

The Mexican Telenovela's Tidy Nation

Adriana Estill

University of New Mexico

The popularity of the Latin American telenovela has engendered a number of studies that range in focus from content analysis to the consideration of the audience's reception. The ideological and economic interests of cultural production have also been considered, with a particular and well-developed focus on the representation of women and sexuality. However, while there have been some critics who have begun to delineate the national character of specific telenovelas (particularly in regards to Brazilian soaps), the telenovela has not--as yet--been considered a site where nationality, nationalism, and Nation are produced and, as befits a repetitive genre like the telenovela, reproduced.

I would like to offer five approaches to understand the Nation-construction that occurs in the Mexican telenovela which admittedly reflect my literary and textual bias. (1) Mazzioti (1993) has argued elsewhere that Mexican telenovelas are--in contrast to the Latin American genre as a whole--more playfully melodramatic, the scenery more baroque, the narrative fuller of pathos and more inclined towards tragic heroes. I will consider the melodramatic aspect--taken up in other authors, but always abandoned, perhaps rightfully so--and consider whether Mexican telenovelas present a specifically National melodrama. (2)

Telenovelas present a limited number of characters and only a few sets to the audience. These characters only interact with each other and seem to have no knowledge of larger social, political events. They therefore present a "closed community" which is complete and autonomous unto itself. Given the nature of the narrative's "community," it can be seen as an extension of, or a depiction of, the ideal imagined Mexico. In the footsteps of Benedict Anderson, these closed communities become National imagined communities par excellence. (3) Given the generally closed community, when the "outside" world is referred to, that reference takes on a particular importance. How is the larger arena of Mexico portrayed? (4) Telenovelas, like other visual media, participate in a semiotic field of images that represent the Nation, metaphorically or metonymically. The mariachi costume, for instance, represents Mexican music in the recent telenovela Vivo por Elena. The choice of mariachi over rock, pop, or norteño privileges a centralized notion of Mexico that has a great historic tradition. (5) Gender politics, I argue, are also, very importantly, national politics. The representation of women and sexuality in the Mexican telenovela must be simultaneously read as a representation of the necessity of producing and reproducing the Nation.

I further suggest that the consistent representation and production of national identities through the telenovela that emerges in the Latin American--and Mexican--telenovela depend upon a structure that is inherently "tidy," especially when you

compare these programs to U.S. soap operas. U.S. soaps such as General Hospital and One Life to Live last for decades and longer, continuously building a viewer-base that has an increasingly greater chance of not completely understanding the intertwining and complex histories of the numerous characters. This situation has led recent U.S. soap theorists to suggest that the narrative encourages the public's engagement in the program by emphasizing its polysemic nature; by refusing closure (which invites the public to further imagine lives and roles and even consider extratextual evidence to guess at future plot twists); by proffering the viewer as "complete" a knowledge as possible while also acknowledging the impossibility of ever attaining that completion; In other words, in the U.S. soaps, knowledge gives the viewer power; however, the impossibility of knowing everything means that U.S. soap operas produce in viewers the desire for more, but paradoxically the knowledge that that desire can and will never be fulfilled. This is an essentially postmodern vision of the world that depends almost completely on the lack of closure inherent to the U.S. soap genre.

In contrast, the telenovelas generally have runs of between three months and two years, a structural difference that has resounding impacts on other, naturalized conventions as per U.S. and British critics. As Torres Aguilera remarks, "la evolución de estos programas dentro de la realidad mexicana cobró una singularidad que se ha extendido al resto de Latinoamérica con notable aceptación" (26). The telenovela's impulse towards final and total closure means that the potential polysemic nature of

the melodrama dissolves to a large degree; so that while Cynthia Duncan suggests that the viewer may imagine different futures beyond the narrative ending of the telenovela, the satisfaction that is given by these endings (all eligible good people are married off; most bad people die) prevents the majority of readings that would gaze into the characters' non-narrated future. Telenovelas are thus "tidy": they present complete narrative closure, they tie the loose ends, they "clean up" any doubts or desires that the viewer might have about the characters.

Thus the U.S. soap opera keeps its viewers watching because, as Hayward puts it, the "desire for plenitude that keeps him/her watching is, in this case, forever deferred" (155). Mexican soaps provide the possibility of fulfilling all those desires: for complete knowledge; for the rewards of correctly-measured anticipations; for the eventual--and understandable--reduction of the multiple meanings (many story lines, many possibilities) to clearly legible moral resolutions. Thus the construction of nation and its myths stands complete, offered to the viewer as his or her reward for following the narrative(s). Such a mastery of the Mexican telenovela leads to a satisfaction in the resolutions produced within, including the construction of national beliefs and relations.

Making Mexico melodramatic

As mentioned above, one defining element of the Mexican telenovela is the type of melodrama that it employs. Melodrama

is a common approach in all soap operas¹; however, Mexican telenovelas tend to be, according to Nora Mazzioti, playful and excessive in the use of melodrama (1993).

What exactly is melodrama? James Smith provides an historical perspective, showing that the contemporary melodrama evolved from the music-drama that was not opera. Music was used to enhance and suggest emotional complexity, a technique that implied that dialogue and words inevitably fell short. Later, music was optional, but the need to suggest grand emotions continues in the rather simply-drawn stock characters and the focus on morality and appeals to the emotions. Perhaps one of the more persuasive analyses of melodrama—by Robert Bechtold Heilman—suggests that "tragic man is essentially 'divided' and melodramatic man essentially 'whole'" (sic, qtd in Smith, 7). The melodramatic character knows the difference between good and evil and sees the world in such black and white terms. His or her wholeness allows him or her to war against external pressures: evil people, unjust situations, unfair fates. That wholeness forbids self-doubt; melodramatic characters have attained full selfhood and it is clear-cut and, oftentimes, quite unchanging.

¹ And, some U.S. critics suggest, in ALL television, see Mulvey's discussion of the "naturalization" of the melodramatic form (96) and Mumford's suggestion that the "tendency for television as a whole [is] to incorporate aspects of the melodramatic mode of address into previously established genres" (17). Smith goes so far to say as to decide that it is perhaps a "human" desire to want the simple resolution of melodrama instead of the conflicted heroes of tragedy. Ana Lopez concurs, saying that "we must agree that there is such a thing as a 'melodramatic' impulse that seems to be universal" (6).

Smith provocatively suggests that "we see most of the serious conflicts and crises of our everyday lives in melodramatic, rather than tragic, terms" (10). "By attacking villains we can all become heroes." (10) In other words, our everyday interactions are, to some extent, antithetical to a "tragic" dramatic sense; we have no desire or need (or get no pleasure) out of imagining ourselves as less than whole and our adversaries or allies in similarly complex terms.

In this rubric, it makes sense that the Latin American telenovelas eventually come to an end; after all, the closure that a telenovela provides essentially confirms the world view--the wholeness--always already present in the interactions of the characters. In La dueña, Regina, the titular owner of the rancho "Los Cascabeles"--who has at times seemed arrogant and has been understood as domineering by some characters--marries José María, a man who labors hard on the rancho. This marriage presents to us the Regina who was already there, only hidden under insecurities: a lovely, generous woman who deserves this man's admiration and respect. It is a given that José María has always seen through her façade.

Frankly, it seems more surprising that U.S. soaps, very melodramatic and often moralistic or didactic, offer no momentous finale to cement identities and narrative meanings. Compared to U.S. soaps, all Latin American telenovelas offer an enhanced melodrama inherent in both narrative and characters. The final closure of the telenovela creates a permanent, stable world where

"complete" individuals win or lose and where the audience can participate in that completion.

The inherently Mexican melodrama?

In spite of the fact that the melodramatic genre inherently seems to be apolitical because of its focus on the individual, his/her emotions, and personal travails, the Mexican melodrama's focus on "justice" and the clear cut distinctions the novelas make between good and evil persons produce a narrative that reinforces each character's designation and the necessity for the conclusions to come.² The audience can follow the conventions (I have yet to see a Mexican telenovela where the unmitigatedly evil people do NOT suffer) and expect certain endings. Expectations are always fulfilled. In the case of La dueña, Macario and Laura, the two simply evil characters (both had killed other people) were punished by the end of the novela with their deaths. In Cuna de Lobos, the classic Mexican soap, the matriarch and her tainted progeny ALL die. If death is the ultimate punishment, love and marriage is the highest reward. Vivo por Elena already shows traces of its ending, where Elena will be rewarded for her devotion, goodness, and purity with marriage to el juez Juan Alberto. Of course, in many of the telenovelas, marriage and love include a major class ascension for one of the characters, usually the female.

² See Christine List or Laura Stempel Mumford for a discussion of the problematic ideologies associated with and produced by melodramatic narratives.

The "playful" nature of Mexican melodrama (its seemingly parodic exaggeration, its emotional excess) is perhaps a natural outcome of the focus on a moral justice that sometimes is also a partner to social justice.³ The "whole" and thus one-sided characters, to increase the audience's interest and engagement with the narrative, emphasize a theatricality of reaction, not action, which involves a large number of close ups, many scenes that involve "eavesdropping" of some kind, and more revelation scenes than any Sophoclean play. This discourse of reaction necessitates and revolves around a certain type of, yes, exaggeration of the melodramatic elements that is constantly signaling the character's surprise at the newest twist in the plotline. Every negative event is cried over ad nauseam, every potential happy day is celebrated and also second guessed. As Martha Vicente Castro declares, the Mexican telenovela represents "el modelo esencialmente melodramático, con toda la carga sentimentalista, maniqueísta y moralista que ello implica" (qtd in Mazzioti 1996, 47).

To presume that this exaggerated discourse of reaction is nationally-bound, purely Mexican, could be a bit distorted in itself. After all, it could just be a repetitive formula that Mexican television has discovered does well not only in Mexico, but also in other countries.

³ On a lighter note, I recently (9/21/98) viewed an episode of the NBC sitcom Caroline in the City. One of the characters, Charlie, exclaims after he offers a melodramatic solution to other characters' quandary, "Am I the only one who watches Mexican television?!"

However, we could consider how historically "melodrama is one of the most enduring cinematic genres in Mexico," so that many contemporary films enlarge melodrama's focus, keeping emotions and family life at the center, but noting the inevitable eruption of the political and social world into that "closed" home, such as in Como agua para chocolate (Mistron 47).

Fernando Vivas laments the inability of Peruvian telenovelas to do well in the ratings when Mexican telenovelas are playing, pointing out that their "clasicismo de mal agüero obligaría a pensar que la telellorona tradicional se vuelve a ponder de moda" (44). Speaking of El premio mayor, another Mexican telenovela, he remarks that "su impacto local es tan grande que obliga a recordar las décadas del cuarenta y cincuenta cuando el cine mexicano ayudó a tapar varios baches de nuestra identidad cultural" (44). This suggests strongly that the Mexican telenovela has a "national" presence based on its particular melodramatic focus.

"Closed" and Imagined Communities: Little Nations

The notion of the "closed" soap community I owe to Laura Stempel Mumford who explains it in the following manner:

soaps take place within closed communities and . . . they emphasize the personal relationships among members of those communities rather than, for instance, their political or work lives, or the connection between a particular community and the larger world. (40)

While this may seem to be the case with a number of television genres, Mumford continues, saying that soap opera characters are diegetically entangled by their past, present, and potential future ties of kinship and romance, blood, marriage, and friendship. They are narratively entangled by the fact that their economic, political, and other "public" relationships are subordinated to these personal ties. (41)

This seems ever so much obvious with U.S. soap operas that take their name from the imagined community, such as Santa Barbara, General Hospital, or Sunset Beach. Mexican telenovelas, while less obvious, have the same focus on the closed community and the tangled personal lives that form it. Vivo por Elena's premiere episode set up its community and its thematic focus over a backdrop of various "Mexican" sites, mainly representative of Mexico City such as Chapultepec Park, the Zócalo, etc.:

[Esta telenovela trata] dos mundos muy diferentes . . . detrás de su cara de pobreza se encuentra esta pintoresca vecindad . . . donde reinan la felicidad y el amor. [Al otro lado se encuentra otro mundo] que detrás de su rostro de abundancia esconde engaño y traición. Dos mundos que nada tienen en común excepto una cosa--Elena.

The estreno continues to elaborate the portrait of Elena, the protagonist, and her closed world: as the show starts, the subtitle "Ciudad de México" helps us find a national place for the poor neighborhood we first see. The next scene presents us with the clear image of the UNAM and introduces us to Elena, a student just about to graduate. Thirdly, the camera takes us to

a posh neighborhood where the juez Juan Alberto lives. These first three scenes introduce us to the major locations for the action. They also visually represent the class difference that will soon permeate the narrative as Ernesto, a rich man, woos Elena while she expresses her doubts: "tengo miedo a que estás jugando conmigo." The estreno introduces us to almost all the characters who will figure in the novela, and delineates the private and public spaces in which they will come together to discuss and negotiate their lives.

Because of the way that the premiere episode establishes Elena's context within an overtly national framework, I contest that while Mumford accurately diagnoses the "closed" and limited community that novelas portray, Anderson's notion of the imagined community could and should be added into the equation. Anderson's classic argument posits the idea that the Nation and its "nation-ness" are but cultural artifacts that have come into being with specific historical, social, and political dimensions. Further, he says, the nation is "an imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). And while Anderson, pointing to the beginnings of nationalism, indicates that print-capitalism "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (36), it is clear that mass media now plays that part.⁴

⁴ At this point I would like to argue against certain presiding interpretations of the mass media as, first, ideologically suspect, and second, as manipulative, "non-contradictory expressions of dominant ideology" (thanks to Ana Lopez for that

Mass media offers new and oftentimes exciting ways for communities to reimagine themselves. The telenovela's wide popularity (estimates of the viewing public in Mexico range from 60-80%) attests to its fundamental importance as a narrative that both unifies and creates the nation-ness that is Mexico. In the same way that the telenovela text offers a closed community up to the public, the viewing audience creates communities to discuss, argue about, and understand specific novelas, the generic demands, and those imagined relationships. (See note 3)

But the closed telenovela community emulates the nation's imagined community within its own text too, especially since the Mexican novela's melodramatic focus emphasizes morality, justice, and the eternal play between good and evil. Those foci create at every turn a portrait of what the nation should be. The rebirth of the nation happens at this micro level as the narratives emphasize not one single person, but the ways in which they must interact and the choices they should make in order to provide the "just and good" ending.

particular phrasing, 12). While the Frankfurt School notions of dominant ideology are useful and certainly can be traced in many mass media texts, the most recent reception studies demonstrate that audiences do not consume television culture without question. In U.S. soap opera studies, Hayward proves the primacy of collective viewing and discussion. Soap opera fans attempt to foretell the narrative because of their knowledge of conventions; they also make fun of the soap opera when such conventions become malleable beyond belief. Hayward indicates Usenet groups as a particular site for such interpretation, reinterpretation, and subversion. Similar studies of the Latin American telenovela exist and demonstrate similar reception, use, and appropriation of the telenovelas and a similar focus on collective viewing and discussion. See Bustos-Romero, Duncan, Fadul Gutiérrez et. al., Lozano Mascarúa, and Uribe Alvarado.

It is because of this constant creation of nation-ness through the microcommunity that problematic beliefs surface. In most Mexican telenovelas, for instance, racial division is unstated but present: lower classes tend to be portrayed by more mestizo or indigenous-looking actors; the rich are always more European looking. Vivo por Elena presents an interesting variation on the theme: an Afro-Hispanic actor plays the (young) leader of the local pandilla. He is teasingly nicknamed "el güero." Within the telenovela he has a marginal but still important part as one of the local bad guys who constantly intimidates the "good" lower class people who inhabit the barrio. Equating dark skin with the metaphorically "dark" behavior is not uncommon and certainly reflects wide-held though unstated Mexican beliefs.

There are a number of examples of how the "closed" community produces and expects, in turn, the reproduction of national values. In the last section of this essay I will discuss the generation of a specifically Mexican femininity. But other roles besides gendered ones are inflected by their nation-ness. Because of the melodramatic nature of the genre, the community is fueled by dissension and discord and it is the "winner" of the various conflicts who represents the "idealized" citizen.

Vivo por Elena presents us with a small world faced by various threats. Since the goal of any telenovela is to eventually marry off all the good people and eliminate--somehow--all the bad ones, Vivo por Elena, like any telenovela, narrates difficulties that could destroy relationships. In the second and

third episodes, Elena is drugged and then raped by Ernesto, Juan Alberto's half brother. This event becomes both an inner trauma that could prevent her from trusting again and an corporeal and moral transformation (from pure to impure) that could disallow any relationship with a "good" man. Chelo, Elena's sister, presents a more interesting case, because she takes a job as a caberetera in order to help her family. While being a caberetera could move her from good and wholesome to impure and unworthy, her maternal position in the family re vindicates her. Narratively, Vivo por Elena encourages women's education and work, but implies that either could potentially disrupt the reproduction of the Nation.

Another turning point in Vivo is the arrival of Eli to the barrio: she is Doña Aurora's niece from Los Angeles and has arrived in Mexico City to become a model. She is consistently called "la gringuita" by the pandilla members, which reminds us that while she speaks excellent Spanish, she is not "of us." On the other hand, her integration into the barrio and her falling in love with Luis Pablo, the mariachi musician, suggests a national reclamation of the Chicano community. Moreover, it is clearly shown that her chances to succeed in Mexico are far greater than they were in the U.S.: Mexico becomes a land of opportunity, an impression that is reinforced as Elena and Chelo both embark on love affairs with successful professional men.

The pandilla represents one of the greatest threats to the barrio and to its unity. They (especially el güero) resent those people in the vecindad who seem to have the respect of those who

live there. El güero is particularly seen as a potential disruption to a comfortable and happy life in the barrio; he attempts to get close to Elena, he tries to shoot Luis Pablo, he disdains Don Fermín and the moral authority he represents. In this sense, the vecindad easily represents Mexico's attempts to hold itself together in the face of increasing street violence; the moral of the story is that good people (honest, caring communities of lower class people) will always win out. This narrative vests a great proportion of the Mexican population with moral and social power, in order to compensate them for not having financial power. Nation-ness inheres in common decency, respect, and honor. Those who overstep those boundaries have also, metonymically, left the Nation and will be punished.

Juan Alberto provides a good example of the class politics of the Nation when, after Elena is hired to be Juanito's governess by Rebeca, Juan Alberto's mother, he decides to dismiss her after one day. Elena announces: "qué fácil se ve nunca ha sido [Ud] pobre--que nunca ha tenido que luchar." Convincing him of her sincerity and decency, he decides to hire her after all. It later becomes less of a surprise that he is a decent man because he was orphaned at an early age and, with the help of his adoptive mother Rebeca, has succeeded in his education and career as a judge. This is almost a stereotypical telenovela idea, that poor people will be better neighbors and citizens than the rich.⁵

⁵ Mulvey provides a historical overview of the British and American melodramas, pointing out that the nineteenth century melodramas portrayed the "arbitrary, relentless nature of class justice" with a focus on the working class community (84).

The honesty and decency that are seen as the very qualities that the Nation desires are attacked occasionally by other characters so that the viewers can understand that honorable values are always under attack: Rebeca says of Elena that she is "una pobre muchacha sin personalidad" and worries that Elena will take over and eventually throw her out. The paranoid fears of Rebeca reflect national worries over relationships between lower and upper classes, the displacement of the landed after the Revolution, the insecurity of the peso after 1984 and throughout the early 1990s after NAFTA.

It is no surprise in Vivo por Elena that, in this closed community, the upstanding characters are Elena--licenciada in Psychology--and the juez Juan Alberto, struggling to "keep the law" in the face of disruptions from the pandilla, Ernesto, the dissipated rich man, and various female figures who reject the feminine roles which are supposed to be theirs: mother or virgin. In fact, Adolfo says at one point to his friend, Juan Alberto, "prefieres ser juez antes de hombre."

When the World "Outside" Intrudes

La lucha de poder político, las guerrillas, el robo por hambre, y cualquier tema que cuestione el orden establecido, trascienden de manera incuestionable, los rígidos marcos de la ficción de la telenovela.

(Olguín, 23)

The imagined community rarely truly opens up to the "outside" world. As Olguín suggests, partly this is because the

order that is fictionally created needs to be maintained; however, the writers and producers are also striving to create a timeless story that can be repeated. When work or politics do enter the picture, generally it is because these issues are vital to the "main" story that drives the telenovela: questions of familial and amorous relationships.

In Vivo por Elena, both Juan Alberto and Elena are deceived by their respective mates, even though their worlds are miles apart (love is the only certainty). Yet when Elena graduates from the UNAM and looks for a job where she can use her top-notch skills in psychology, it is only a matter of time before she applies for a job as institutriz for Juan Alberto's young son Juanito. Thus Elena's workplace also becomes, eventually, a house of romance, as she and Juan Alberto grow to respect and love each other.

Elena's sister, Chelo, presumably has a job as nurse when the telenovela begins. We see her leave every night in a uniform and we see her return tired in the early morning hours. However, the narrative emphasizes not her job, but her ultimate deception, because Chelo is actually working as a caberetera, unbeknownst to her family or friends.

The one person we see really working is Juan Alberto, which again emphasizes the necessity for the law and order that will keep the nation sound.

A Field of images: representing regionalism

The omnipresence of "regionalisms"--markers of the nation's individuality--reiterates the importance of subtly, but firmly, locating each telenovela within national boundaries, whether geographic or moral. Part of what I have already delineated as "national" is somewhat tenuously connected to mass national identity: the types of narratives most often used, the quality of the melodrama. We can add to this list other distinguishing characteristics between Latin American telenovelas: the number of episodes produced in a week, the degree of technical virtuosity, the production values. Annamaria Fadul is one of the few scholars to go beyond these characteristics associated mainly with production to an investigation of the "prácticas culturales" that contribute towards a "lenguaje de ficción que permite canalizar valores típicamente nacionales" (140).

While Fadul's work on the Brazilian national image of women is not entirely convincing because of its great generality, she points out several major areas of nation-construction: the presence of the Catholic religion, and a specifically Brazilian Church; the use of several smaller cities and rural areas as locales, thus emphasizing the importance of every area of the nation; the appearance of ethnic histories, such as of Italians, Africans, and Arabs and their incorporation into the national imaginary; the emphasis on Brazilian music such as samba or on Brazilian pastimes such as soccer.

We can trace the majority of these categories in Mexican telenovelas as well. While La dueña presented the rancho as a

quintessential Mexican space, one of Marimar's main characters was a jugador de futbol on a Mexican team. Almost every telenovela that I have watched integrates contemporary Mexican pop singers either as actors (Marimar again) or for the theme song; most telenovelas also use a great deal of classic Mexican music: mariachi, rancheras, boleros. Vivo por Elena, from the first chapter, used mariachi music in the barrio scenes to indicate the lower classes' closeness to "ideal" Mexican character--Luis Pablo, one of the major characters, is a musician attempting to achieve success with Mariachi music. Of course, mariachi music also presents the viewer with images of Mexicanness that remind one of old 40s and 50s movies that have come to "mean" Mexico. Religion also plays an important part in most Mexican telenovelas, so that Mazzioti writes that she has been told that in most of them "debería figurar, como actriz invitada, la Virgen de Guadalupe" (1996,50).

The one area that Mexico has not excelled in--as opposed to Brazil--is a presentation of ethnic or racial diversity and their meaning to the nation. The underlying message would seem to be a desire to assume a mestizo nation, with no diversity that in any way threatens the unity of Mexico.

"Mujeres y telenovelas": the nation strikes again

Many critics write about the role of women in telenovelas and the feminine nature of the genre, both because of its assumed largely female audience and because of its perceived "feminine" narrative that rarely closes. Fem published a special issue

(17.30 [1993]) in which several television writers, actresses, and theorists elaborated on the questions of whether women were portrayed realistically, whether audiences are "sumisas or críticas," and whether telenovelas are good television for women. Some U.S. critics have focused on seeing the soap opera as a space for a specifically feminine voice and structure (Nochimson).

Some of these questions will not be considered in this paper. However, in order to make my points, I feel it is necessary to demystify some of the misconceptions underlying others of those questions. First, most studies of the Latin American telenovela prove conclusively that the público is extremely diverse; collective viewing or discussion is common; families watch novelas together.⁶ Second, while novelas may offer a space for a feminine subjectivity and desire to come into being, Hayward proves conclusively that soap operas' structure "reflects the material conditions of generic development," not the wishes of a specific gendered audience.

A recent example of scholarship that posits the telenovela as a feminine space is Cynthia Duncan's recent article in Chasqui, in which she argues that the many feminist writers (such as Elena Poniatowska) who refuse to see telenovelas as anything other than tools for capitalism and gender oppression are underestimating the telenovela. Her piece focuses on the idea (from Tania Modleski) that soap operas are a "feminine" narrative

⁶ See Bustos-Romero, Fadul Gutiérrez et. al., Lozano Mascarúa, and Uribe Alvarado.

in that--according to Modleski--they privilege female voices and ways of seeing and refuse closure and instead celebrated multivoiced stories. Duncan's position rests to a large degree on two novelas that have, according to her, broken down conventions: Dos mujeres, un camino and Corazón salvaje. Each of these readings depends on an optimistic extratextual interpretation: in the case of Corazón salvaje, Duncan asserts that viewers will associate Sofía (the widow who "has become a scheming, calculating, manipulative person") with Mónica, the young bride of Sofía's illegitimate son, Juan and thus see Mónica's happiness in marriage and love as potentially elusive and short-lived. However, I would argue that, as Duncan admits, while Sofía is not "evil by nature," her rejection of a long suffering and modest feminine role can only lead to despair, madness, and soap punishment. Meanwhile, Mónica offers the viewer the hope of the woman who will stick to her place, have children and be the true, Mexican mother: as close to Guadalupe as possible. Duncan's argument does not hold, given, as I have contended, the relatively "closed" nature of the Mexican telenovela.

La dueña and Vivo por Elena demonstrate clearly the most salient aspects of telenovela women: that they come in two varieties, bad and good.⁷ La dueña's Regina was initially portrayed as somewhat cold (because she had been hurt in love); her subsequent unapproachability meant that her virtue remained

⁷ See Bracho for an elaboration of and complicating of this mold.

unassailed until her wedding to José María. Laura, her cousin, on the other hand, slept with several men throughout the several month narrative. Sex was openly avowed as her tool for manipulating men and achieving what she wanted: humiliation for Regina. In this dyad, competition between the women (perceived only by Laura) leads to the desire for men, not vice versa.⁸ By the end of the story, Laura is thoroughly scripted as the "otra" or "mala." Finally she commits suicide when her plans fail. In a melodramatic presentation of these characters, it is difficult not to see an epic battle between the Mexican Malinche and the Virgen de Guadalupe. Sex leads inevitably to downfall, the chingada can never regain her purity and respect from her peers.

Vivo por Elena presents a variation on this theme. Elena, the protagonist, is, at the beginning of the telenovela, raped by Ernesto, the half brother of el juez Juan Alberto. Even though the sex was entirely nonconsensual--Ernesto drugged her drink and she woke up naked and deflowered--Elena worries that Juan Alberto will think her less pure and worthy if he finds out; after all, when he first falls in love he describes her as a woman with a "rostro fresco, natural...una expresión limpia, ingenua te diría." For the longest time, she even keeps the secret from her sister, because she truly believes that now her hopes for the future (getting out of the barrio, getting married, etc.) are all for naught. Immediately after the event she says to Ernesto: "me quitaste lo único que tenía--mi decencia." Chelo presents

⁸ As Lozano Mascarúa observes, "las alianzas entre mujeres son más bien difíciles, endebles en este mundo de ficción" (41).

another case. In order to raise Elena and Talita, pay for their schooling, etc., she has been pretending to be a night shift nurse when--in reality--she has been working as a caberetera. This masquerade is undone when one of the very wealthy patrons of the club sues her (unjustly) and her case comes up before el juez Juan Alberto. El juez, when Elena (whom he now loves) informs him that said accused woman is her sister, is shocked and angry. Chelo's "badness" --"las mujeres que trabajan en ese sitio beben, fuman! No me diga que su hermana nunca hizo nada así"--rubs off onto Elena, so that he exclaims: "odio las mentiras, odio que me engañan." Later he says to himself: "todas [las mujeres] son iguales, falsas." In these words and this attitude lies the essential Malinche / Virgen dichotomy: the idea that women all have the potential to betray their men, sexually, verbally, morally, by not living up to the mother / virgin image that is constantly held up as ideal, as, for instance, when el juez Juan Alberto watches Elena play with and take care of Juanito, his son. In those moments, she is the virginal mother, loving and understanding without ever having given birth.

In these conservative portrayals of feminine good and "evil" we can thus glimpse the palimpsest of nation-identity creation, explained so well by Sandra Cypess Messinger: "One method of accentuating national identity despite a shared language and literary history is to formulate divergent perspectives that stress "difference" In Mexico, the way of showing that difference in perspective was to begin with the conquest" (41). The conquest and its immediate aftermath offered up two feminine

figures: La Malinche, she who would be the scapegoat for the fall of indigenous Mexico and the Virgen de Guadalupe, who symbolized "a new nationalism founded on [the criollo's mixed] racial heritage" (Franco xviii). Both of these figures, of course, emphasize women's status as territory, fought over and defined by what they are able to produce or reproduce for the Mexican nation.

The telenovela Vivo por Elena demonstrates the primacy of the Virgin figure, her desirability and her idealization as the perfect Mexican woman. The title itself indicates what will become obvious as the story precedes; Elena is or becomes the desired object of several men: Luis Pablo, the güero, Ernesto, Juan Alberto. In contrast, Silvia, Rebeca, and even Chelo are somewhat tainted by the reality of or the insinuation of unfeminine ambitions, whether sexual, financial, or moral.

Developed nations

In conclusion, the very closed structure (tidiness) and melodramatic bent (focus on emotion and family) of the Mexican telenovela combine to create an ideal space in which nation, nationalism, and the ideal citizen are constructed and disseminated. Within the production of national identities, gendered identities are resolved and cemented in traditional and conservative molds. However, it will be impossible to revise gender roles without recognizing the underlying force that creates the Nation and always constructs these antiquated gender roles in the service of that goal.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. London: Verso, 1991.
- Bracho, Diana. "La buena-buena y la mala-mala." Fem 17.130 (1993): 16-17.
- Bustos Romero, Olga. "Mujeres y telenovelas: audiencia cautiva: ¿sumisa o crítica?" Fem 17.130 (1993): 20-21.
- Bustos-Romero, Olga L. "Gender and Mass Fiction in México: The Receptors of Soap Operas." Serial Fiction in TV: the Latin American Telenovelas. Ed. Anamaria Fadul. São Paulo: U. de São Paulo, 1993. 123-34.
- Cypess, Sandra Messinger. La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1991.
- Duncan, Cynthia. "Looking Like a Woman: Some Reflections on the Hispanic Soap Opera and the Pleasures of Female Spectatorship." Chasqui 24.2 (1995): 82-92.
- Fadul, Anamaria. "La telenovela brasileña y la búsqueda de las identidades nacionales." In Mazzioti 1993. 133-52.
- Fadul Gutiérrez, Ligia María, et al. "Mirada de mujer." Nexos 20.239 (1997): 98-99.
- Franco, Jean. Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico. NY: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Hayward, Jennifer. Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera. Lexington, KY: UP Kentucky, 1997.
- List, Christine. Chicano Images: Refiguring Ethnicity in Mainstream Film. NY: Garland, 1996.

- Lopez, Ana. "The Melodrama in Latin America: films, Telenovelas and the Currency of a Popular Form." Wide Angle 7.3 (1985): 4-13.
- Lozano Macarúa, Alicia. "Telenovelas: Lo femenino como espectáculo cotidiano." Fem 13.78 (1989): 39-41.
- Mazzioti, Nora, ed. El espectáculo de la pasión: las telenovelas latinoamericanas. Buenos Aires: Ed. Colihue, 1993.
- Mazzioti, Nora. La industria de la telenovela: la producción de ficción en América latina. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1996.
- Mistrion, Deborah E. "A Hybrid Subgenre: The Revolutionary Melodrama in the Mexican Cinema." Studies in Latin American Popular Culture 3 (1984): 47-56.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Melodrama In and Out of the Home." High Theory / Low culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film. Ed. Colin MacCabe. NY: St. Martin's Press, 1986. 80-100.
- Mumford, Laura Stempel. Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.
- Nochimson, Martha. No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.
- Olguín, Palmira. "Las reglas del juego: moralidad y moraleja en la telenovela." Fem 17.130 (1993): 22-23.
- Smith, James L. Melodrama. London: Methuen & Co, 1973.
- Torres Aguilera, Francisco Javier. Telenovelas, televisión y comunicación. México, D.F.: Ed. Coyoacán, 1994.
- Uribe Alvarado, Ana B. "La telenovela en la vida familiar cotidiana en México." Serial Fiction in TV: the Latin

American Telenovelas. Ed. Anamaria Fadul. São Paulo: U. de
São Paulo, 1993. 103-122.

Vivas, Fernando. "Telenovelas: Las nuestras y las mexicanas."
Debate 18.90 (1996): 42-44.

Zarattini, María. "Las telenovelas y la imagen de la mujer."
Fem 17.130 (1993): 18-19.