

Joey Whitfield
Cardiff University

Lucy Bell
Sapienza University of Rome¹

Love & Law: The Aura of Prison Writing in Mexico,
from the 1800s to the Present

Abstract

Prison writing has largely been excluded from the literary canon of the Spanish-speaking world, even though it encompasses key names that extend as far back as Cervantes in Spain and Lizardi in Mexico: two of the pioneers of what is now called the “novel”. Building on seminal analyses of Latin American literature by Roberto González Echevarría, Ángel Rama and Doris Sommer, this article addresses the following questions: What is the power of prison writing? How might we interpret its status as a genre, both in historical and contemporary terms? And what do contemporary forms of prison writing share with much older examples? To answer these questions, we analyze prison narratives from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, including well-known novels by José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi and José Revueltas, and narratives by emerging writers from Susuki Lee, Águila del Mar, and Amatista Lee to Julio Grotten. Through an “auratic quality” that, we argue, derives from their ability to develop powerful counter-truths through the experience of confinement, these narratives reveal and resist the subjugation of the subject by the state as the latter intervenes violently in politics and private life. Our contention is that the power of prison writing

1 Joey Whitfield is the principal author and Lucy Bell is the second author. The following sections were written by Joey Whitfield: 2. “The authority of the extremes: Prison writing as revelation and counter-discourse in *El Periquillo Sarniento*” and 5. “Julio Grotten: the horror of the law”. The following sections were written by Lucy Bell: 3. “José Revueltas as prison writer: prohibition, love, and an “appeal” to the reader”; 4. “Hermanas en la Sombra: The traps of love and law in contemporary women’s prison writing”. The following sections were co-written: the introduction; 1. “Ángel Rama, Doris Sommer, and Roberto González Echevarría: Latin American narrative and legal discourse”; and the conclusion.

lies in its ability to turn legal, state-sponsored discourse on its head through the production of alternative stories narrated from within prison and from below; and that these are simultaneously founded on legal discourse and its affective underside; on law and love.

La libertad, Sancho, es uno de los más preciosos dones que a los hombres dieron los cielos; con ella no pueden igualarse los tesoros que encierra la tierra ni el mar encubre; por la libertad, así como por la honra, se puede y debe aventurar la vida, y, por el contrario, el cautiverio es el mayor mal que puede venir a los hombres.
Don Quijote, II, 58

1. *Introduction*

The experience of imprisonment and the development of prose narrative are closely interrelated in the Spanish-speaking world. María Antonia Garcés opens her study on Miguel de Cervantes by wondering whether the author of *Don Quijote* – often identified as one of the first precursors to the modern novel (Bandera 2006) – “could have become the great creative writer that he was had he not suffered the traumatic experience of his Algerian captivity” (2002, 1). In Mexico, the writer of *El Periquillo Sarniento* – regarded by many as the first Latin American novel (Vogely 1987) –, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, also spent time in prison, an experience that would go on to feature prominently in his landmark text. Taking direct inspiration from Cervantes, Lizardi’s work was considered dangerous and transgressive, and as a result it was heavily censored (Vogely 2004, xix). Yet despite its transgressive quality, history has conferred upon Lizardi’s *El periquillo* a status and an aura that echoes down the ages – one that, as we will argue, is shared by prison writers from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries including emerging contemporary writers.

In this article, we explore the power of prison writing – defined as writing about prison by people who have experienced incarceration – in Latin America, and more precisely in Mexico. We argue that prison writing makes a particular claim to truth and, as a result of this, has what we call an auratic quality that is peculiar to it. Counterintuitively, given that prisons and punishment are institutions and practices associated with suffering and negative emotions, we develop the idea that the aura of prison writing

is often connected to its representation or enactment of love in its plural forms: romantic and brotherly, heterosexual and homosexual, sororal and political.² Love can also be a negative force: a justification for acts of violence; an element of damaging romantic myths and patriarchal power. Put in simple terms, the experience of imprisonment takes people to extremes of suffering and social rupture, but in so doing also reveals what is important in human experience, and what transcends and transgresses state control.

One of the key features of prison writing, we argue, is its unique ability to reveal the nature of state power, from within and from below. It is a valuable source of experiential, creative theorization on the mutually constitutive nature of the law and the state. As such, it has much to say about the relationship between writing and material experience. This is because, to paraphrase Loïc Wacquant, prison is itself an institution which symbolizes the material and materializes the symbolic: it is a place where discourse – the law – is made material and also an institution of state power that works partly through its reputation (2009, xvi). Fear of prison, in other words, is one of the state’s primary mechanisms of power. Without making any naive claim about a transparent or straightforward relationship between creative expression and lived experience, our concept of the auratic quality of prison writing derives from Walter Benjamin’s notion that “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (1935, 4). The aura, therefore, endows the object with authority as well as a peculiar untouchability.

Below, we develop the concept of the aura through two particular theoretical takes on it in the field of Latin American literary studies: Idelber Avelar’s use of Benjamin’s definition of the “aura” to designate a quality of something that cannot be falsified (1999, 95); and René Jara and Hernán Vidal’s notion of testimonial literature containing, if not the essence of reality which is always lost in representation, a “trace of the real” in its material, tangible quality (1986, 2). Our argument is that prison writing does not only have truth value in that it comes from a lineage of writing that takes its form from legal testimony,³ but more

2 In so doing, we draw on two works by Roberto González Echevarría – *Myth and Archive* and *Love and the Law in Cervantes* – that seek to develop theories of Hispanophone literature.

3 As Roberto González Echevarría argues in *Myth and Archive*, the narrative form, especially the first person narrative form has, in Latin America, always had the capacity to act as a kind of counter-discourse to the state’s truth-making machinery (and machinations) (1990, 9).

significantly, it also exposes society's false discourses and deceptions (especially the falsity and deception of the law), by means of its own apparent authenticity.

Prison writing is simultaneously a source of knowledge about, and a form of resistance to, state and legal power. We trace the inception of Hispanophone prison narrative from the colonial metropolis to the colony, taking as our point of departure the foundational place of legal discourse in its emergence, both as a fundamental model for the novelistic and story form and as an instrument of epistemic colonial power: Spain. Inspired by González Echevarría's reading of *Don Quijote* and the *Novelas ejemplares*, we make a case for reading Mexican prison literature, from its inception to some of its most contemporary forms, in relation to the (counter-)legal and (anti-)romantic discourses that underpin it. Said discourses, we argue, serve as fundamental (counter-)models for the narrative form. They do so as instruments of epistemic colonial power on one extreme, and as contemporary critiques of the carceral logic of the colonial and patriarchal nation-state on the other. Elsewhere we have argued that state power is represented metonymically by the prison in Latin American narrative (Whitfield 2018, 109). This article proposes that the significance of prison writing lies in its ability to transgress state power; in its capacity to tell the same story from a very different angle and with a very distinct "truth".⁴ As has been extensively explored by thinkers including Ángel Rama, Doris Sommer, and Roberto González Echevarría, the written narrative form in Latin America has, from Colonization, through the nation-building period of the new Republics, and throughout the twentieth century, enjoyed a special status, and with it the power to lay claim to truth, legitimacy and authority. In line with this, we argue that twentieth- and twenty-first-century prison narrative – whose plots continue to be fueled by what we broadly call love, as a kind of counterpoint to the law and its legitimacy – reveals the legacy of this colonial prison literature, and its paradoxical auratic status.

We begin by outlining some of the now-classic theories of Spanish and Latin American literature that have used both love and law as their conceptual grounding. We then place prison narrative at the center of our inquiry: the

4 Of course, the experience of imprisonment is not a necessary condition for producing writing about prison. Nevertheless, the texts we look at here and the texts in our definition all are written by people who experienced confinement. While we do not claim any direct or transparent pathway from experience to creative output, what we are calling prison writing's auratic quality is an attempt to grasp at the nature of an ineffable link.

second section looks at the prison episodes in Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816), in relation to both counter-truth and friendship as love. The third section tackles José Revueltas's novel *Muros de agua* (1941) through the lens of desire, transgression, and homosexuality, arguing that a powerful state critique is interwoven into the unfulfilled romantic subplots. The fourth section brings the discussion into the contemporary moment through an examination of a feminist collective, the Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, whose methodology for teaching creative writing to imprisoned women centers around a deep critique of the myth of romantic love as an extension of patriarchal state power and imprisonment. In the fifth section, we turn to the works of Julio Grotten, whose gothic aesthetic allows him to explore the complicity of patriarchal and state violence from an obverse perspective to that of the Colectiva. Grotten's texts, we argue, are haunted by the spectral echoes of the pre-modern violence of love and law.

2. *Ángel Rama, Doris Sommer, and Roberto González Echevarría:
Latin American narrative and legal discourse*

Critics who have developed unifying theories of Spanish and Latin American literature have paid particular attention to the relationship between writing and the development of the nascent colonial and post-Independence nation states. Ángel Rama famously foregrounds the figure of the *letrado* – the man of letters – who was responsible for both the creation of the law and in many cases other forms of writing (1984). These men, Rama argues, created the nation state through a form of autopoiesis.

Roberto González Echevarría, building on the work of Rama and others, has gone on to explore the links between narrative and the state through a closer examination of one of the key foundations of the state: the law. He points out the differences between areas, on the one hand, where Roman law is the foundation of the legal system and, on the other hand, countries such as England and the USA, whose legal systems have diverged from it (2005, 20). Unlike in those countries in which common law practices gave power to legal precedent, in Spain and Latin America legal codes derived from Roman law were written down *a priori*, rather than deriving from precedent. Basing their legal codes on Roman law, Spanish and Latin American states gave a power to

the written word to precede, shape, and define reality. The written form of Roman law had an immutable quality derived from the fact that it was “anchored in the overarching doctrine of natural law”:

This was the theory that there were immutable laws that were derived from the reason with which God endowed humans and that were embodied in the person of the king. These laws were indisputable principles, understandable to all, and against which there was no recourse. Anything that went against them was by definition unlawful. (2005, 23)

González Echevarría makes the case that writing and legal discourse developed together. Writing on Cervantes, he states that:

the organization of a modern state in Spain, beginning in the reign of the Catholic kings and the attendant growth of a patrimonial bureaucracy, created a discourse dealing with criminals and common people that writers found compelling partly because it also pertained to them as subjects of the new polity. (2005, xiv)

Law, then, not only gave nascent writers a vocabulary to draw on, but also a narrative form to mimic and a rhetorical means of expressing a kind of truth narrative that had the power to shape them as subjects. This subjectification was not limited to political or social formation, however, since it also dealt with matters of the heart. González Echevarría goes on to propose that: “in fiction the law dealt primarily with conflicts of love, a synecdoche for social strife and evolution. Love and law converge on marriage, the legal and religious institution at the foundation of the body politic” (2005, xiv). In turn, the “deep complicity” between love and law, for González Echevarría, leads to the “unnarratable stories” that he traces through some of Cervantes’s stories: “The law’s arbitrariness and irrationality are like those of desire itself – interdiction is not a given but a construct of the human” (2005, xviii).

The idea that narratives of romance are at the heart of state formation is also well established. Doris Sommer, in the 1990s, established the romance novel as the “foundational fiction” of the Latin American nation state (1991, 2023). It is our contention that a second significant element of prison writing, and that from which it partially derives its auratic quality, is its rootedness in the theme – and enactment – of love of different kinds. Prison as an institution is designed to break social and family relationships, but in so doing it invariably emphasizes their significance. While in contemporary Mexico, the law is not as

directly concerned with matters of the heart as it was in Cervantes's Spain, in this article we propose that prison writing continues to derive its significance and popularity from the fact that the political and social subjectification that imprisonment entails has love at its core.

Regarding nineteenth-century Latin American fiction, Doris Sommer asks why so many novels of the newly independent nations are love stories. The answer she offers is that "passion between the sexes and patriotism across national sectors were helping to construct one another, as if one kind of love were assuming a mandate from the other" (Sommer 1990, 110). Yet, while in Sommer's foundational fictions the allegory of romantic love stands as a potentially homogenizing force, an ally to the project of nation-building through law, prison writers find themselves in a situation in which love frequently emerges in a kind of contrapuntal opposition to law.⁵ Below, we build on the work of Rama, González Echevarría, Sommer and others, to propose that prison writing remains a potent force – with a powerful aura – because it speaks from the extremes of human experience as they relate both to the most totalizing institution of state power and to the penetration of state power into the most intimate spaces of human experience. On the one hand, then, these are experiences of great suffering and violence, which many imprisoned people have experienced even before their incarceration. On the other hand, prison narratives and poems are often testimony to, or fictionalized forms of, that most exalted of human experiences: love. This account of love goes beyond romantic, heteronormative love – which as we shall see are questioned and complicated by many of the texts below – and is closer to Richard Gilman-Opalsky's account of love as a "subversive power" that resists commodification (2020, 261).

In what follows, we tackle four key methodological and theoretical questions about some of these very practical – material, political, and economic – matters: What is the power of prison writing? What is the relationship between prison narrative and state power, given its complex interweaving of love and law, politics and private life, authority and anti-authority, complicity and rebellion?

5 "A magnificent document from the 1580s, Cristóbal de Chaves's *Relación de la cárcel de Sevilla*, provides ample documentation on all this, including the organization of sexual traffic in the jail itself, with its ranks of unsavory pimps, prostitutes, and corrupt officials. This is love under the law yet paradoxically outside of it. It is the penal side of the love-law relationship. The other side is the one that leads to marriage. Prison and the altar are the sites where love is captured in the net of the law" (González Echevarría 2005, 4).

How might we interpret its status as a genre, both in historical and contemporary terms? And to what extent can contemporary prison literature as a form be traced back to much older, colonial forms of prison writing? We propose that the appeal of the genre – particularly in the contemporary Mexican context of what many have called a “failed state” or a flawed democratic transition (Cansino 2012) – could be a public appetite for a form of truth-telling fiction, for a narrative that poses an alternative perspective to “official” government discourse from within one of the principal seats of state control: the prison.

In order to make a case for the aura of prison writing this article draws lines of connection from the work of Lizardi to those of contemporary prison writers, from the counter-canonical author José Revueltas, to relatively understudied writers who have published their work with the support and the labels of the Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra, La Rueda Cartonera, and Viento Cartonero. These writers may not initially seem to have that much in common. While Lizardi and Revueltas are titans of Mexican letters, the others are participants in what we term “literature of solidarity” (Whitfield 2018, 147-180) or “literature in action” (Bell, Flynn & O’Hare 2022, 110-151): people who have had the chance to write and have their writing published thanks to cultural activists working in hyperlocal contexts. Their works, although gaining increasing international recognition and, in some cases, being translated into English, are intended for small local readerships. Their publishers report anecdotally, however, that prison writing resonates strongly with contemporary readers. In an interview with Sergio Fong and Israel Soberanes, the founders of two small, autonomous publishing collectives of Guadalajara whose prison narrative is featured in the final section of this article, the publishers revealed that of all the themes on which they publish, the collections by imprisoned people are the best-sellers, prompting them to bring out repeated print runs.

The enduring appeal of prison writing reflects the historical influence – within literary, cultural and political fields – of prison narrative across and beyond Latin America. Examples include the rising influence of prison literature beyond the prison cell in sixteenth century Europe (Ahnert 2013); the transcontinental canon of narratives by enslaved people from Juan Francisco Manzano to Esteban Montejo (Samuell Muñoz 1993), as well as by abolitionists from Olaudah Equiano to Angela Davis; the influential body of resistance literature produced from captivity or exile during the dictatorships of the Southern Cone principally in the 1970s and 1980s (Tedeschi 2024); and more recently

the huge popularity of prison documentaries, from Darius Clarke Monroe's award-winning film *Evolution of a Criminal* (2014) to the Netflix hit *Inside the World's Toughest Prisons*, now in its seventh season. In relation to specific best-sellers by prison writers, two narrative works stand out: *Papillon* (1969), the bestselling memoir by the French writer Henri Charrière about his imprisonment in and escape from a penal colony in French Guiana (Pierre 2002); and *La isla de los hombres solos* (1968), by Jose León Sánchez, Costa Rica's bestselling writer, a novel first written on paper bags of cement on which the author slept during his imprisonment on San Lucas Island (Whitfield 2018, 30). The corpus selected for this article includes works whose influence and popularity is of varying kinds, from *El periquillo*'s status as Latin America's first novel and its more than twenty editions, through the public fascination generated by Revueltas's prison writing in the post-1968 generation (Ruffinelli 1976), to the prison narratives of grassroots "solidarity" publishers that have been at the center of a broader politics of decolonial feminist alliance-building (Bell 2024).

3. *The authority of the extremes: Prison writing as revelation and counter-discourse in El Periquillo Sarniento*

It is significant that *El Periquillo Sarniento* was published in 1816, on the eve of Mexico's independence from Spain. Nancy Vogeley proposes that *El Periquillo Sarniento* takes the form of a satire because Lizardi believed this was what the newly emerging independent country of Mexico needed: a form that was capable of being "always true and devoid of [...] flattery and hyperbole" (xi). Prison writing, as we shall see throughout this article, will go on to act in the same way as these early satires, telling a form of truth and tackling reality in a way that, even when fictional, draws attention to the fact that the law itself tells a flawed story.

El Periquillo Sarniento has a picaresque form involving what we might think of as a chain of revelatory counter-truths that expose the deceptions and corruptions of the lettered classes. Despite the several passages that take place in the colonial era jail, and the fact that Lizardi had spent time in prison himself, the novel does not seem to have been read as a piece of prison writing. Mariana Rosetti pays some attention to the prison passages but in order to argue that they are significant in the protagonist's transformation into a "lépero letrado":

Inicia[n] a Periquillo en el camino del “lépero letrado”, es decir, del letrado rebelde que desea vivir sin trabajar, pero que se ve obligado a asumir el trabajo cual si fuese un oficio para escapar de un mal mayor: el crimen, la cárcel, la muerte. (Rosetti, 2011, 8)

While we agree with this reading, our argument is that the passages of this novel set in prison are crucial in establishing a counter-account of (i) the corruption of law and fiction that is the notion of crime; and (ii) the potential of love to overcome its evils. The events that lead to the protagonist’s imprisonment begin when he falls in with the thief called *Januario*. In a telling passage, *Januario* expands on a thief’s idea of robbery as a universal human trait:

Te diré que robar no es otra cosa que quitarle a otro lo suyo sin su voluntad, y según esta verdad, el mundo está lleno de ladrones. [...] unos roban con apariencias de justicia, y otros sin ellas. Unos pública, otros privadamente. Unos a la sombra de las leyes, y otros declarándose contra ellas. Unos exponiéndose a los balazos y a los verdugos, y otros paseando y muy seguros en sus casas. En fin, hermano, unos roban a lo divino y otros a lo humano; pero todos roban. [...]

¿Qué más tiene robar con plumas, con varas de medir, con romanas, con recetas, con aceites, con papeles, etc., etc., que robar con ganzúas, cordeles y llaves maestras? Robar por robar, todo sale allá, y ladrón por ladrón, lo mismo es el que roba en coche que el que roba a pie; y tan dañoso a la sociedad o más es el asaltador en las ciudades, que el salteador de caminos. (Lizardi, [1816] 2003, 220-221)

Lizardi thus questions assumptions about the moral activities associated with different social classes. Robbing with a fountain pen is a potent trope that is repeated as far afield as in the lyrics of Woody Guthrie’s “Pretty Boy Floyd”: “some will rob you with a six gun, and some with a fountain pen” (cited in Partington 2016). It stands not only for the ability of the pen to shape reality, but also to do so in a dishonest and manipulative manner. Here, therefore, in Mexico’s first novel, we already find a stark critique of the work of the *letrado* in constructing the colonial and post-colonial state.

The universality of human dishonesty proposed by *Januario* is belied, however, when *El Periquillo* finds himself imprisoned in Mexico City’s *Cárcel de la Corte* after being accused of stealing a rosary which was in fact stolen by *Januario*. The *Cárcel de la Corte* is a jail located until 1835 on the *Plaza Mayor*, opposite the Cathedral. Inside, after being punched in the mouth for declining to pay the “entry fee”, *El Periquillo* finds himself “en un mar de aficciones” ([1816] 2003, 228):

Había en aquel patio un millón de presos. Unos blancos, otros prietos; unos medio vestidos, otros decentes; unos empelotados, otros enredados en sus pichas; pero todos pálidos y pintada su tristeza y su desesperación en los macilentos colores de sus caras. ([1816] 2003, 228)

This desperate picture is mitigated when El Periquillo is befriended by a man who informs him that prisons do not in fact function as people may assume they do: “Es cierto que las cárceles son destinadas para asegurar en ellas a los pícaros y delincuentes, pero algunas veces otros más pícaros y más poderosos se valen de ellas para oprimir a los inocentes” ([1816] 2003, 230). Lizardi’s work can then be seen as an evolution of the relationship between narrative and law. While as González Echevarría has pointed out, in earlier texts such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* a witness gives testimony before an authority figure to whom he professes his innocence and asks for absolution (1990, 9), in Lizardi’s novel the relation to power is more thoroughly questioned through an explicitly anti-prison sentiment and an emotional or affective account of the corruption of the legal system.

In Lizardi’s novel, El Periquillo’s new friend, whose name is Don Antonio, goes on to explain how prisons and court cases really work according to the logic of money:

—¿Pero en siendo inocentes?—pregunté.

—No importa nada—respondió el amigo—. Aunque usted esté inocente (como no tiene dinero para agitar su causa ni probar su inocencia), mientras que ello no se manifieste de por sí, y a pasos tan lentos, pasa una multitud de tiempo.

—Ésa es una injusticia declarada—exclamé—, y los jueces que tal consienten son unos tiranos disimulados de la humanidad; pues que las cárceles que no se han hecho para oprimir, sino para asegurar a los delincuentes, mucho menos son para martirizar a los inocentes privándolos de su Libertad.

—Usted dice muy bien —dijo mi amigo—. La privación de la libertad es un gran mal, y si a esta privación se agrega la infamia de la cárcel, es un mal no sólo grande, sino terrible. ([1816] 2003, 242-243)

At the moment of the foundation of the Mexican nation state, the prison – the state’s key mechanisms of control and power (Salvatore, Aguirre & Joseph 2001) – is denounced. As early as 1816, long before the institution of penitentiary reforms in Mexico during the Porfiriato (Buffington 2010, 52), there is a sense that prisons are going beyond their function to hold delinquents, oppressing them through various modes, from financial bribes (the entry fee) to

many instances of violence, theft, and general “hardship and squalor”. The recognition that being in jail is a “terrible evil” lends a hefty moral weight to the narrative that encourages us to read it as a serious reflection on the legal underpinnings of the colonial state: the notion that Don Antonio is able, through his personal experience, to reveal and denounce the “true nature” of these judges demonstrates the capacity for literature, rather than creating new falsity, to see beyond and determine new truths, via affective evocations of outrage and frustration. Literature is therefore able to distinguish the good from the bad – and good from evil –, determining reality in a way that the law is revealed not to adequately do.

At the same time, the experience of imprisonment teaches El Periquillo that there *are* good people. While he finds many of the inhabitants of the jail to be dishonest rogues, Don Antonio informs him that in fact some of them are good people and that one ought not to judge by appearances: “no debe despreciarse al hombre ni desecharse su compañía, en especial si aquel color y aquellos trapos rotos cubren, como suele suceder, un fondo de virtud” ([1816] 2003, 281). Indeed Don Antonio goes on to demonstrate this himself by looking after El Periquillo, who states “lo amaba y lo respetaba como a mi padre” ([1816] 2003, 282). After his release, Don Antonio goes on to support El Periquillo, sending him in a supply of food and goods. Unlike everyone else in the prison, for whom the only language that can be understood is money, the experience of imprisonment also demonstrates to Lizardi’s protagonist the significance of fraternal love and what we might think of as mutual aid.

The reliance of prisoners on support from the outside, from loved ones who must send in basic necessities, is also a startlingly contemporary concern. In an article written with two recently imprisoned women in Mexico, we observed that:

In Mexico’s neoliberal prison system in which even the most basic necessities like hygiene products, tampons and medicine must be bought or brought in by visitors, a lack of visits is not only damaging for women’s mental health, it can potentially cost them their lives. (Moshán et al 2024)

In Lizardi’s view, prison writing – as a series of revelatory counter-truths – exposes the deceptions of the lettered classes, as the protagonist’s encounter with Januario challenges class assumptions and blurs the lines between legality and criminality. The metaphor of robbing with a fountain pen becomes a powerful

critique of the role of the *letrado* in shaping the colonial state. However, the universal notion of human dishonesty proposed by Januario is contradicted when El Periquillo experiences imprisonment, unveiling systemic injustices tied to economic disparities within the prison system. Don Antonio's insights underline prison writing's ability to discern and denounce truths obscured by the law. Furthermore, as will become clear in the three sections that follow, the contemporary relevance of El Periquillo's is undimmed, showcasing as it does prison writing's capacity to expose hidden truths behind the state's often corrupt and unjust structures and institutions.

4. *José Revueltas as prison writer: prohibition, love, and an “appeal” to the reader*

In an article published in the year of the death of José Revueltas, Jorge Ruffinelli foregrounds some of the key themes that would become the cornerstones of literary criticism in twentieth-century Mexico:

José Revueltas (1914-1976) ha sido, y es hoy, considerado no solo uno de los escritores más importantes de México sino, también, el escritor político por antonomasia. Perseguido, encarcelado, por su militancia política, lleno de conflictos con la propia izquierda (cuyo Partido Comunista integró y abandonó más de una vez), Revueltas fue admirado y leído con fervor en especial después de 1968, a raíz de su participación en el movimiento estudiantil como uno de los ideólogos, y hasta como chivo expiatorio de la represión. (Ruffinelli 1976, 61)

The public fervor and “fascination” for his books, in Ruffinelli's own terms – or what we are calling their auratic quality – can thus be seen to have begun in earnest, in Revueltas's case, in the post-1968 era. As Stefano Tedeschi has argued, this was a period in which literary narratives came to constitute themselves, as had happened with the “novela de la revolución”, as “a parallel discourse, a narrative placed at the crossroads of protest, vindication, and myth” (2022, 231).

In this section, we examine the role played by Revueltas's imprisonment and resulting prison literature in the belated “fascination” produced by his writing. Our focus is on *Muros de agua*, whose narrative derives in great measure from his own repeated experiences of incarceration, and on the entanglement between the auratic quality of the text and the complicated love stories that drive it forward. The aura of the novel, we argue, lies in its use of narrative suspension: the multiple love stories that begin on the island are frustrated or

unfulfilled; and the relationship between lived experience and narrative reality remains undecided. This literary gesture, in the context of a prison novel, turns into a political one, as *Revueltas* forces the reader to suspend judgment on his characters and on his novel too. In turn, the writer contributes to the narrative construction of alternative truths about Mexican society; truths that go beyond the discourse of the increasingly repressive, one-party regime of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucionalizado) that had been in power since the end – and for many, including *Revueltas* himself, the “institutionalized betrayal” (Millington 2007) – of the Mexican Revolution.

Muros de agua was first published in 1941 and republished in 1961 with the famous prologue about Guadalajara’s “leprosario”. Based loosely on his own experience of incarceration in the Islas Marías prison, first in 1931, and then in 1935, on the charge of “pretender la disolución del Ejército Mexicano, para derribar al Gobierno constituido” (cited in Campuzano 2002, 140), the narrative revolves around five protagonists – political prisoners based on the real characters with whom *Revueltas* was captured in 1932 – alongside a series of subplots led by characters representing the so-called “common prisoners”: murderers, prostitutes, homosexuals, and thieves. As Juan Carlos Galdo has pointed out, though, “la integridad de los presos políticos se contrasta no con la de los delincuentes, quienes en la mayoría de los casos acusan el efecto alienante de los aparatos del estado, sino con las autoridades que rigen el penal” (Galdo 2001, 59). The military officer, Smith, especially, is portrayed as a monster whose brutality and sadism, represented by his physical deformity, become a metonym for the Mexican state (Durán 1999).

Some passages of the novel are dedicated – albeit in a rather clunky, counter-moralizing fashion – to an explicit unveiling of the “real” truth of the criminal (in)justice system and therefore to an overt critique of the Mexican state authorities. This is exemplified by *Revueltas*’s depiction of the emblematic case of Maciel:

Correspondía Maciel a ese rango de colonos conocidos en la Isla como «de gobierno», esto es, los no sentenciados por autoridad competente, y que son apresados en las *vazzias* sin ninguna culpabilidad demostrada. Se agrupan en esta categoría los delincuentes habituales —rateros, por lo general—, a quienes desde el punto de vista jurídico no se les puede comprobar nada. Para esquivar la acción de los jueces la policía los mantiene por temporadas en diversas cárceles de la ciudad de México, en la Sexta, en la Penitenciaría, en el Carmen, hasta que hay una «cuerda» y los «remite» a las Islas Marías. En el penal duran años para obtener

su libertad, pues no habiendo jueces ahí ni autoridad regular alguna, el director de la colonia, cuando se le demandan informes, dice ignorar todo. Si por ventura hay algún juez tan intrépido como para arriesgarse en un viaje que le permita verificar por sí mismo los hechos, el sujeto a quien la justicia federal pretende amparar es borrado de las listas e internado en la parte más remota, hasta que el juez desaparece. (1961, 73-74)

Here, as elsewhere in the narrative, Revueltas uses his semi-autobiographical novel to reflect on the legal plight of a particular category of prisoners – “government cons” – who are incarcerated without a conviction, moved from jail to jail, and eventually brought to the Islas Marías to avoid lawful sentencing. Maciel is a paradigmatic victim of government corruption, one that Revueltas dramatizes in the occasional battles of a few truth-seeking judges against an overwhelmingly and structurally corrupt penal system. Whether unsentenced prisoners or honest judges, people with inconvenient truths are simply “disappeared” by and into the system. The hypothetical lawful judge in the paradigmatic case is barred from “verifying the facts for himself”. In his absence, Revueltas’s autobiographical narrator positions himself against this corrupt system, and as the upright judge: having been there, and verified for himself the facts, he is able to bear witness, and endows his novel with the particular auratic quality of the counter-truth. Yet as we shall see, judgment is not a simple matter in *Muros de agua*, especially when it comes to the various romantic subplots that propel the narrative forward.

Threaded into the novel’s political counter-truths are the more complicated tales of passion, transgressive desire, and homosexual love, which in González Echevarría’s terms constitute the inevitable underside of the repressive law. Much of the narrative tension of *Muros de agua* derives from the love triangle between Ernesto, Santos, and Rosario, the only woman in the group of five political prisoners. Ernesto’s undeclared love for Rosario preoccupies him from the very first chapter of the novel, where he asks himself: “¿Por qué no me he atrevido a decir nada?’ [...] Y una vergüenza infinita se apoderó de su ser; algo como una gota de plomo derretido que cayó en el fondo, mordiéndole tejidos y vísceras, tabiques orgánicos” (Revueltas 1961, 19). This profoundly painful, guttural experience of love reveals the affective experiences that lie in the dark underbelly of desire: shame, prohibition, and punishment. Though it is not the reason for his incarceration – unlike other cases we shall go on to examine – Ernesto’s love for Rosario does become entwined with prohibition, and therefore law: “Su amor hacia Rosario [...]

estaba oscurecido por una serie de represiones, inhibiciones y censuras, e inclusive no aparecía completamente claro ante él mismo. No obstante en este hecho no radicaba lo insólito del problema” (57). What is it, though, that leads to this repression, this self-censure?

These “represiones, inhibiciones y censuras”, we propose, must be read within the context of a prison novel written by a political dissident who had spent five long months on the *Islas Marías*. Imprisonment and repressed desire of course go hand in hand. As González Echevarría argues, the prohibition of desire is the foundation of Judeo-Christian legal systems – and therefore ultimately the prison systems – in Europe and its colonies, where “the law emerges with God’s ‘no,’ His injunction in Genesis not to eat from the tree of knowledge” (2005, 19):

The law originates in a prohibition and a need for order: something that stops the flux, the chaos, the meaningless noise of untrammelled desire. The founding ‘no’ is coeval in its emergence with desire, with love, with the ‘yes’ that it opposes— Molly’s ‘yes’ at the end of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Desire is movement to which the law gives direction and form. (2005, 19)

Layered above the colonial, Christian discourses of prohibition in *Muros de agua* are the contemporary political prohibitions linked to the context – 1930s Mexico – in which the novel was written. Revueltas, who was a controversial political activist throughout his life, uses the novel to launch a fierce critique of the post-Revolutionary Mexican state. This is perhaps most evident in chapter XIII, which revolves around the exploitation of women and prostitution on the *Islas*, and includes several references to the Revolution and the Constitution: “El Trabajo Regenera, se leía en un marco, sobre la pared” (80); “el puertecito, breve y arenoso, formado por dos calles — Venustiano Carranza y Artículo Ciento Veintitrés”. Article 123, ironically, is the following: “Toda persona tiene derecho al trabajo digno y socialmente útil; al efecto, se promoverán la creación de empleos y la organización social de trabajo, conforme a la ley.”⁶ These pointed references to the Mexican Revolution and the 1917 Constitution are undermined by the grim realities on

6 See “Constitución Federal de 1917”, Political Database of the Americas / Base de Datos Políticos de las Américas, <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Mexico/mexico1917.html> (accessed 01/05/2024); and Artículo 123, https://www.cjf.gob.mx/websites/CS/resources/marcoNormativo/Constitucion_Articulo_123.pdf (accessed: 11/05/2024).

the Islas Marías, where Revueltas's characters experience extreme pain and suffering in the form of multiple human rights abuses, including torture, rape, prostitution, forced labor, and starvation.

Against this backdrop, prohibited desire becomes an affective metonym for a repressive state. This might explain why Revueltas chooses to end his novel without resolving the love triangle:

Si algo podía unirlos, atarlos, tender en ellos ligaduras, eso era el común destino de dolor, de sufrimiento y de voluntad callada para aguardar la alegría [...] Ahora habría que esperar que llegara Rosario, su camarada. (Revueltas 1961, 129-30)

The narrative strategy of the suspended ending is arguably connected to the state critique that lies within the pages of the novel, and gestures towards the potential of escape and evasion from prison, law and state control through the promise of affective relations. Perhaps the most “fascinating” – to use Ruffinelli’s term – story in *Muros de agua* is Soledad’s secret lesbian desire for Rosario; a love depicted by Revueltas with a great deal of ambivalence. The first time this love is presented to the reader is in terms of purity: “Sentía un amor casi puro por Rosario, un amor que se había despojado de cosas adjetivas, y que se levantaba, irreprochable, sin exigir nada, sin esperar nada” (Revueltas 1961, 85). This purity is linked to silence, and therefore to the act of silencing and self-censure: “Si sólo se le hubiese permitido estar siempre junto a ella, sin hablar, sin decir nada y hasta sin mirarla” (85). Soledad’s muted desire is the underside of prohibition and repression by a Catholic society, state, and legal system in which homosexuality is an illness that defies the “laws of nature”, and therefore a crime against the “sacred laws” of heterosexual marriage (Foucault 1998, 25); laws that are magnified in conditions of incarceration. As Carolina Andrea Sierra Castillo explains in a study of the role of affect in women’s prisons,

En la prisión, las emociones están vetadas, censuradas y, en último caso, controladas o medicalizadas. Pero es el mismo sistema el que las provoca, el que les recuerda y refuerza el rol femenino frente al que fracasó, más allá del delito que cometió. (2021)

Prison bears a dual relationship with desire: like the law, and standing politically for the law, it both prohibits it and causes it. Soledad’s relationship with the law is thus doubly deviant, and her sexuality is treated as such:

He aquí que por primera vez de una enfermedad brotaba el amor, reivindicando lo desviado, haciendo digno lo enfermo. Y de pronto, las cosas normales, las relaciones equilibradas y sanas entre hombre y mujer, deshacían el amor, lo cubrían de manchas, rebajándolo y haciéndolo perder su primitivo y puro sentido. (1961, 108)

Sick, unbalanced, unhealthy, destructive, staining, and degrading: homosexual love, which a few chapters before was portrayed as pure, is utterly othered by Revueltas here. We agree with Jorge Luis Gallegos Vargas (2014) and Francisco Manzo-Robledo (1998), who critique Revueltas for the strong homophobic discourse that runs throughout this novel. Indeed, it would be hard to read the description of Soledad's "illness" in any other way. Yet given the position of this subplot of disgraced homosexual desire within a broader anti-state narrative that explicitly condemns the failures of a repressive post-Revolutionary government, perhaps we should return to the "unnarratable stories" that González Echevarría traces through some of Cervantes's plots:

The consubstantiality of law and literature results from the common origin of both desire and interdiction in the irrational. This is the buried, yet coeval, kernel of the love-law dyad in Cervantes and in modern literature in general. The sadistic pleasure of the 'no' meets the indulgent delight of the 'yes.' The 'thou shalt not' of our invented gods is fraught in the pleasure of negation and the equally pleasurable threat of punishment if transgression occurs. (2005, xviii)

More specifically, González Echevarría traces a direct line between the criminalization of homosexuality in Colonial Spain – and by extension Latin America – and that of repressive twentieth-century states in which "the love persecuted by the law is often homosexual love, the *bête noire* of repressive regimes, as it had been with the Holy Office of the Inquisition" (González Echevarría 2005, 233). Since Revueltas uses his auratic writing to construct a powerful counter-truth that runs against the repressive discourses and ideologies of the PRI and to advocate for the liberation and "desajenación" provided by communism (Revueltas 1978), it is difficult to reconcile the brutal, alienating narratorial stance on Soledad's desire with the author's own political position.

Manzo-Robledo concludes his queer critique of *Muros de agua* by insisting that we should not make the common mistake of confusing the narrator with the author (1998, 37). This brings us back to the question of the truth-value that – as we are arguing – constitutes a crucial element of the auratic quality of prison literature. In line with Manzo-Robledo, we might turn to some of Re-

vueltas's own critical writings on narrative construction to better understand the (dis)connection between the "real" Revueltas and the narrator, between the fictional *Muros de agua* and the historical Islas de María, between revolutionary ideals and the realities of 1940s Mexico, a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures and Christian values.

In the prologue to the novel's second edition, Revueltas reflects on the issue of realism and reality in his first novel:

Con todo, *Los muros de agua* no son un reflejo directo, inmediato de la realidad. Son una realidad literaria, una realidad imaginada. Pero esto lo digo en un sentido muy preciso: la realidad siempre resulta un poco más fantástica que la literatura, como ya lo afirmaba Dostoevski. (Revueltas 1961, 6-7)

Revueltas thus distances himself from the broader notion – which would become key to poststructuralist theory and literary criticism – of the gap between signifier and signified, to mention a very specific form of "literary reality": that of Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose 1861 serialized semi-autobiographical novel *The House of the Dead* was based on his four years spent in a Siberian prison camp, and whose work is also characterized by narrative suspension. Kornelije Kvas describes the Russian novelist's writing in terms of a Bakhtinian

dialogicness of narration [that] postulates the non-existence of the 'final' word, which is why the thoughts, emotions and experiences of the world of the narrator and his/her characters are reflected through the words of another, with which they can never fully blend. (2019, 101)

The same ambivalent, uncomfortable and inconclusive relationship between the truths of Dostoevsky's different voices – as author, narrator and characters – can be found in the semi-autobiographical prison writing of the twentieth-century Mexican writer. In the 1961 prologue, Revueltas states: "Sí, las Islas Marías eran (no he vuelto a pisar su noble tierra desde hace más de veintisiete años) un poco más terribles de lo que se describe en *Los muros de agua*" (7). Another suspended relationship ensues, this time between Revueltas's lived reality of the Islas and his novel about them. As readers, we become embroiled – complicit, even? – in the complex, chaotic, and contradictory intermingling of reality and fiction, law and love, and thus in the deeply-rooted dynamic of prohibition that dictates and drives forward the narrative.

Revueltas's writing, read in continuation with that of Lizardi, thus reveals the way González Echevarría's reading of Cervantes's narrative – as an expression of the primeval yet carefully curated tussle between love and law in the formation of the modern Spanish state – plays out in Mexican prison literature in different contexts of nation-building and myth-making. Written from the authors' experiences of incarceration, the narratives of Lizardi and Revueltas are built on the complexities of love and law, desire and repression, truth and corruption, reality and myth, which reveal themselves to be much more than binary pairs or what González Echevarría terms a “dyad” (2005, xviii): they constitute a complex network of dynamics, forces, and forms that are sometimes contradictory, or at least hard to reconcile. In the next section, we turn to the twenty-first century, and to a particular form that has been overlooked in most accounts of Latin American prison literature (Whitfield 2018, 27): women's writing. We analyze the writing of a decolonial feminist publishing collective – the *Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra* – that takes as one of its guiding principles a highly critical posture towards the often-dangerous stereotype of romantic love, and its contribution to the many forms in which women are entrapped both by law or by social convention.

5. Hermanas en la Sombra: The traps of love and law in contemporary women's prison writing

In Mexico as elsewhere, women represent a very small proportion of the prison population (Sigüenza Vidal 2018). However, given women's participation in drug trafficking – albeit mostly at the very lowest echelons – in Mexico's ongoing War on Drugs, this picture is changing alarmingly fast, with a reported increase of 16% between 2022 and 2023 alone (Arellano García 2023). The injustice of the state's targeting of Mexico's most vulnerable population – poor, Indigenous or rural women – in its attempt to control the narrative of the Drug War has led to multiple forms of resistance in civil society through initiatives, collectives, and networks characterized by feminist politics, solidarity, and mutual aid in the fight against state-sponsored injustice, crime, and corruption: a search, in other words, for truth and justice (Youngers 2023).

Prison writing and publishing form a key part of this social justice activism, as exemplified by the *Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra*

(the Editorial Collective of Sisters in the Shadow), a group from the State of Morelos who work with women in prisons in and around Cuernavaca and Mexico City. Over nearly two decades, founders Elena de Hoyos Pérez, Aída Hernández Castillo, and Marina Ruiz have run workshops that bring together imprisoned women to create co-written books, through a writing methodology called “escritura identitaria” (Hoyos Pérez 2021). The resulting process not only gives participants useful transferable literacy skills but more importantly serves to build a creative community – or “sorority” as the Hermanas have conceptualized it (Smik Moshan et al 2024) – that also serves as a feminist counter-archive (Bell & Whitfield 2023) and as a mode of healing in contexts of colonial violence (Bell 2024).

Below, we ask how love is framed and reconfigured in the writings of the collective in relation to law, state power, and patriarchy in contemporary Mexico. Their writings, in that regard, contrast starkly with the above literary examples narrated by men: what stands out time and again is a denunciation of love and its function in broader state-sponsored forms of patriarchal authority, control, and repression, including the imprisonment of women. Romantic love, or the stereotype of the lovestruck woman who would do anything “for love”, is revealed to be another one of the many normative roles in which women are entrapped (Lagarde 2005).

The authors of *An Aromantic Manifesto* write that “the romanticisation of women is especially violent, because the cis-heterosexual female romantic ideal is expected to put the man’s emotional and sexual needs above her own” (yingchen & yingtong 2018). Across the Western world, numerous scholars have traced the insidious links between the myths of romantic love, gender violence, and femicide (García & Gimeno, 2017; Bajo Pérez, 2020). In Mexico, a country in the grip of one of the deepest human rights crises in its history (Bizarro et al, 2023, 11), with over 100,000 disappeared, and with more than eleven women killed every day at the hands of men (Barragán et al, 2022), gender violence looms large over public debate. For the imprisoned Hermanas, as we shall see, the effects of this violence are catastrophic: the institutions of state and family collude, via the myth of patriarchal relations and romantic love, to imprison women.

As Hoyos Pérez writes in a short text entitled “Presas del amor romántico”, women in prison are often paying the price for their romantic partners, having been persuaded into risky criminalized activity and in some cases

into confessing to crimes committed by their boyfriends or husbands: “El ‘mito del amor’ es una de las causas que mantiene presas a las mujeres, en la cárcel o fuera de ella. [...] Algunas de ellas están pagando los crímenes de sus parejas que las visitan y les llevan ropa y regalos” (in Hernández Castillo et al, 2013, 50). The connection between love and patriarchal violence has become one of the central tenets of the Colectiva’s decolonial feminist writing methodology designed for women in prison and other spaces in which women experience gender violence. As laid out in their manual *Renacer en la escritura*,

El amor romántico es una construcción social del patriarcado que se ha convertido en el opio de las mujeres. “Mientras los hombres gobiernan, las mujeres, los amamos”, dice la escritora y activista estadounidense Kate Millet. Se nos asigna el amor como tarea fundamental y en nombre del amor cometemos las más grandes traiciones a nuestros sueños y deseos. Cuántas veces me fallé a mí misma para no fallarle a alguien más. (Hoyos Pérez et al 2021, 51-52)

Alongside Kate Millett, another author who features prominently in their feminist toolkit is Coral Herrera Gómez (2012), who in her work critiques romantic love as a powerful patriarchal tool used for purposes of control and subjugation, leading women to endure abuse and exploitation in the name of love. As a consequence of the Hermanas’ feminist pedagogy and the imprisoned – or formerly incarcerated – women’s own personal experiences, this critique of romantic love reverberates throughout their literary works in a powerfully gendered retort to González Echevarría and what he terms the “legal strife provoked by love” (2005, xiv): the Hermanas denounce, specifically, the legal strife provoked by the patriarchal myth of romantic love.

In *Sanadoras de memorias* (Bizarro et al 2023), for example, Susuki Lee’s poems read as lacerating reflections on romantic love and its embroilment in patriarchal power and domination. In “Esclava”, she denounces romantic love through the language of coloniality and slavery: “Me amaste primero/ ese me convirtió en tu esclava/ por lo mismo tomaste señorío en mí” (in Bizarro et al 2023, 48). In another poem, ambiguously titled “Guardia”, she writes:

Apuré tu aliento
en concordia con la noche,
entre sábanas blancas
el amo siniestro frenó mi guardia.

Desarmada la cautela
me sumerjo en el candente
magma ardiente,
en la marea escarlata
no pregunto, acato órdenes
solo siento sin pensar,
aunque llore al despertar. (In Bizarro et al 2023, 48)

Here, Susuki Lee plays with the polysemic quality of language to expose the connections between love and law: “guardia” refers both to the female writer’s state of alert and to the policeman or armed prison guard; “amo” implies the first-person singular of the verb “amar” as well as being a noun designating a male owner or master; “desarmado” means helpless but also unarmed; “cautela”, beyond its dictionary meaning of caution or care, also implies the legal term used for preventative or precautionary detention; “ardiente” refers both to passion and crime, destruction and danger; and “órdenes” suggest both male domination and military or police authority. Through a critical feminist optic and an intricate web of words that enmesh love and law, passion and violence, Susuki Lee gestures towards the stories that “result from the deep complicity of love and the law” (González Echevarría 2005, xiv); experiences that, while they may be “unnarratable”, can nonetheless be reconfigured through polyphonic wordplay.

While the above poems were written by Susuki Lee in the years following her release from prison, we now turn to an earlier publication by the Colectiva: the collective, narrative work *Bitácora del destierro* (2013), written when Susuki Lee was still incarcerated. It is in texts like these, we argue, written from inside the prison walls, that the Hermanas’ work achieves its strongest auratic quality. In Hoyos Pérez’s introduction, the book is presented in terms of its truth-value:

Estas escritoras en reclusión han perfeccionado su estilo y pulido la forma de encajar las palabras en el sitio preciso que estremezca el corazón de los lectores. Nos dan a conocer realidades ocultas a los ojos de una opinión pública que considera escoria a la población penitenciaria, enemigos derrotados e inmerecedores de los derechos humanos fundamentales. [...] Este libro ha sido escrito porque hay cosas que son tan verdad que deben ser dichas. (Hoyos Pérez 2013, 10-11)

The heart is invoked here, but it is entirely different from the romantic love denounced above: by pulling at the heartstrings of the reader through a

polished style and a revelation of transgressive, hidden truths, the imprisoned Hermanas forge an affective bond with their reader. This aura of authenticity can be traced throughout the book, and is arguably encompassed in the very first narrative by Águila del Mar, a short autobiographical story which draws the reader in through a language that interweaves intimacy and personal experience with an otherwise cold legalistic discourse:

Es ley natural que el tiempo sea caprichoso, lento y rápido; no hay cielo azul ni claro, sólo penas mudas entre las mujeres y la esperanza que se escapa gota a gota. Algunas plegarias, promesas, decretos pendientes. No me voy, sí me voy. Promesas de cambio con tal de obtener una segunda oportunidad. Unas corren con suerte, a otras nos dictan auto de formal prisión. Lo que quiere decir que serás sometida a proceso, si te encuentran culpable te sentencian “conforme a la ley”, si no, te dejarán libre. ¡Ojo!, hay procesos que duran años. Si no eres culpable te dejarán ir, con un disculpe Usted pero teníamos que estar seguros. Legalmente te dan de plazo tres días para decidir tu destino, cuando el delito es menor y se puede llegar a un acuerdo, te vas y esto se quedó como la mitad de una página mal vivida y, como dije antes, bajo la audacia y constancia de un buen abogado bien pagado. Para los que no llegamos a ningún arreglo o siendo delito grave, se nos dicta un ¡Auuuuto!... de formal prisión. (Mar 2013, 15)

As the first text of a collection of writings that reveal imprisonment to be a form of exile, Águila del Mar – Sea Eagle, the pseudonym of one of the imprisoned Hermanas – plunges the reader into a morass of Mexican legalistic jargon: “auto de formal prisión” (decree of formal imprisonment), “plazo de tres días” (the three day deadline that those detained have to provide their appeals and evidence), and so on.⁷ Yet far from parroting back the legalistic jargon with which she is met in the bureaucracy of the state prison system, Águila del Mar uses her writing for purposes of critique and denunciation, and like Susuki Lee, she uses linguistic ambiguity to make her critique: the “penas mudas” here are both the sorrows of the incarcerated women and the sentences for crimes that are never proven, with women remaining years in prison through lengthy trials (“hay procesos que duran años”). In this way, we might read Águila del Mar’s story as González Echevarría reads Cervantes’s *novela ejemplar* “La fuerza de la sangre”: the narrator gestures to “that which, literally, cannot be told, cannot

7 For further details on this legal terminology, see the Mexican Juridical Dictionary: <http://dicionariojuridico.mx/definicion/auto-de-formal-prision/> (accessed: 11/05/2024).

be related – it is beyond language, which is why things and bodies ‘speak’ here” (2005, 193). In Águila del Mar’s tale, the incarcerated women find an answer to the excessive force of the law in prayers and promises, as well as in alternative identities, in flying above the system as an Eagle.

It is where the narrative gets personal, though, that it also gets more intriguing, and brings us to the heart of our argument. The “revelation”, in Águila del Mar’s text, takes the form of a dialogue between two incarcerated women:

Un día, una de las mujeres que ya son de la población bajó al área de ingresos a platicar con nosotras.

—¿Y tú, por qué estás aquí? —me preguntó.

—Por extorsión.

—¡Ah, chingao! ¿A quién? ¿Cobraste el dinero?

— A mi esposo, y no, no cobré nada.

—¿A tu marido? ¿Y tu marido te tiene aquí? Qué puto y culero, no aguanta vara. ¿Sabes? Pensándolo bien, la mayoría estamos aquí por un culero, ya se llame marido, amante, hijo, amigo. Pero cómo son necesarias las buenas vergas. Ni pedo, mámatela como buena culera, aquí te vas a aleonar, vas a dejar de ser la pendeja que llegó, con el tiempo lo verás, aprenderás a ver como masca la iguana. Sale pues camarada, entonces te espero allá arriba, en el vibore-ro. ¡Jajá! —Y se fue. (Mar 2013, 15-16)

What Águila del Mar implies here is that she has been unjustly imprisoned for the crime of extortion that her husband, no less, has accused her of committing. The woman with whom she engages here – with substantial experience of life in prison, it seems – generalizes their predicament, stating that many of them are incarcerated because of a man, whether it be a husband, lover, son, or friend. This reflects broader societal expectations and gender roles that may push women into situations where they feel compelled to commit illegal acts, either through coercion or for survival; or they are forced to cover up for crimes committed by their husbands, lovers, or sons.

Águila del Mar’s text is built on a particular kind of aura: the combination of a personal lived experience with the collectivization of that otherwise subjective reality. The aura of prison writing, in this context, might be connected to two aspects of the truth value of *testimonio* as it has been theorized in Latin American literary studies: the capacity of testimonial narrative to retain “a trace of the real” through their first-person experience of a reality that, as such, “is inexpressible” (Jara & Vidal 1986, 2); and its ability to capture, or rather construct, a collective

reality, identity and struggle. As George Yúdice puts it, “testimonial writing, as the word indicates, promotes expression of personal experience. That personal experience, of course, is the collective struggle against oppression from oligarchy, military, and transnational capital” (1996, 54). In the writing of *Águila del Mar*, though, this testimonial quality is used not as tool for unifying or universalizing a personal struggle, but rather as a means of pluralizing language, evading discursive normativity and liberating the act of writing from the grips of state authority. This becomes clear in the dialogical style of the passage – based as it is on a conversation between two incarcerated women –, the prison slang, and the lurid language by which the writer herself is taken aback:

Todo lo que dije me puso a pensar mucho, sí le entendía a sus palabras, pero no estaba acostumbrada a hablar de esa manera tan florida. Aprender a aleonar. Aleonar. ¿Aprenderé a aleonar? ¿En qué sentido? (Mar 2013, 16)

The combination of distance and closeness allows the narrator to draw the reader into this “new world” of prison, and thus into the rest of the book. “Aleonarse” here goes beyond its dictionary definition of “Incitar a alguien a la acción, especialmente al desorden o a la lucha”.⁸ Here the word is specific to this particular community of imprisoned women, who have found in the lioness a figure of collective female strength: lionesses are known for working together to stalk, surround, and kill their prey. “Lionessing yourself up”, then, is a powerful response to the discourse of authority, law and (in)justice of the first part of the narrative. Women’s prison slang thus opens the door to an alternative story, and an alternative form of love: the alliances of sorority through which imprisoned women survive in and after prison; a sorority that has its own language and its own truths (Smik Moshán et al 2024). In this way, the *Colectiva*’s narrative work reveals a further development in the treatment of love and law in Mexican prison writing: here, extreme experiences of pain and suffering – often caused by intense and toxic romantic relationships –, mediated through narrative, reveal not only the truth(s) or counter-truth(s) behind state discourse, but a whole set of subjective truths: truths whose playful, polysemic linguistic forms within the *Colectiva*’s publications materialize in multiple alternative material forms: ways of being and living together.

⁸ The definition is that of the RAE, <https://dle.rae.es/aleonar> (accessed 11/05/2024).

In this close relationship between the subjective reality of the individual prisoner and the material conditions of the prison population, we might be reminded of Daniel Roux's insistence that,

In prison, as a political prisoner you encounter the state as a condition – the state of the country, to revert to an Early Modern use of the word 'state' – and your response is necessarily the condition of the people rather than the self, or rather the condition of the self as it synecdochically stands for the state of the people. (2012, 547)

Drawing on Roux's perspective, the generalization of Águila del Mar's condition – that of yet another woman, ultimately, in prison "for love", or in her comrade's distinctly less romantic terms, "por un culero" – displays the synecdochical relationship between self and other, between the state of the self and the state of the broader female population. Feminizing a trope that recurs throughout male-dominated prison literature (Whitfield 2018, 25), here it is the experiences of women prisoners that stand as a synecdoche for the challenges, injustices, and conditions faced by women in society at large. In turn, this shows the "common" women writers of the Colectiva, as well as all their imprisoned Hermanas, to be political prisoners too: prisoners of gender normativity and of the patriarchal state.

Against these multiple forms of incarceration – which Carolina Andrea Sierra Castillo, building on the criminological concept of "double deviance", terms "doble cautiverio: mujer frustrada y presa" (2021) –, the Hermanas work to form bonds of sorority that flesh out a different kind of love. Amatista Lee describes the Hermanas thus in a narrative fragment entitled "Mensajeras de otros mundos":

Soy una oruga, por una circunstancia o por azares del destino fui traída a esta jungla donde el cautiverio no se habla pero se siente, me convertí en monstruo para la sociedad, aquí las horas y días son iguales. De vez en cuando llegan palomas mensajeras cuando les es permitido, Elena, Aída y Marina, trayendo mensajes de otros mundos. Entre tanto, los abrazos cargados con amor y calidez, sanan mis heridas poco a poco haciendo brotar alitas sobre mi espalda, porque ellas me enseñaron a plasmar sin temor esa obscuridad que me ataba a un doloroso pasado, trayendo la luz. Mis palomitas, mis hermanas, mis madres, escuchan mis gritos: ¡no soy un monstruo! (Lee 2013, 137)

The Hermanas write in and against a patriarchal system that punishes women twice (Azaola 1999): once for their crime, once for their transgression of

gender norms that turns them into “monsters” for society. Against the gender normativity that Revueltas perhaps unwittingly endorses in *Muros de agua* through his idealization of heterosexual romantic love and his construction of homosexual love as an “illness”, the Hermanas foreground an altogether different form of love: sororal love. Their embraces, filled with love and warmth, are a powerful antidote to a system of multiple exclusions and exiles; the “little wings” with which Amatista Lee flees her condition of incarceration are a metaphor for writing and publishing, for a practice of activist literature that brings to the outside world an “archive of the forbidden”, as González Echevarría calls it (2005, xv). But whereas in Cervantes’s time, this archive served to “counterbalanc[e] the copious repository of the pious”, here its purpose is to transmit the incarcerated women’s cries of protest – “¡no soy un monstruo!” – through powerful counter-truths about state corruption and alternative states of being; about brutal police repression and forceful feminist resistance; about the broken rule of law and restorative stories of sororal love.

6. Julio Grotten: the horror of the law

Finally, we turn to another contemporary writer whose work stands almost in an obverse position to that of the Hermanas: formerly incarcerated author, Julio Grotten. Grotten’s story is itself exemplary of the injustice of the Mexican system. In his own words:

Para comentar de mi caso, es necesario decir que estuve 16 años en prisión acusado de homicidio, rodeado de mucha gente que, como yo, luchaba por sobrevivir al desgaste emocional, a la soledad, la angustia y la locura y, a su vez, pugnaba por alcanzar una oportunidad de salir y recuperar sus vidas, independientemente de su culpabilidad o inocencia. En la cárcel se castiga más la pobreza y la ignorancia que los delitos.

Mi proceso jurídico duró todo este tiempo. La sentencia fue absolutoria. Mi tiempo robado, pero la cárcel me dio oficio: Escribir. (Personal communication 2024)

While inside, thanks partially to the activism of local cartonera publishers and action research projects supported by the authors of this article, Grotten wrote and published a series of short stories *Noche de los perros tristes* (2022). Now outside, he continues to write, runs his own cartonera publishing house, Casa

Gorgona, and devotes his time to helping others who have recently got out of prison with their process of “reinserción social”. He goes on to explain that:

La posibilidad de escribir me dio un alto grado de libertad en mi mente e incluso en mi entorno. Ya no me veía a mí mismo solo como un preso, pero como un ser pensante, capaz de analizar, comprender y sacar una radiografía del horror y el dolor que se vive no solo tras los muros, pero tras nuestros ojos, en nuestra mente, poniéndolo por escrito. Jugué con las metáforas para no decir nombres ni afectar susceptibilidades. (Personal communication 2024)

Grotten’s explanation of writing develops several common tropes in prison writers’ accounts of their transformation, setting out the opposition between prisoner and writer, with the latter emerging as a transcendent identity; a transcendence represented by the “wings” of sororal writing in the work of the Hermanas. For Grotten, writing, like law, is a technique for ordering reality, for worlding on a small scale, and the power of the writer lies quite simply in the capacity to create art and understanding from the horror of experience.

Horror is at the heart of Grotten’s aesthetic. Before his incarceration, he was already a big fan of heavy metal rock music. His love of gothic aesthetics is evident in the tattoos that cover his arms. Indeed, his gothic style may well be one of the reasons for his arrest. He describes Gorgona Cartonera as the first gothic cartonera publisher. Grotten’s prison stories are shot through with gothic elements which serve, as we explore in this section, to shed a particular, haunting light on the violence done in the name of both love and the law. By turning to the gothic, Grotten is able to denounce his situation in a manner that maintains cultural resonance and power, but also provides protection. By incorporating fantastical elements into his writing, Grotten, who continues to work in the prison as a pastor, is able to tackle otherwise risky issues.

Grotten’s first collection of short stories *Noche de perros tristes* (2022), translated into English by David O’Meara and published as *Night of Sad Dogs* (2023), is an anthology from the perspectives of a number of different characters in a men’s prison. In addition to the title, each story begins with a prisoner number. This format serves to anonymize the characters and also remind readers of a counter-truth that the author is keen to underline: that behind the bureaucratic reduction of citizen to “inmate” lies a human being. In the opening story, “Preludio absurdo en Fa menor (Fm)/Música de cámara para cello y piano/Interno: 3489/Bienvenidos a mi circo mental” (2022, 11), the narrative voice seems to cleave closely to Grotten’s own when he states, “Y sí, soy un

perro y un poeta y temo morir; escribo para no ser olvidado, aun cuando nadie tiene muchas ganas de recordarme o de leerme... ¿Quizás, tú?” (2022, 13). In this bleak appeal, Grotten simultaneously posits the possible futility of writing while also emphasizing how, on an individual level, even the faintest hope of being heard is enough to motivate the writing subject.

Reflecting on the relationship between the law and English gothic writing, Leslie J. Moran writes that:

the law is presented as archaic and dark, a vestigial shadow haunting the social order of the enlightenment and modernity [...] law is associated with the ad hoc, unreason, the outmoded, the judicial in contrast to the Parliamentary, unwritten law in contrast to the written law [...] as an archaic past that haunts, corrupts and renders labyrinthine the straight path of rule and reason. (2001, 75-76)

Gothic elements are present in all of Grotten’s stories, a mode through which to communicate not only the unreason and irrational operations of the criminal justice system but also the visceral affective horror of patriarchal gender relations. The gothic also gives Grotten an aesthetic vocabulary to express ways in which violent logics of Inquisition-era Mexico still endure, and also a way around understandable self-censorship that the presence of invisible power in prisons necessitates.

“Absurd Prelude in F-Minor (Fm)” plays with the trope of prison as a place of the living dead or half living. The cell block inhabited by the narrator is presented in Dantesque terms:

Ala Este.

Cuarto círculo del infierno. Celda 434.

Más parece una cripta olvidada, rociada de lúgubre patetismo;

infestada de vida. Almas muertas. Sin propósito.

¡Parasitónicas! (2022, 11)

Grotten goes on to portray the visits of family members bringing the food that many prisoners rely on as a ritual to the dead, who are honored by relatives with gifts of food during Mexico’s ubiquitous Day of the Dead ceremonies:

Estamos todos muertos como calabazas aplastadas, y quien te ve, te lo recuerda. Lo ves cuando vienen a visitarnos, vienen siempre de negro, todos tristes y te traen luto y viandas como ofrenda, tu comida favorita, como en día de muertos. Ni la burla perdonan. (2022, 12)

Grotten conveys the symbolic resonance of family members as bearers of sustenance and connection in an otherwise desolate realm. The act of nourishing the incarcerated loved one becomes a bridge between the realms of the living and the dead – familial love possessed of the transformative power. Love is once again presented in opposition to Grotten’s gothic account of “law” albeit in an ambiguous fashion, the loved ones’ presence in mourning clothes contributing to the prisoners undead state.

Against this hellish backdrop, listening to metal music is compared by another of Grotten’s narrators to the peace of the womb. In a story simply titled “La paz del útero”, the maternal body is recovered as a refuge through Norwegian metal music:

He seguido buscando, encontrando y maravillándome en el canto de las hadas nórdicas, sobre el sonido poderoso del metal. Cada vez que lo escucho, si es tiempo de amor o de guerra, de felicidad o de dolor, vuelvo a sentir la paz del útero y me puedo envolver en el suave abrigo del “me vale madre”. (15)

Here the maternal body – through the dual meaning of “me vale madre”, which means “nothing/fuck all to me” but literally “it is worth as much as a mother to me” – perfectly encapsulates the dual glorification and demonization of women that many of Grotten’s characters exhibit. One is reminded of Octavio Paz’s discussion of origins and uses of the term “chingar” and “la Chingada”: “the singularity of the Mexican resides, I believe, in his violent, sarcastic humiliation of the Mother and his no less violent affirmation of the Father” (1961, 80).

Misogynistic femicidal violence is the theme of the story “Un infierno prometido”, in which Grotten deals with the clash of love and law in a manner that complements and confirms many of the concerns of the Hermanas about misogynistic violence. The story bears the subtitle “Un infierno prometido/ Interno: 1845/Confesiones hechas por escrito a su abogado.../en susurros” (40). The story is disturbing because Grotten takes on the voice of an extremely violent man, and repeats the refrain “Tuve que hacerlo”:

Todo lo que un día amé, todo lo hermoso que el Cielo un día me obsequió, todo lo dañé, lo perdí irremediamente, en un vano desplante de poder. Un arrebató súbito. Tuve que hacerlo... (2022, 40)

The outburst in question was the murderous stabbing of the narrator's lover. Over the course of the *cuento*, the narrator alternates between regret and fantasies of how he could have got out of the situation and escaped the dual prison of both stone and conscience in which he finds himself, and the sense that he had no control or agency in the situation. He presents himself as completely within the power of the woman he simultaneously idealizes as 'perfecta' and demonizes as an "ángel caído", "un demonio, con rostro de princesa" to whom he becomes an "esclavo agradecido" (2022, 42).

Her sin, of course, is to cheat on him, and to disappear and refuse his attempts to control her: "No eres mi dueño" (2022, 44). When she begins to tell him he is not her only lover he stabs her in a hideous rape-murder, represented in a series of shocking phrases, such as "Tuve una poderosa erección" (2022, 46). After stabbing his former lover the man turns the dagger on himself, mutilating his own body and attempting to kill himself. The "promised hell" does not arrive, however, as he wakes up paralyzed, destined to spend the rest of his "vida vegetal" chained to a hospital bed.

With this horrifying portrait of masculinity, Grotten gives readers an insight into the minds of a character who is revealed to be an example of what Sayak Valencia calls, in her account of the violent masculine subject, a *sujeto endriago*. Valencia describes these as: "subjectivities [that] use crime and overt violence as tools for meeting the demands of hyper-consumerist society and its processes of capitalist subjectification" (2018, 134).⁹ The *sujeto endriago* is, for the trans-feminist theorist Valencia, a product of a hyper-consumerist context, and; it is specifically associated with Mexican society, in which ultra-violence has become part of the business model of drug-trafficking cartels. In Grotten's story, the protagonist's violence stems from a more basic principle of capitalism: ownership. Such is the narrator's visceral horror at even the prospect that his lover has not shown unfailing loyalty that he cuts her life short before she can even utter the words of confession. The narrator's insistence that his action is inevitable points to a "high-intensity" patriarchy, which Rita Segato argues has its origins in coloniality (2016), founded on a series of unwritten laws that grant men the right to control, violate, and annihilate the "territory" of the feminized body:

9 The term is a reference to the medieval romance *Amadís de Gaula*, in which Endriago is a monstrous hybrid of man, hydra and dragon.

[P]odría decirse que la violación es el acto alegórico por excelencia de la definición schmittiana de la soberanía – control legislador sobre un territorio y sobre el cuerpo del otro como anexo a ese territorio. Control irrestricto, voluntad soberana arbitraria y discrecional cuya condición de posibilidad es el aniquilamiento de atribuciones equivalentes en los otros y, sobre todo, la erradicación de la potencia de éstos como índices de alteridad o subjetividad alternativa. (Segato 2004, 5-6)

Grotten's story lays bare the commonplace of a form of "control legislador" – legislative power. The narrator's masculinity is excessive even of the codes of the patriarchal machismo that are hegemonic in Mexico. The setting of the prison hospital here serves as a Borgesian labyrinth of immobility – the narrator trapped for eternity in a private hell composed of his own violent, misogynistic love. The Hermanas' cry "no soy un monstruo" thus finds its terrible obverse here in a character who confesses his own monstrosity.

If "Un infierno prometido" is a critique of the worst forms of patriarchally-perverted love, a more redemptive tale of passion is told in the following story, "Interludo en Sol Mayor". The story concerns a man whose life is turned around by the weekly conjugal visits of a woman described as "Hermosa en tu imperfección" (2022, 48). Such is the love between them, the passion of their sexual connection, that the narrator achieves a form of escape – the "hell" converted into paradise.

Ya no queda lugar para ellas desde que tú llegaste, porque has convertido todo en paraíso con tu sola presencia, con el simple hecho de respirar y limpiar el aire cada vez que visitas nuestro odiado infierno. El ángel desterrado aun toca a Chopin. El ave negra aún puede volar, huir de aquí. Reír, cantar, morir. (2022, 50)

The subtitle of the story, however, is "Interno: 0036 En una hoja encontrada bajo el camarote de un hombre que nunca tuvo visita", revealing this redemptive tale to be no more than a fantasy.

An element of the story not immediately clear to the casual reader is the significance of the fleeing "ave negro" in this passage. Black birds and crows appear in multiple stories, as sinister presences perching on the prison walls, watching and observing the activities of the prisoners. Black birds such as crows and ravens are of course augurs of evil and misfortune in European gothic traditions. They also had negative connotations for pre-Columbian cultures in Mexico, representing, for example, a poor harvest in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Sharpe 2014, 321). In Grotten's oeuvre, their status as all-seeing entities, able

to physically move beyond the prison walls, indicates the presence of invisible powers other than the state that control life inside.

Their role is, however, to evoke subtle sense of dread. In a later story in the collection, “El ritual del bardo”, a ragged imprisoned musician, who may in fact be a cipher for Grotten himself – he is an excellent guitarist –, plays guitar and sings for the others as he is watched over by the *aves negros*.

El ave negra se posa en el muro. Pero hay otros, los más, que rugen como leones, que arden de rabia al oír el canto del bardo, porque no le encuentran sentido a cantarle a un Dios que ni escucha, ni responde. Ellos ya no saben llorar, ni reír. (2022, 69)

While the power represented by birds are symbolic, dehumanized and spectral, when speaking of the violence of the state, Grotten turns to another institution with sinister, gothic but all-too-human associations: the *Santo Oficio* – or Holy Inquisition. In “Bienvenido”, the narrator looks at a new arrival who has been placed in his cell. The man is covered in wounds:

Culpable o no, con toda certeza, la Procuraduría de Justicia le hizo honor a su nombre y le ejecutó justicia; le otorgó sus caricias, muy al estilo de la Santa Inquisición, es decir, te torturan casi hasta la muerte para obligarte a confesar. Si te resistes, te mata la tortura; pero si confiesas, te queman en la hoguera. ¡Horrenda cosa es caer en manos del dios justicia! —¡Bienvenido al infierno! —susurré. No encontré mejores palabras que decir. (52)

The reference to the Procuraduría de Justicia executing “justice” – with a cruel irony akin to the methods of the Santa Inquisición – adds gothic undertones, intensifying the horror of the situation. The comparison to the Inquisition, known for its brutal interrogation techniques and merciless punishments, amplifies the sense of dread, painting the justice system as a tormentor rather than a dispenser of fairness. Grotten thus underscores, once again, the brutality of the prison system, and invokes historical precedents, leaving the reader with a lingering sense of both immediate horror and the enduring weight of oppressive state power throughout time.

In summary, Julio Grotten’s stories, rooted in his sixteen-year experience within the Mexican prison system, emerge as a potent critique of systemic injustices. Grotten’s personal journey from wrongful accusation to eventual acquittal illuminates the punitive nature of a system that penalizes poverty more than any ostensible crime. Through writing, Grotten transcends the

confines of incarceration. Employing gothic elements in his anthology *Noche de perros tristes*, Grotten unveils the irrationality and violence embedded in the criminal justice system, utilizing symbolism to address both historical trauma and contemporary forms of state violence within prison narratives. His stories delve into the complexities of love and violence, exposing the darkest aspects of misogynistic masculine subjectivities. Overall, Grotten's literary contributions are a poignant exploration of individual psychological horror amid the dehumanizing bureaucracy of imprisonment – a picture that is ultimately an account of the horror of the state itself.

7. *(In)conclusions: Opening alternative worlds from the exile of prison*

We have argued that the status of prison writing as “literature”, and its place in the Latin American literary canon, is rooted in its unique capacity to enact an incursion into the realm of the “lettered city” from below. By analyzing a body of narrative works that extends from the Spanish Golden Age to contemporary Mexican prison writing – in a distinctly jagged line from Cervantes through Lizardi, Revueltas, the *Hermanas en la Sombra*, and Grotten – we have traced prison writing as a disavowed, counter-canonical foundation to contemporary Mexican literature. Love, in this complex network of complicity and transgression, revelation and rebellion, takes on very different roles in different narratives, but it is always in some way integral to the fate of the imprisoned writer as they grapple with the materialization of state power: it is the fiery underbelly of the same system that simultaneously restricts, regulates, and fuels emotion and resistance.

As Sierra Castillo (2021) insists, desire is both forbidden and inflamed by the prison system and its reinforcement of gender normativity. Sierra Castillo's feminist analysis can arguably be extended to all the texts analyzed above: the male characters are also punished for their failure to comply with gender normative stereotypes, for being destitute rather than affluent breadwinners, or weak rather than strong, or homosexual rather than heterosexual. From the dawn of modernity to the present day, the imprisoned writers presented in this article not only denounce the injustices of a system built on pitting a patriarchal legal system against its most vulnerable subjects, but also open other forms of storytelling and narration that go against the grain, whether through

satirical denunciations (Lizardi), homosexual transgressions (Revueltas), feminist narratives of sorority (Hermanas), or disturbing gothic tales (Grotten).

In examining prison writing's auratic quality and the constant intermingling between literary, legal, and romantic discourses, we must be cognizant of "the heavily politicized world of Latin America", where literature and culture can serve as "alternative projects of world making by engaged artists who could pay with death, prison or exile for their creations" (Arias and Campo 2009, 5). We propose that the stakes of literature – and in particular prison narrative, as a highly politicized literary form – are heightened in this region, where narratives of exile, incarceration and other forms of state violence occupy a central role not only in the literary sphere but also in and against state formation. The lives and literatures of Latin American writers, as epitomized by the prison writers presented above, are marked by repression, incarceration, and multiple forms of exile; often, as the Hermanas demonstrate in *Bitácoras del destierro*, within their own countries and communities. Within that exile, it is through affective alliances – through different forms of love – that they find alternative ways to construct new versions of themselves and the worlds that they inhabit.

Bibliography

- Ahnert, Ruth. 2013. *The Rise of Prison Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Arellano García, César. 2023. “‘Alarmante’ tendencia a la alza de mujeres encarceladas: expertos.” *La Jornada*, 23 October. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/noticia/2023/10/23/sociedad/alarmante-tendencia-a-la-alza-de-mujeres-encarceladas-expertos-3125>
- Arias, Arturo, and del Campo, Alicia. 2009. “Introduction: Memory and Popular Culture.” *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 5: 3-20.
- Avelar, Idelber. 1999. *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Azaola, Elena. 1999. *El delito de ser mujer: hombres y mujeres homicidas en la ciudad de México: historia de vida*. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.
- Bajo Pérez, Irene. 2020. “La normalización de la violencia de género en la adultez emergente a través del mito del amor romántico.” *Cuestiones de Género: de la Igualdad y la Diferencia* 15: 253-268.
- Bandera, Cesáreo. 2006. *The Humble Story of Don Quixote: Reflections on the Birth of the Modern Novel*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Barragán, Almudena. 2022. “Por Debanhi, por Susana, por Adriana...: los miles de feminicidios que indignan a América Latina”, *El país*, <https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-11-25/por-debanhi-por-susana-por-adriana-los-miles-de-feminicidios-que-indignan-a-america-latina.html> (accessed: 11/05/2024).
- Bell, Lucy. 2024. “Narración y sanación: La sorografía y las nuevas formas feministas en la obra narrativa de la Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra”. *Altre Modernità* 32 (forthcoming).
- Bell, Lucy, Flynn, Alex Ungprateeb, and O’Hare, Patrick. 2022. *Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America*. Austin: Texas University Press.

Bell, Lucy and Whitfield, Joey. 2023. "La creación de una archiva: Feminismos descoloniales en la obra testimonial de la Colectiva Editorial las Hermanas en la Sombra y las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte". *Cartaphilus* 20: 5-39.

Benjamin, Walter. [1935], 1969. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, pp. 1-26. <https://web.mit.edu/allan-mc/www/benjamin.pdf> (accessed: 11/05/2024).

Bizarro, Marcia Trejo, Hernández Castillo, R. Aída, Castro Cruz, Valentina, and Hernández del Águila, Marisol. 2023. *Sanadoras de memorias: Testimonios fotográficos-poéticos de violencias y resistencias*. Cuernavaca (Mexico): Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra.

Campuzano, Javier Mac Gregor. 2002. "Comunistas en las Islas Marías, julio-diciembre de 1932". *Signos históricos* 4, no. 8: 139-150.

Cansino, César. 2012. "De la transición continua a la instauración democrática fallida. El caso de México en perspectiva comparada". *Tla-melaua: revista de ciencias sociales* 32: 6-29.

Durán, Javier. 1999. "Apuntes sobre el grotesco en tres novelas de José Revueltas". *Chasqui* 28, no. 2: 89-102.

Galdo, Juan Carlos. 2001. "Nacionalismos y disidencias en la narrativa carcelaria latinoamericana: Los muros de agua de José Revueltas y El Sexto de José María Arguedas". *Lucero* 12, no. 3: 57-64.

Gallegos Vargas, Jorge Luis. 2014. "Los muros de la feminidad en *Los muros de Agua de José Revueltas*". *Temas y variaciones de literatura* 43: 149-159.

García, Carmen Caro, and Monreal Gimeno, María Carmen. 2017. "Creencias del amor romántico y violencia de género". *International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology* 2, no. 1: 47-56.

Garcés, María Antonia. 2002. *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive's Tale*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Gilman-Opalsky, Richard. 2020. *The Communism of Love: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Exchange Value*. Chico, California: AK Press.

- González Echevarría, Roberto. 2005. *Love and the Law in Cervantes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Grotten, Julio. 2022. *Noche de perros tristes*. Guadalajara: La Rueda Cartonera, Viento Cartonero.
- Grotten, Julio. 2023. *Night of the Sad Dogs*. Guadalajara: Viento Cartonero, Cartonera La Rueda, Casa Gorgona.
- Hernández Castillo, Rosalva Aída, Hoyos Pérez, Elena de, Lee and Ruiz Rodríguez, Marina. 2013. *Libertad Anticipada. Intervención Feminista de Escritura en Espacios Penitenciarios*. Cuernavaca: Astrolabio Editorial and Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra.
- Hoyos Pérez, Elena de. 2013. "Presentación". In *Bitácora del destierro: narrativa de mujeres en prisión*, edited by Hoyos Pérez, Elena de, Hernández Castillo, R. Aída, and Ruiz, Marina, 9-14. Cuernavaca: Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra.
- Herrera Gómez, Coral. 2012. "La violencia de género y el amor romántico". *Pikara Magazine*, <https://www.pikaramagazine.com/2012/11/la-violencia-de-genero-y-el-amor-romanticocoral-herrera-gomez-expone-que-el-romanticismo-es-el-mecanismo-cultural-mas-potente-para-perpetuar-el-patriarcado/> (accessed: 11/05/2024).
- Hoyos Pérez, Elena de, Ruiz Rodríguez, Marina, and Hernández Castillo, R. Aída. 2021. *Renacer en la escritura. Manual para la intervención feminista en espacios donde se viven violencias*. Cuernavaca (Mexico): Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra.
- Jara, René, and Vidal, Hernán (eds). 1986. *Testimonio y literatura*. Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature.
- Kvas, Kornelije. 2019. *The Boundaries of Realism in World Literature*. Translated by Novica Petrović. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Lee, Amatista. 2013. "Mensajeras de otros mundos". In *Bitácora del destierro: narrativa de mujeres en prisión*, edited by Hoyos Pérez, Elena de, Hernández Castillo, R. Aída, and Ruiz, Marina, 137. Cuernavaca: Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra.

Lizardi, José Joaquín de. [1816] 2003. *El Periquillo Sarniento*. Online: Editorial del Cardo.

Lagarde, Marcela. 2005. *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Manzo-Robledo, Francisco. 1998. "El discurso homofóbico: El caso de *Los Muros de Agua* de José Revueltas". *Chasqui* 27, no. 2: 27-37.

Mar, Águila del. 2013. "Tiempo de aleonarse". In *Bitácora del destierro: narrativa de mujeres en prisión*, edited by Hoyos Pérez, Elena de, Hernández Castillo, R. Aída, and Ruiz, Marina, 15-16. Cuernavaca: Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra.

Millington, Mark I. 2007. "Mexican revolutionary politics and the role of the intellectual in Martín Luis Guzmán's *La sombra del caudillo* and José Revueltas's *Los días terrenales*." *Journal of Romance Studies* 7, no. 2: 35-53.

Moran, Leslie J. 2001. "Law and the Gothic Imagination". In *The Gothic: Essays and Studies*, edited by Fred Botting, 87-110. Martlesham, UK: Boydell and Brewer.

Paz, Octavio. 1961. *The Labyrinth of Solitude; Life and Thought in Mexico*. New York: Grove Press.

Pierre, Michel. 2002. "Papillon ou les raisons d'un best-seller». *Histoire de la Justice* 1: 251-259.

Rama, Angel. [1984] 1996. *The Lettered City*. Duke University Press.

Revueltas, José. [1941] 1961. *Los muros de agua*. Lectulandia. ePub 11.0. <https://ww3.lectulandia.com/book/los-muros-de-agua/> (accessed: 11/05/2024).

Revueltas, José. 1978. *Cuestionamientos e intenciones, Obras completas* 18. Mexico City: Era.

Rosetti, M. 2011. El "leperaje letrado" como crítica del sistema colonial de la Nueva España en *El Periquillo Sarniento*. XXIV Jornadas de Investigadores de Instituto de Literatura Hispanoamericana, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (UBA).

Roux, Daniel. 2012. "Writing the Prison". In *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, edited by Attwell, David, and Attridge, Derek, 545-63. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Ruffinelli, Jorge. 1976. "José Revueltas: política y literatura (1941-1944)". *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* 2, no. 4: 61-79.
- Salvatore, Ricardo D., Aguirre, Carlos, and Joseph, Gilbert M. (eds). 2001. *Crime and Punishment in Latin America: Law and Society Since Late Colonial Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Samuell Muñoz, Rafael E. 1993. "El otro testimonio: literatura carcelaria en América Latina", *Revista Iberoamericana* 40: 497-507.
- Segato, Rita Laura. 2004. "Territorio soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado", *Labrys* 6. <http://mujeresdeguatemala.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Territorio-soberani%CC%81a-y-cri%CC%81menes-de-segundo-estado.pdf> (accessed: 11/05/2024).
- Segato, Rita Laura. 2016. *La guerra contra las mujeres*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.
- Sharpe, Ashley E. 2014. "A Reexamination of the Birds in the Central Mexican Codices". *Ancient Mesoamerica* 25, no. 2: 317-36. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536114000297> (accessed: 11/05/2024).
- Sierra Castillo, Carolina Andrea. 2021. "Ser mujer en prisión: el estereotipo de los afectos como pena en la prisión de mujeres". In *Pluralismo jurídico y derechos humanos: Perspectivas críticas desde la política criminal*, edited by Marcela Gutiérrez Quevedo, Ángela Marcela Olarte Delgado, 65-105. Bogotá: Universidad Externado de Colombia.
- Sigüenza Vidal, Fernanda. 2018. "La ex Acordada y Belén, una visión de la rehabilitación penitenciaria en la prisión femenina en México (1833-1882)". *Relaciones. Estudios de historia y sociedad* 39, no. 154: 193-223.
- Smik Moshán, Marthita, Najera Ordaz, Ana Veronica, with Mondragón, Daniela, Bell, Lucy, and Whitfield, Joey. 2024. "Sorority inside and outside as a means of survival and resistance: testimonies Experiences of women imprisoned in Mexico". *Prison Service Journal* 273: 41-49.
- Sommer, Doris. 1990. "Love and Country in Latin America: An Allegorical Speculation". *Cultural Critique* 16: 109-28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354347> (accessed: 11/05/2024).

Sommer, Doris. 1991. *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sommer, Doris. 2023. "A Picaresque Parrot and Decent Domesticity: Novel Nations in Latin America". In *The Oxford Handbook of the Latin American Novel*, edited by Castro, Juan E. de, and López-Calvo, Ignacio, 41-60. Oxford University Press.

Tedeschi, Stefano. 2022. "Remembering Violence: The Narrative of '68 in Mexico". In *The Routledge Handbook of Violence in Latin American Literature*, edited by Baisotti, Pablo, 231-252. New York & London: Routledge.

Tedeschi, Stefano. 2024. "Scritture carcerarie in America Latina. Uno sguardo panoramico". In *Liber/Liberi. Libri, carte e parole nelle realtà carcerarie*, edited by Arianna Punzi and Marta Marchetti. Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice (forthcoming).

Valencia, Sayak. 2018. *Gore Capitalism*. Boston: MIT.

Vogele, Nancy J. 1987. "Defining the 'Colonial Reader': *El Periquillo Sarniento*". *PMLA* 102, no. 5: 784-800.

Vogele, Nancy J. 2004. "Introduction", in José Joaquín Lizardi, *The Mangy Parrot*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Wacquant, Loïc, 2009. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Whitfield, Joey. 2018. *Prison Writing of Latin America*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

yingchen and yingtong. 2018. "An Aromantic Manifesto". *The Anarchist Library*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/yingchen-and-yingtong-an-aromantic-manifesto> (accessed: 11/05/2024).

Youngers, Coletta. 2023. "Liberarlas es justicia: Mujeres, políticas de drogas y encarcelamiento en América Latina". *WOLA*, <https://www.wola.org/es/analisis/liberarlas-es-justicia-mujeres-politicas-de-drogas-encarcelamiento-en-america-latina/> (accessed: 11/05/2024).

Yúdice, George. 1996. "Testimonio and Postmodernism". In *The Real Thing: Testimonial discourse and Latin America*, edited by Gugelberger, Georg M., 42-57. Durham: Duke University Press.

Joey Whitfield is a senior lecturer in Hispanic Studies at Cardiff University. He researches questions to do with culture, crime and punishment in 20th and 21st century Latin American literature and film. He is the author of *Prison Writing of Latin America* (Bloomsbury, 2018). He also collaborates with activist groups and social movements who campaign for justice, mostly in Mexico. He was Co-Investigator, with Lucy Bell, on the AHRC-funded project “Prisoner Publishing: Supporting Rehabilitation and Reform through Innovative Writing Programmes” (2020-21).

Lucy Bell is a lecturer in Spanish-American literature at Sapienza University of Rome. She is principal author of *Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America* (University of Texas Press, 2022). She has led several funded research projects, including “Prisoner Publishing: Supporting Rehabilitation and Reform through Innovative Writing Programmes” (AHRC, 2020-21), and “Plotting for Democracy: A Transnational Approach to Literatures of Transition in Latin America (1960s – Present)” (PRIN PNRR, 2023-2025).

