest, while also providing for maternity leave and childcare (135). Women's labor was vital to increasing productivity, and women were encouraged to take up traditionally male occupations and "swell the industrial labor force" (135). While these rights were promoted and asserted, they did not occur in practice. Worse, the attempt to address women's rights issues was dismissed, closing further discussion of "the woman question" (135) with the declaration that women were already equal in Soviet society. Women were then faced with a double burden: state provision of childcare and meals fell short, which left women to lead the traditionally feminine sphere of the home while being expected to maintain party loyalties and support the workforce (135). With legislation and propaganda promoting the nuclear family, women became the pillars of the new Soviet order based on the family, but the "economic imperative to encourage women to swell the labor force made them a prime target for persuasion" (136). In the same vein, Susan E. Reid explains that:

in 1936 when new legislation emphasized women's reproductive role, *Pravda* still printed more photographs of women engaged in nontraditional pursuits than of women as wives and mothers. It was the role of visual rhetoric to compensate where reality failed to match promises, to persuade women of their important contribution to building socialism, while at the same time shaping and containing their

aspirations within bounds that, in many ways, reinstated traditional gender prescriptions. (Reid 136)³

Women were trapped between worlds and expectations. They were expected to participate in the Soviet cause as mothers and as caretakers, but also within traditionally masculine work roles without government support to aid in the former role. This tension of the Soviet woman is portrayed within *Sofia Petrovna*, as the main character is both a mother and a worker, balancing these responsibilities.

Terror Through the Eyes of Lydia Chukovskaya and Sofia Petrovna

When the reader is first introduced to Sofia Petrovna, she has suffered the loss of her husband. Faced with the responsibility of taking care of her son Kolya, who has yet to finish school or begin on an eventual higher education, she takes a typing course, feeling that she “simply had to acquire a profession” (Chukovskaya 3). After earning the highest skill rating on her certificate, she gets a job at a large Leningrad publishing house. Sofia Petrovna is described as a model Soviet woman. She finds joy and fulfillment in her work, all the while supporting her son in becoming a model Soviet citizen. This tension of sacrifice and expectations includes living in an apartment which once belonged entirely to her but has been transformed into a communal living space. The nursery is the only space left to Kolya and his mother, but they do not complain. On the contrary, Kolya defends the “revolutionary idea behind filling bourgeois apartments with extra tenants” (14). Kolya is the source behind much of Sofia Petrovna’s knowledge of Communism and the new order. In some ways, Kolya is representative of the new Soviet order in his understanding of revolutionary

³ *Pravda*, a Soviet newspaper whose name translates to “Truth”, was the official news venue of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Founded in 1912 as a daily workers’ newspaper, it became the main newspaper of the Russian socialist movement. During the Soviet era, party members were obligated to read *Pravda* (*Pravda Digital Archive*). It served as a mouthpiece for Soviet ideology, announcing official policy.

practices. Sofia Petrovna is not necessarily a member of the old order, but demonstrates how older generations had to relearn and situate themselves within this new society. This transitional situation is demonstrated throughout the novella through Kolya's explanations of Soviet ideology to his mother:

Sofia Petrovna now completely agreed with Kolya when he expounded to her on the necessity for women to do socially useful work. Yes, everything Kolya said, and everything that was written in the newspapers now seemed to her completely obvious, as if people had always written and talked that way (Chukovskaya 14).

The narrator speaks about Sofia Petrovna with a slightly disdainful and sarcastic tone, demonstrating a mocking pity towards this naïve Soviet citizen who later cannot comprehend her own reality. Chukovskaya highlights the rapid change in discourse that has occurred in Soviet society. If one gives their whole self to the Soviet doctrine, as Sofia Petrovna does, it is easy to believe that everything should have always been this way. This perspective on Soviet discourse does not acknowledge the system's failings.

Ideology is present in every aspect of the characters' lives. Sofia Petrovna receives flowers on the Eighth of March from the Party Organization at the publishing house and places them on top of Kolya's desk, "under the shelf which held the collected works of Lenin, next to the little bust of Stalin" (18).⁴ Kolya is described as having a "military way about him" (19), but remains an upstanding youth and loyal Young Communist League ("Komsomol") member.⁵ As a

⁴ Women's Day, occurring on March 8, was institutionalized in the Soviet Union to celebrate women.

⁵ Komsomol is the acronym for the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, a political youth organization in the Soviet Union. It was focused on drawing youths away from Western culture present in films and popular culture, eventually creating their own ideology-infused films and magazines. It worked as a filter to create and select future Communist Party members.

“Komsomolet,” he is polite, refraining from decadent activities such as drinking and smoking. Instead, he devotes his energy to bettering his country and community. In other words, he is an ideal Komsomol member and Soviet youth. Kolya and his friend Alik, both politically active, respectable youths, are selected to go as engineers to the city of Sverdlovsk. In their absence, Sofia Petrovna spends time with a friend from work, Natasha, and they attend Soviet propaganda films together. These films appeal to Sofia Petrovna, as they remind her of Kolya and his work for the country. In letters to his mother, Kolya states that “injustice was a class concept and vigilance was essential” (Chukovskaya 24). However vigilant the characters in the novella are, they are unable to escape the repression and violence that surrounds them.

These letters arrive regularly, speaking of his work and of the factory he was assigned to, but not of himself or his own life. Kolya has become an industrious Soviet youth that one day makes the front page of *Pravda*, where he is lauded for his ability to manufacture a new form of machinery for the factory (27). Everyone praises Sofia Petrovna for her son’s efforts, and she is pleased to have such an exemplary son. But a hint of sarcasm is present here. The praise is given not for Kolya’s individual nature, but for his contributions to Soviet society. His actions are only important because they support his country and cause. The government-fueled official newspaper rewards him by using him as a public example of a model citizen. Since *Pravda* has published his accomplishments, it is safe for other people to congratulate Sofia Petrovna on Kolya. However, when the official stance changes and these formerly lauded individuals are painted as enemies and saboteurs by the state, the Soviet citizens must alter their actions and continue to believe that what the government says is the truth.

The praise of the work of the Komsomol young man whose picture appears in *Pravda* is contrasted with the arrests that begin happening around Sofia Petrovna—a man in her apartment

building, the ex-supervisor of the print shop—both painted as enemies of the people. Despite the fact that people she knows and speaks to on a daily basis have suddenly been dehumanized as saboteurs, Sofia Petrovna continues to display faith and confidence in the Soviet government. When she speaks to an old friend whose husband has been arrested, Sofia Petrovna insists that, if he has not done anything against the Soviet regime, “everything will be all right. Nothing can happen to an honest man in our country. It’s just a misunderstanding” (Chukovskaya 37). Sofia Petrovna’s ignorance is something that Chukovskaya mocks. It is clear that people are being arrested, but Sofia Petrovna follows the Soviet doctrine that has been instilled in her, her faith in the government preventing her from seeing the truth of the arrests. In her mind, there are the criminals, enemies of the Soviet state, and she fails to understand that she and her loved ones could just as easily be wrongfully labeled as criminals or enemies. Perhaps this denial is one of willing ignorance. Similar to Bella in “Cuarta versión” and later on in the thesis, the citizens in Hernández’s “Hechos de un buen ciudadano,” it is safer and easier for Sofia Petrovna to believe in the known, governmentally spread ideology.⁶ Mentally straying outside of the accepted beliefs and considering the actual violence and terror that is happening widely is dangerous, as it confronts individuals with their own reality. In their complacency a state of mute violence is achieved, a sort of mental censorship enforced by fear.

In Soviet society, the arrests persist, culminating in Alik’s appearance at the apartment door, bringing news that Kolya, the perfect Komsomolet, has been arrested (43). Kolya believes his arrest was a mistake, and as a result takes nothing with him, saying that he will return the next day (58). Faced with imprisonment and serious charges, Kolya is still convinced of the equitable

⁶ “Hechos de un buen ciudadano” by Claudia Hernández is discussed in the following section, Chapter 4.

nature of the Soviet legal system. His absolute faith is demonstrated through his decision to leave empty handed, as he is wholly convinced of his innocence.

Upon hearing of Kolya's arrest, his mother is devastated, but at the same time in denial, convinced they meant to arrest someone with the same name as his. She goes to the prosecutor's office to try and sort things out and is made to stand in a long line of people also inquiring about their arrested friends or relatives. In this line, Sofia Petrovna continues to display a disconnect in understanding the fate of those that surround her:

all these women, the mothers, wives and sisters of saboteurs, terrorists and spies!
And the men, the husband or brother of one... They all looked perfectly ordinary,
like those on a streetcar or in a store. Except they all looked tired and baggy-eyed.
'I can imagine how awful it must be for a mother to learn that her son is a saboteur.'

(Chukovskaya 50)

Here, Sofia Petrovna's existence as a complacent Soviet citizen persists, unable to place herself with the relatives of those labeled as saboteurs. Instead, she pities those who in reality are experiencing the same thing as she is. She is in denial of the fact that she is a mother who just learned that her son is a saboteur. When Natasha and Alik view all the women in line, they comment on the possibility of all the arrested being the same as Kolya, since "all those mothers standing in line somehow look an awful lot like Sofia Petrovna" (60). Her experience is universal, with all these people in line facing the same friction between ideology and reality. She is not permitted to see Kolya, and her daily life turns from a devotion to work to a devotion to freeing her son.

The persistent terror does not stop at reaching Kolya. Natasha is fired from the publishing house, with a small typo aligning her with the bourgeois enemy. Like Natasha, Alik loses his job

due to his persistent belief in Kolya's innocence. Still, Sofia Petrovna is not able to recognize the state's role in the repression that surrounds her, beginning to wonder if perhaps Kolya himself gave cause for being arrested, or if Alik lost his job due to his impetuous nature. She continues to show belief in the ideal that, if one is a "real Soviet citizen" (Chukovskaya 69) they will never face trouble, demonstrating her continued denial of the corruption that is staring her in the face. She is unable to process that everything she has been taught by her son, the epitome of this new Soviet generation, has turned on him and her loved ones. To cope with this, she forces herself to believe in Kolya's innocence and the righteousness of the government, convinced that everyone will realize all is a misunderstanding and life will return to normal. When Sofia Petrovna finally discovers Kolya's fate, he has already been sentenced to ten years without right to correspondence at remote camps, having confessed to his crimes (78). This is a final breaking point for Sofia Petrovna. Her son's new criminal status is something that she must now believe, as it has been decided so bluntly by the government that she has always thought to be truthful.

As Sofia Petrovna descends into madness, caught in a world that ceases to make sense to her, so does the novella. Alik is arrested as well, and an article is written aligning Sofia Petrovna with the saboteurs. Sofia Petrovna decides to leave her job, and after doing so goes to visit Natasha, but learns that she poisoned herself and is now dead. Without friends and family, she is alone and an outcast. Some of the tenants isolate her further, motivated by a sort of greed that is supposed to be absent in ideal Soviet society. If Sofia Petrovna is deported or made so uncomfortable that she leaves, they would be left with her valuable room. Her life is now devoted to freeing Kolya, the only goal which she can now focus on, but is faced with constant fear—of the publishing house, her neighbors, even of looking at the table in her room, as it could contain a summons from the police.

A year passes, and Sofia Petrovna visits Natasha's grave. When Natasha was expelled from her position, she was left a pariah. While Sofia Petrovna continued to speak to her, she kept searching for some truth in what the party officials were saying about Natasha. In her visit to Natasha's grave, Sofia Petrovna has to some degree accepted Natasha's innocence. But for Kolya, there is nowhere to go, nowhere to mourn her loss. Sofia Petrovna writes to Stalin several times, pleading him to review Kolya's case, but nothing happens. This government that is supposed to work for the common people is silent. With regards to silence, Sofia Petrovna now is silent as well. She has learned that in order to maintain her own safety and any hope of her son's return, she cannot express any controversial opinion. As such, her actions and words are censored by the government and in acts of self-censorship.

When some arrested persons are released from prison, Sofia Petrovna loses all doubts regarding Kolya's return, convinced he will be released instantly. She feels elated and begins telling people that Kolya has been released, even though no correspondence has been given to indicate that. It is not that she is necessarily lying—she has convinced herself that he must return, and in his absence begins to create a fictional narrative. As days pass and there is still no sign of Kolya, she uses this fiction as a means of grappling with reality. She is unable to cope with the fact that her son may never return, kept away by the cause that they both so strongly believed in. The fabrication of his return allows her to feel that same pride and validation in Soviet ideology that she felt when Kolya's article was published in *Pravda*. Manically, she tells more and more people that "Kolya's been released! Did you hear? They've released Kolya!" (Chukovskaya 103). People respond with pleasure and relief, reassuring her that if he is being returned then he has been determined innocent, and the government is doing what it should. However, when she checks her mailbox it is clear that in her madness she has not completely convinced herself of the falsehood

of Kolya's return. Day after day the mailbox is left empty, and Sofia Petrovna lives each day attempting to recreate the praise and pride that she understood before her son's arrest, of being a good mother and Soviet citizen. These two worlds of family life and the great Soviet cause are intertwined in Sofia Petrovna's characterization as a Soviet woman.

Finally, a letter in a pink envelope appears with Kolya's writing inside. He pleads with his mother, asking her to right his situation and claim his innocence. He states that he was forced to admit to crimes he was not guilty of, displaying faith in his mother's ability to simply write an appeal and fix the situation. However, to write an appeal would put Sofia Petrovna in the spotlight, perhaps causing authorities to remember and deport her. In an act of self-preservation, she "struck a match and lit a corner of the letter. It burned, slowly turning to ash, coiling up into a tube. It curled completely and burned her fingers" (Chukovskaya 109). In this scene, Sofia Petrovna is faced with an extremely difficult choice. The past years of her life have been dedicated to rescuing her son and getting the government to recognize his innocence. Not only would getting an appeal approved return her son to her, but it would demonstrate that the ideology she was taught to believe in was valid and the truth. A violent effect persists, of a totalitarian regime existing at the core of this deep relationship between a mother and her son. Moreover, this violence is highlighted in the act of burning the letter. She is effectively burning the hope of having her son returned, while also burning her naïve belief in the Soviet cause and its accompanying ideology. In choosing herself over her son, she defies the traditional role of a Soviet woman. Chukovskaya begins the novella with an ideal Soviet character—Sofia Petrovna works, supports the economy and her country, shares her belongings, and cares for her son. But by the end of the work, she is completely transformed. She has lost much of what she lived for at the start of the Terror and has turned to

creating fictional accounts of her son in order to cope with her loss of him. In the end, she severs the relationship between mother and son in order to preserve her own life.

Conclusions

Lydia Chukovskaya's presence throughout the novella is clear. As a narrator and writer, she approaches Sofia Petrovna with a tone tinged with sarcasm and disdain, but also compassion. Sofia Petrovna is one of these naïve Soviet citizens that surrounded Chukovskaya during her experience of the Stalinist Terror. As a character, she is unwilling to recognize the disconnect in her thought processes. Sofia Petrovna's son is victim to an unfair arrest, the same experience of many around her. However, she views those that have also lost family members as the relatives of criminals. Chukovskaya describes a character who cannot withstand the tensions between government-dictated reality and actual experiences, therefore breaking under the pressure. Experiencing daily violence through censorship, the arrests that surround her, and the suicide of Natasha, Sofia Petrovna goes mad trying to understand the losses and lies that encapsulate her life. By demonstrating Sofia Petrovna's descension into madness, Chukovskaya elicits an emotional response in the reader, forcing them to view the disconnect that exists between the ideology of the state and the reality of terror. This emotional impact is heightened due to Sofia Petrovna's loss of Kolya, demonstrating the rupture of ties between a mother and a son. Through creating a fictional narrative of the events that Chukovskaya experienced firsthand, she better portrays the fear and terror of her own reality, while emphasizing the emotional impact of everyday life through fiction. This fictional account better allows the reader to understand the violence and fear that existed under the Soviet Stalinist regime.

4. Bodies in the Kitchen: Lingering Violence in the Short Fiction of Claudia Hernández

From 1980 to 1992, the Salvadoran Civil War caused the violent deaths of over 75,000 Salvadorans and forced a quarter of the population from their homes. By the time peace accords were signed, much of the country had been devastated, and a generation of children had grown up knowing only war and civil unrest (Byrne 210). At the core of the conflict, a ruling oligarchy—then aligned with the military—fought against a coalition of guerrilla forces struggling to protect the human rights of Salvadorans. When clandestine opposition movements arose in the early 1970s, the ruling military dictatorship immediately responded with violence, enacting terror upon the citizens. Organized military forces were supplemented by death-squads and paramilitary gangs, specialized in perpetrating disappearances, torture, and killings in an attempt to elicit compliance from the civilian population (Ellis 1). During wartime, common types of torture utilized by the military and police included dismemberment, mutilation, and the public act of leaving the victims' remains in visible places (Booth and Walker 79).

By the end of the decade, the conflict had culminated in a full-scale civil war. Salvadoran authors participated heavily in the resistance movement. Inspired by the conflict and political strife that surrounded them, authors used literature as a means of speaking out against the actions of the government. Although many were not active participants in the war, they served as historical commentators, documenting ways of life and societal norms that occurred during wartime. With the end of the civil war, a shift in literature is clearly exhibited. Authors lessened their direct focus on the war itself, instead commenting on its societal impact and lingering effects. Through their commentary, these authors rebel against any sort of erasure of the history of violence that occurred in relation to the war (Ellis 1). Salvadoran author Claudia Hernández's fiction deconstructs preconceived notions of acceptable actions in society, directly confronting the reader with violent and absurd events. Hernández's work differs from the previously discussed authors in that the

subjects within her fiction are not necessarily female. However, her feminine voice strongly prevails. She is present throughout her stories, driving them with the desire of demonstrating the emotional impact of violence. In this chapter, I will focus upon the normalization and dehumanization of violence in two stories by Hernández, “Hechos de un buen ciudadano” (“Acts of a Good Citizen”) and “Manual del hijo muerto” (“Manual of a Dead Child”). In these short works, there is no appearance of blood, no active state of violence. The gruesome images remain neatly packaged without mess, contrasted against an extremely bloody and messy war. I will examine Hernández’s emphasis on memory of wartime violence during and following the Salvadoran Civil War, investigating her ability to directly confront the reader through absurd themes.

Outlandish Acts of Violence in El Salvador’s Postwar Era

Born in 1975, Salvadoran author Claudia Hernández grew up during the Salvadoran Civil War (Galindo 190). As the twelve-year war ended when Hernández was seventeen, her generation became the first to have lived during the conflict but not have participated in it. Much like in the case of Alexievich, this led to a generation of young people attempting to understand their nation’s violence and history from an outsider’s perspective. In Hernández’s short fiction, little mention is given to the setting of her works or the history that surrounds them, and no mention is made of El Salvador or Central America. In this manner, they speak about war and violence on a global, broader scale. The stories could occur anywhere, or nowhere, existing as pure fiction. However, they continue to be specific to El Salvador, in that they are directly influenced by Hernández’s desire to preserve and understand the violence surrounding the Salvadoran Civil War.

Featured in Hernández’s collection of short fiction *De fronteras* (2007), “Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte 1)” and “Hechos de un buen ciudadano (parte 2)” take an absurd and twisted

approach to violence. These stories center upon an unnamed narrator who encounters a nude corpse in his kitchen. The narrator interacts with the world around him in a simplistic, matter-of-fact way. He fails to question why there is a body in his kitchen, immediately accepting it and instead focusing on solving his problem by finding it a home. This blunt acceptance of death is prevalent throughout Hernández's stories. In an interview at Central American University in El Salvador, Hernández discusses the childlike nature of her characters (Galindo 191). Describing her own style as "primitive," she emphasizes her belief that the trauma of war causes a human being to return to the most elemental part of themselves, leading her to craft characters who are "muy básicos y en situaciones limitados" ("very basic and in limited situations"; 190). In a practical attempt to find a place for the body in his kitchen, the narrator publishes an advertisement in the newspaper, receiving several responses from desperate individuals searching for the bodies of their loved ones. More and more people find human bodies mysteriously appearing in their own homes, and the altruistic narrator takes it upon himself to find a use for all of them.

In the opening lines of "Hechos de un buen ciudadano," Hernández immediately confronts the reader with blunt, vivid, and inherently violent images. Utilizing short, abrupt sentences, Hernández presents the narrator's first encounter with the scene that has unfolded in his kitchen. By presenting the narrator's impressions in the form of matter-of-fact statements, Hernández distances the reader from the incomprehensible idea of finding a corpse in one's kitchen. In addition, the short, blunt statements are violent in their own way. They exhibit an emotionless approach to a violent situation through a harsh, masculine perspective and style. However, Hernández's words are not emotionless, but full of feeling. Through emulating this masculine approach to events that generally would elicit an emotional response, such as finding a body in one's kitchen, Hernández highlights the flaws in an emotionless, factual approach to history and

violence. By confronting the masculinized blunt perspective to history, the power of Hernández's authorial feminine voice is demonstrated, emphasizing the emotional in absurd situations. These blunt descriptions create a sense of reliability with the narrator, as well as normalize the violence surrounding a dead body. The narrator does not cry out in fear or call the police when he sees a corpse, instead calmly observing his surroundings.

Había un cadáver cuando llegué. En la cocina. De mujer. Lacerado. Y estaba fresco: aún era mineral el olor de la sangre que le quedaba. El rostro me era desconocido pero el cuerpo me recordaba al de mi madre por las rodillas huesudas y tan sobresalientes como si no le pertenecieran, como si se las hubiera prestado otra mujer mucho más alta y más flaca que ella.

There was a body when I entered. In the kitchen. Of a woman. Lacerated. And it was fresh: the metallic smell of blood still lingered. I did not recognize her face, but her body reminded me of my mother, because of her prominent and bony knees; it was as if they did not belong to her but were lent to her by a much taller and skinnier woman. (Hernández 17)

The blunt observational sentences at the beginning of the passage are juxtaposed with a longer sentence that humanizes the corpse. Although he does not recognize the woman's face, her body and knees evoke an emotional connection with the narrator, reminding him of his mother. As the narrator questions the appearance of the woman, this allows the author to comment on her social and economic status—her knees appear to belong to a thinner and older woman, although she is later described as “youthful.” The contradicting characteristics of this body lead the reader to conceptualize a young working-class woman, aging before her time. This opposing quality only further emphasizes the strange nature of her death, making it absolutely clear she did not die of

natural causes, and allowing Hernández to comment on the victims of El Salvador's civil war—working-class, non-military citizens. The fact that the narrator acknowledges the similarities that this body shares with his mother, but then pushes this fact away, demonstrates the denial of emotion prevalent throughout this story. It is far easier for the narrator to treat the body as an object than it is to dwell on its familiar and human aspects.

Through her description of the body, Hernández presents postwar Salvadoran social reality as mundane and absurd. Her deadpan tone allows for the notion that there is nothing unusual about finding a cadaver in one's kitchen, therefore evoking questions of what passes as "ordinary" in a society that has experienced so much violence and hardship. This is similar to Sofia Petrovna's normalization of what happens to the Soviet citizens surrounding her. For Sofia Petrovna, the arrests and terror become a part of ordinary, daily life. In her fiction, Hernández attempts to understand the war during which she grew up, and the resulting normalization of violence. By creating fiction that is absurd, Hernández forces the reader to reexamine the incorporation of violence into everyday life and understand that it is not something that should be normal. Through her own feminine perspective, she emphasizes the importance of remembering wartime deaths and acts of brutality. In addition, this passage indirectly situates Hernández's story within Salvadoran history, referencing the public display of victims' remains by the police or military (Kokotovic 72). These acts of violence, done by officials as they remained quiet on the state of loved ones who disappeared or were arrested, occurred in silence. Confronted with the remains of a body that could be their relative, loved ones could not protest or combat the government, out of fear for their own lives, therefore being forced to remain silent.

As the narrator examines the kitchen, he notes that the crime scene is completely clean, devoid of even a drop of blood. He states "He visto muchos asesinados en mi vida, pero nunca uno

con un trabajo tan impecable como el que le habían practicado a la muchacha” (“I have seen many murders in my life, but none of such impeccable work as what had been done to this young woman”; Hernández 17). Rather than reacting with shock to the appearance of a body in his home, the narrator instead admires the quality of the murder; an absurd reaction that elicits a feeling of shock in the reader. A normal human reaction would be to react with horror, but death and the appearance of bodies is so common in this violent society that the narrator accepts it as another ordinary task to deal with. Deciding to name the corpse “Lívica,” the narrator establishes a personal connection; she is no longer merely a faceless, nameless body, but is humanized. “Lívica” translates as “pallid” or extremely pale. Like the crime scene, Lívica remains bloodless, emphasizing her existence as a corpse and reminding the reader that she is neither alive nor capable of becoming so. Hernández’s choice to name the body allows it to become more human and real to the audience, while reminding the reader that the name is rooted in characteristics that are related to death. After her “naming,” the narrator places the following advertisement in the newspaper, searching for the individual to whom she belongs:

Busco dueño de cadáver de muchacha joven
de carnes rollizas, rodillas saltonas y cara de llamarse Lívica.
Fue abandonado en mi cocina, muy cerca de
la refrigeradora, herida y casi vacía de sangre.
Información al 271-0122.

I am searching for the owner of the body of a young woman
with plump flesh, prominent knees and
a face that looks like she would be called Lívica.
It was abandoned in my kitchen, very close to

the refrigerator, wounded and almost devoid of blood.

Send information to 271-0122. (Hernández 17)

The format of the advertisement, and the details that the narrator draws attention to, emulate an advertisement for a lost item or a common household problem. The body is treated as an object and is presumed to have an “owner.” Furthermore, Lívida is dehumanized through the use of the word “it” to describe her. This further emphasizes the attempt to treat violence as normal. It is easier to think of the corpse as an object than as a human being, as then the narrator does not have to pause and consider any sort of emotional implications. The brusque language further normalizes the concept of finding a body in one’s home. By listing details that are familiar only to the narrator, the unclaimed body is defined solely through his perception of her. Regardless, the advertisement proves to provoke the interest of several readers.

The act of the “good citizen” is positively responded to by the community, with several individuals calling and inquiring about the body, or sharing their own personal stories. Most notably, a man requests the body. Although he has lost a male relative, he wishes to give his family closure by presenting them with a body to bury, even if it is not their family member. After a week passes and no one else claims the corpse, the good citizen offers Lívida to the man, who asks for his discretion in this transaction. This situation marks one of the only moments within the story where there is an acknowledgment of illicit activity. The man claiming the body wishes to have his family accept her, even though he understands this false body will not replace or fully represent his lost relative. He chooses to keep his family in the dark regarding the true identity of the corpse and would rather let them believe a lie than continue living in a state of hope and fear for their missing relative. Saying a phrase repeated often throughout the story, the narrator obliges “como cualquier buen ciudadano habría hecho” (“like any good citizen would have done”; 18). In offering

this woman to be buried, the narrator is complacent in burying the effects of wartime violence, as he is erasing the crime that had been committed in order to preserve a family's happiness. Furthermore, he is participating in the active erasure of Lívida as a human being. Rather than finding out who she was, or why she appeared dead in his kitchen, the narrator finds a useful and functional purpose for the body, sending her to lie in a false grave. This is praised as an act of a good citizen, as he did what was best for society.

The second half of "Hechos de un buen ciudadano," situated several stories after part one in *De fronteras*, finds the good citizen overwhelmed with phone calls. Having heard of the narrator's good deed, where he found Lívida's body a home, people in the community begin to contact him with the hope that he will find homes for the corpses that have appeared in their houses as well:

En una sola tarde me llegaron veinte cadáveres de ambos sexos, de todas las edades y de diferentes partes de la ciudad. Ni uno solo estaba desnudo...los habían vestido [los ciudadanos] con la primera de las ropas que encontraron en sus armarios, habían muertos con ropas de hombre, niños con faldas floreadas...

In only one afternoon, I was brought twenty cadavers of both sexes, of every age and from different parts of the city. Not a single one was nude...they had been dressed [by the citizens] with the first articles of clothing they could find in their closets, there were dead people dressed in men's clothes, boys with flowery skirts...

(Hernández 39)

Here, Hernández again emphasizes the humanization of the corpses, but with a twisted approach. The citizens of the town take care to clothe the naked bodies, even though being nude does not affect the cadavers, but rather the townspeople. While they take the time to dress these corpses,

they do not actively attempt to find clothing that corresponds with the age or gender of the body. Why do they take time to clothe the bodies if they do so haphazardly? Perhaps in doing so, they feel that they are doing their own “good deeds,” absolving themselves of any guilt they might feel from not caring to find the perpetrators of the murders. In exchange for taking on the task of finding homes for twenty bodies, the townspeople offer to help the good citizen, teaching him how to file the proper paperwork for the corpses, create a publication in the newspaper, and provide him with tea and coffee. By emphasizing the routine of this process, Hernández further normalizes the violence of wartime, as no one attempts to find those who committed these crimes, but rather accepts that the “right thing to do” is to find a useful purpose for these bodies.

With the aid of his neighbors, the good citizen finds a place for thirteen out of the twenty bodies. Several of his helpers ask him what should be done with the remaining corpses, but he states that he will be able to take care of them and remove them. His neighbors respond by saying, “en verdad es usted un buen ciudadano” (“truthfully, you are a good citizen”; Hernández 41). Alone, he begins to prepare the bodies into a stew. Hernández makes use of suspense as the level of severity of the narrator’s “good deeds” increases. It is not clear to the reader what the good citizen will do with the remaining cadavers until he is already doing it. Calmly, without any sort of emotional preoccupation, the narrator lists the steps he took in order to prepare this stew. The reader is given no sort of warning or clue that cannibalism is what awaits, with the horror setting in slowly. The narrator never shares his thought process in choosing to make these bodies into a stew—in his head, it has already been decided. As the concept of cannibalism is immediately accepted by the narrator, it therefore must be accepted by the reader. This is in line with the story of cannibalism that Alexievich describes. In that instance, the storyteller experiences shock at the idea of eating another human. It forces the reader to consider the implications of violence as normal,

since there is nothing stopping cannibalism from being a daily occurrence as well. He describes his actions as if he is cooking a normal dinner:

Me dispuse a lavar los cadáveres para quitarles el exceso de sal. Demoré tres días en conseguirlo. Luego, cuando estuvieron listos, los corté con cuidado para que no fueran a crujiir demasiados huesos y llamaran la atención de los vecinos. Después de herví los trozos, deshilé la carne y la mezclé con una salsa hecha con los tomates que cultivo en mi jardín. El sabor era inmejorable.

I prepared myself to wash the corpses, in order to remove excess salt. This took me three days. Then, after they were ready, I cut them cautiously, so as not to crunch too many bones and have the noise alert my neighbors. After boiling the pieces, I mixed the meat in with a sauce made from tomatoes harvested from my garden.

The flavor was unbeatable. (Hernández 41)

The good citizen travels with this stew to impoverished areas and serves it as a meal to many people. Unaware that they are consuming human meat, the citizens of the town continue to praise the narrator's good deeds. He prides himself in having found a useful purpose for the corpses when he is told by the consumers that "nunca habían tenido mejor cena en la vida" ("they had never had a better dinner in their lives"; 41). The narrator's pride in human flesh being a delicious meal serves as another instance of Hernández's absurd imagery being used to speak about complacency in violence. Rather than being condemned for instigating the act of public cannibalism, the narrator is celebrated for his resourcefulness and dedication to the common good. Until this point, Hernández emphasizes the humanization of these corpses—they are clothed by people who find them in their own personal belongings, some are named, and many are buried as if they were the loved one a family had lost. However, for these seven remaining corpses, it is clear that they cannot

fill this role. No families can utilize them, and they serve now as nothing more than a burden. The narrator repurposes them, however illicit his actions may be. It can be assumed that, in his eyes, it is more important that the living, impoverished people benefit than what it is they are eating.

The citizens of the town either unknowingly or knowingly ignore the truth of what is happening with the bodies, choosing instead to praise the narrator for his good deed. The disappearance of bodies is something commonplace, so much so that it is incorporated into daily life without a thought. Their acceptance of the food raises the question of whether or not it matters that this meat is made from human bodies. Since the people do not question the narrator further, they demonstrate that they would rather have immediate satisfaction and fulfill a basic human need than consider the implications of consuming the food or look further into where it could have come from. By including cannibalism as a major theme in her story, Hernández confronts the reader with a difficult issue. Cannibalism is so unacceptable within our society that it draws a horrified and shocked response. However, we do not have the same response when thinking about the body left in the kitchen. Hernández works to deconstruct the reader's perceptions of what is socially acceptable. If people disappearing or being killed during war is socially acceptable and a "product of the war," then there is no reason that cannibalism cannot be socially acceptable too.

Following his good deed, the narrator is lauded for his efforts, leading to a humble parting from the good citizen in the final lines of the story.

La ciudad entera lo supo y me aplaudió en un acto público en el que fui llamado hombre bueno y ciudadano meritísimo. Yo acepte el homenaje con humildad y expliqué entonces que no eran necesarias tantas atenciones para conmigo, que yo era un hombre como todos y que sólo había hecho lo que cualquiera—de verdad, cualquiera—habría hecho.

The entire city came and publicly applauded me at a ceremony where I was named a good man and an honorable citizen. I accepted this honor with humility and explained that all of these celebrations were not necessary for me, that I was a man like everyone else, and I only did what anyone—really, anyone—would have done. (Hernández 42)

The narrator's sense of humility insinuates that this is what any individual would have—and should have—done. In a society that does not condemn the actions of this one man, but rather praises him for it, the state of ignorance and complacency that the people of the town are placed into directly compares with efforts to restructure Salvadoran history and government following the civil war. In addition to pointing out the complacency of the townspeople and citizens of El Salvador, Hernández indicts the reader, who has remained complacent in their reading of the story. Hernández violently confronts the reader through her blunt language, making the reader reflect on the story they have just read. This violence is present throughout the entire story and is normalized throughout it. The reader is forced to understand that these horrific acts have been there the entire time, and they have seen and recognized them, even if they did not want to see it.

Revolving around an unburied body, “Hechos de un buen ciudadano” emphasizes the remembrance of acts of violence during the conflict. These missing bodies relate to the desaparecidos during the civil war in El Salvador, bringing light to the multiple violations of human rights that were perpetrated by the dictatorial government. The citizens featured in the story are so desperate for closure that they are willing to ignore the victims (the dead bodies), instead becoming the victims of complacency themselves. Their problem, the surge of bodies, is solved by the nameless good citizen, without giving pause to what is causing the appearance of them in the first place. Hernández attempts to de-normalize and dehumanize violence, emphasizing that

these horrific public acts should not and cannot be socially acceptable. This effort is done through her violent, blunt wording and emotional impact on the reader, made possible by a feminine perspective.

Reassembling a Dead Child: Complications of Violence

“Hechos de un buen ciudadano” is not the only work of Hernández’s that demonstrates violence through twisted descriptions. “Manual del hijo muerto,” the final story from the collection *De fronteras*, is shocking in its ability to speak so frankly and bluntly about death in a darkly comical way. Centering on the idea of reconstructing a dead child, the manual begins on an imagined page 23, with the title “Cuando el hijo está en forma de trozos” (“When the Child is in Pieces”). Hernández works to emphasize the warped idea of reconstructing a dead loved one, in this case a 24 to 25-year-old child, likely lost to wartime violence. In assembling the pieces of a “replica child,” the manual states that the replication will be highly accurate to the deceased child, “con frecuencia, el reconocimiento puede realizarse a simple vista, pero no está de más comparar la dentadura del cadáver con las placas registradas en el archivo del dentista de la familia” (“often, recognition can be done at a glance, but it is worth comparing the teeth of the cadaver with the plates registered in the family dentist’s file”; Hernández 107). This association of the replica with the individual’s teeth makes the recreation more personal. It is just like the deceased, in that it even has the same teeth. This image is extremely important, as dentist files are used to recognize or identify lost ones in mass or unmarked graves. When one’s loved one is unable to be recognized or identified, a replacement is available that fits the dental file exactly. Although it shares these features, it could never replace a lost human being.

Extremely factual and blunt in her wording, Hernández emphasizes one’s desire to remain with their loved ones. To mimic a manual, she includes several “tips” in separate boxes throughout

the manual's brief three pages. The first grabs the reader's attention with a large exclamation point, saying that "asegurarse, también, de no firmar de recibido antes de estar completamente seguro (A) de que el contenido del paquete le pertenece en su totalidad. Recuerde que no se aceptan devoluciones" ("be sure, also, not to sign off until (A) you are completely certain that the content of the packet belongs to you in its totality. Remember that we do not accept returns"; Hernández 107). The package containing the parts for the replica is treated as an everyday object, shipped to your home. By incorporating these aspects of ordinary life within the fact-based manual, Hernández deconstructs the reader's understanding of fact and what is acceptable. The objectification of bodies and lives through violence has become an everyday occurrence. In emulating the form of an instructional manual, Hernández draws the reader's attention to the idea that violence should not be a mundane task. The reader is made to conceptualize this world where, plagued by grief over their lost loved ones, people search to recreate them to avoid dealing with reality.

Again, in this story there is an absence of violent imagery. There is no emphasis on the dead body, or the circumstances surrounding it, but the lasting impacts of death and violence are clear. Even if the replica is completely identical to the deceased, it is impossible to replace them. The failure to fill the hole left by a deceased or missing individual is recognized in the final lines of the manual. Hernández writes, "muéstrela a familiares y amigos. Reparta fotografías de cuando vivía. Llore cada vez que alguien mencione su nombre" ("show it to your relatives and friends. Share photographs of when they were alive. Cry every time someone mentions their name"; 109). This last line recognizes that even with a replica, it is impossible to erase one's grief and pain. The owner of the recreation can incorporate it into their daily life, but it remains implausible to replace the actual human being. This is indicative of the loss and suffering felt by those who experienced

the death of loved ones during the Salvadoran Civil War, but also serves as a call not to forget those that have disappeared from daily life. Hernández juxtaposes this final intensely emotional sentence against the blunt language that precedes it. This contrast emphasizes that, even if you are to ignore the loss of someone by reconstructing a perfect replica, it is impossible to remove all emotion and grief from one's life.

Conclusions

Throughout her narratives, Hernández's authorial perspective is clear. By approaching the violence of the Salvadoran Civil War with a blunt writing style, the author clearly demonstrates that an emotionless approach to history and violence is neither effective nor human. Emotion is what matters in understanding these horrific events and is what always seeps through. Following the signing of the peace accords in the 1990s, El Salvador, and Central America as a whole, largely disappeared from the world's political conscience and imagination (Craft). This only further emphasizes the importance of the postwar movement, and the works of Claudia Hernández, in continuing to confront her audiences with the impact of wartime violence. Hernández's fiction allows for boundaries to be torn down. This allows her to directly confront the audience with themes that would typically make them feel uncomfortable. While the works of Salvadoran authors written during the civil war effectively preserve societal and cultural perceptions, Hernández's stories utilize absurd and twisted themes to continue stressing the many violations of human rights that occurred in the wartime era, denying individuals, when confronted, the option to forget.

Conclusion

In examining works by Alexievich, Valenzuela, Chukovskaya, and Hernández, it is clear that each of these female authors is attempting to understand their own histories and the effect of violence upon their societies. Although each of the works examined in this project are of different times, regions, and conflicts, the same elements occur throughout each of them. Censorship impacts each drastically; Alexievich overcame years of repression and nationalistic discourse about the great Victory in order to publish the stories of many women who have struggled with self-censorship. Valenzuela writes of the silence she was forced into due to the Dirty War, utilizing silence itself to lay meaning throughout her story. Chukovskaya persevered through decades of terror and censorship to exhibit her portrayal of ordinary life under Stalin, and Hernández utilizes the absurd and violence to speak about the history that is so quickly being censored and forgotten in her country.

In addition to the focus on censorship, each author relies on emotion to have an impact on their audience. These narratives are designed as living documents, relaying a potentially forever forgotten side to what would traditionally be considered “historical information” to the reader. Each of these women use narratives as a means of reframing history, so that it is better understood in the future. In this manner, the reader and audience are extremely important. These works are created not only with an attempt to understand violence, but also to chronicle it. The narratives include the reader, as the author and reader together struggle to understand this violence that is prevalent throughout human history. I believe that the emotional impact each narrative has had on me has been far more powerful than the traditionally masculine form of historical retelling, based upon emotionless facts and figures. In order to understand human history, it is impossible to have an emotionless approach, for emotion is integral to the composition of a human being.

When thinking of my own exposure to these narratives, I have been able to reflect on the impact that they have had on me. As a US citizen living in this present time, I am removed from the histories of these authors. However, through their focuses on emotion and emphases on narratives, the events that they experienced have become more real and comprehensible to me. Putting this into my current understanding of the violence I see on the news or online, I am able to better incorporate emotion into my personal readings of current events. Since beginning this project, I now find myself thinking more about the lasting impacts of violent acts on our society, and the importance of the rhetoric that surrounds them.

In the previous pages, I have touched on the importance of feminine perspectives in emoting and expounding upon the traditional narratives of human conflicts, and in understanding the effects of violence through fiction and narrative prose. The collective feminine experiences demonstrated throughout the narratives in this project emphasize emotion and aspects of everyday human life. This emphasis occurs not only in how they relate to the mundane and traditional, but in how they expound upon the non-traditional landscapes traversed by feminine voices: those of war and violence. By focusing on these smaller details, war and violence is scaled down. Typically, those aspects are not only normalized within ordinary society, but mythologized to seem incomprehensible. As these women tie together their own experiences and the history of their people, war and violence and their impacts are more easily understood and emphasized, so that perhaps we can one day find a way of preventing these horrific acts from reoccurring.

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