

## Witches and reproductive solidarity in Mexican history and literature. The case of Fernanda Melchor's genderfluid bruja in "Temporada de huracanes"

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**Abstract:** Starting from the premise that the persecution of witches in its global dimension played a considerable role in the historical binarization and hierarchization of gender, in the establishment of gender roles, and the development of reproductive (in)justice, the article explores to what extent the represented fluidity of the witch in Fernanda Melchor's novel "Temporada de huracanes" (Mexico, 2017) makes this process reconstructible and, at the same time, deconstructs it. With reference to historical evidence of witch-persecution in the Spanish colonial empire, the article examines the literary procedures of representing the gender fluidity of the figure of Melchor's witch in connection with their reproductive activities. The investigation of this connection harbors emancipatory potential for anti-essentialist approaches to questions of reproductive justice beyond literary criticism.

**Keywords:** Colonialism; Literature; Mexico; Reproduction; Witch

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# Witches and reproductive solidarity in Mexican history and literature. The case of Fernanda Melchor's genderfluid bruja in "Temporada de huracanes"

## Introduction

From the (auto-)fictions of the witches persecuted by the Inquisition in New Spain to the witch in Fernanda Melchor's "Temporada de huracanes", a novel published in the 21st century, Latin American witches have been (self-)represented as fluid and dynamic beings who provided various services to the community. However, it was and continues to be, among other things, this fluidity, branded as dangerous, associated with pre-Hispanic, indigenous and syncretic customs, that led both the factual and fictional perpetrators in stories, legends and novels to persecute, mistreat and kill witches. The close connection between colonial witch persecution in the Americas and the containment of the reproductive power of supposed witches up to the present day can be exemplified by contemporary literary figures who are subject to additional stigmatization from an intersectional perspective: The fluidity of many Latin American witches in folkloric legends, fairy tales and stories is taken up in contemporary literary works and reconfigured from the perspective of a time in which new practices, concepts and identifications around gender allow for a differentiated, complex, ambivalent and at times dialectical dimension of literary representation.

This paper contributes a Mexico-centered analysis connecting archival histories (New Spain) to contemporary literary representation of reproductive solidarity and vulnerability in Veracruz. One prime example among many is the award-winning novel *Temporada de huracanes* (2017) by Veracruz author Fernanda Melchor, which has been translated into numerous languages and gained international recognition. The novel revisits colonial witchcraft discourse to expose the colonality of gender (Lugones 2008) and its reproductive governance, while staging gender fluidity as a counter-discourse. In the novel, the witch we only get to know as "La Bruja" (the witch), is a multifaceted character that holds both significant influence within the community but is at the same time positioned at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities, and is, therefore, ultimately killed. La Bruja's gender affiliation is marked on the one side by their own non-verbal expressions and on the other side, more decisively, by the manifold ways in which

the other characters address the witch's gender. Referencing historical traces of witch persecution and their reproductive dimension in the Spanish viceroyalty New Spain, today's Mexico, the article examines the literary procedures of representing the gender fluidity of la Bruja in connection with their reproductive services to the community of mostly girls and young female sex workers. The aim is to show the extent to which this form of depiction counters the blatant reproductive injustice that is still manifest in the region today with a possible literary discourse formation that brings together gender fluidity, reproductive activities and solidarity in the face of omnipresent violence.

To do so, I situate the Mexico-specific colonial context by distinguishing diocesan tribunals from the Holy Office in New Spain and clarifying the categories through which witchcraft and sorcery were investigated and sanctioned. Second, I outline how reproductive practices as midwifery, contraception, abortifacients and their criminalization were historically governed, and how these histories inform witch discourse and community rumor. Third, I develop the theoretical framework for gender fluidity and colonial governance of bodies by drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands/new mestiza consciousness and María Lugones's coloniality of gender, linking race, gender, and reproductive regulation. Although Gloria Anzaldúa grounds her theorizing in the borderlands of the United States and Mexico, her concepts travel as decolonial analytics of contradiction, vulnerability, and embodied knowledge: I adopt them to read the novel's setting as an 'internal borderlands' where colonial genealogies and contemporary regimes of violence and reproductive governance converge. Fourth, I offer close readings of "Temporada de huracanes" that explicitly revisit the historical points: the clandestine pharmakon and hospital criminalization; morphosyntactic gender variation in adjectives, articles and pronouns in insults. I address orality, focalization, and punctuation as formal markers of fluid belonging and social violence. Finally, I discuss the implications for reproductive justice in contemporary Mexico, considering persistent precarity, and propose how the novel's staging of reproductive solidarity articulates an anti-essentialist critique with practical relevance beyond literary studies. This way, the article stages a dialogue between Mexico-centered historical archives, narratological close reading of "Temporada de huracanes" , and gender/postcolonial theory – drawing on María Lugones and Gloria Anzaldúa – to trace continuities in the governance of reproduction and the representation of fluid embodiment.

## Institutionalized persecution of witches in New Spain

The Spanish Inquisition, which was active on three continents from 1478 to 1834, began as an offshoot of a long series of ecclesiastical tribunals that the papacy had already created in the 12th century to eradicate heresy. In New Spain, ecclesiastical authorities addressed cases of *superstición*, *brujería* and *hechicería*<sup>1</sup> from the early sixteenth century in diocesan tribunals, while the Holy Office (*Tribunal del Santo Oficio*) was established in Mexico City only in 1571–1572.<sup>2</sup> In the Spanish colonial empires, the procedures of the Inquisition were essentially the same as on the peninsula. However, the demographic situation was quite different. The majority of the population, around 80%, remained untouched by the tribunals, at least initially. Due to the exclusion of the indigenous population from the colonial inquisition tribunals, these only functioned for, against and on behalf of around 20% of the population in the Spanish viceroyalties (Alberro 2015). To counteract this, the tribunals began to persecute “mestizo” people – a colonial term used to describe descendants of European and indigenous populations – because it was enough to have a single “non-indigenous” person as a close relative to pass as “mestizo” and not as “indigenous” (Torres Puga 2019, 131–138). This persecution of indigenous people ‘through the back door’ sometimes took the form of accusations of superstition, witchcraft and sorcery, with regional modifications that referred to pre-Hispanic or syncretic forms of witchcraft that contained elements of both Christian and indigenous religions (see, for example, AGN Fondo Inquisición, Vol. 35–41), not only in the first decades of colonization before the official tribunal was installed and the persecution of

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1 In archival descriptions and even within case files, *hechicería* (sorcery) and *brujería* (witchcraft) are often used synonymously or side by side, especially in the years before the official implementation of the tribunal of the Holy Office in Mexico City. In the official inquisitorial taxonomy, however, they were distinct. *Hechicería* was typically treated as superstition arising from ignorance of Christian doctrine and practice, and punished accordingly; *brujería*, by contrast, was construed as a grave form of heresy insofar as it implied an explicit or implicit pact with the Devil, and thus carried more severe penalties (Trejo Rivera 2000, 292). Interestingly enough, Melchor’s Bruja in “Temporada de huracanes” is sometimes called la Bruja and sometimes described as *hechicera* by the other fictional characters.

2 To avoid anachronism while reflecting archival and historiographic practice, I use “Inquisition” in a capacious sense for ecclesiastical prosecution of causes of faith in New Spain, distinguishing between diocesan or apostolic inquisitions before 1571 and the Tribunal del Santo Oficio thereafter. In the early decades, inquisitors acting under papal faculties investigated *idolatría*, *superstición*, *hechicería*, *brujería* and related offenses among baptized indigenous populations; after the formal establishment of the Holy Office in Mexico City, cases involving indigenous community members were commonly remitted to diocesan forums, though this did not imply exemption from ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Both the Archivo General de la Nación cataloging (Fondo Inquisición) and scholarship treat pre-1571 proceedings alongside later Holy Office records, underscoring continuity in the policing of faith across institutional forums. Accordingly, I specify the forum (diocesan/apostolic versus Holy Office) when relevant while retaining “Inquisition” as an umbrella for this continuum (Greenleaf 1969; Traslosheros 2004; Chuchiak 2012; Torres Puga 2019; Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Inquisición)

indigenous people was more common. The Holy Office's jurisdiction and priorities differed from those of diocesan courts; *brujería* and *hechicería* were often subsumed under superstition or illicit healing or magic rather than prosecuted as organized "witch hunts." While there is no evidence of "witches" executed by the Holy Office in the viceroyalties, sanctions typically took the form of penance, physical punishment, public humiliation, fines, admonition, or forced exile. Therefore, the cultural-historical impact of ecclesiastical prosecutions is nevertheless substantial, as they systematically targeted and disciplined rebellious female and, at times, gender-nonconforming bodies – especially in relation to healing and reproductive care.

Once officially installed in New Spain, the Holy Office was not supposed to target indigenous people directly, while earlier and local ecclesiastical authorities did so with authority. In both cases, however, indigenous practices were being policed through idolatry and campaigns to limit and oppress pre-Hispanic knowledge (Tavárez 2011; Torres Puga 2019).

The persecution of witches on the European continent has been well researched and documented. This applies to a lesser extent to the phenomenon in the Spanish viceroyalties. Although the persecution there was less intense, it took on a different quality due to the specific characteristics of the autochthonous and African origins of many of the accused. Last but not least, the persecution of alleged witches was also a deliberate strategy in the colonial empires to break collective resistance and silence communities (Federici 2021, 270). This is all the more true with respect to reproductive issues: Witches were often feared and persecuted by the Inquisition as specialists in the area, and most of them were of indigenous, African or "mestizo" heritage<sup>3</sup> and possessed knowledge that was mistrusted by the representatives of the Christian dogma.

## Reproductive practices and witchcraft imaginaries in New Spain and contemporary Mexico

The history of the institutionalized persecution of witches in relation to the Inquisition, also in the Spanish viceroyalties, is crucial to understanding the connection between the persecution of women and non-heteronormative persons – in this case supposed witches who, whether allegedly or actually, both served as midwives who accompanied pregnancies and births and performed abortions – and reproductive justice. Silvia Federici states that the connection between

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3 A review of Mexico's Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) thousands of digital files suggests that around one sixth of all archived sources in their Inquisition collection relate to suspected cases of magic, superstition, sorcery and witchcraft. See file descriptions at <https://repositorio.agn.gob.mx/arbol>.

supposed witchcraft, contraception and abortion was first established by pope Innocent VIII, who with his famous papal bull of 1484 provided official legitimation for the consecutive witch hunts and from that moment on alleged “reproductive crimes featured prominently in the trials” (Federici 2021, 197). Whether or not claims were true in each case, witchcraft is, historically and to this day and especially in Latin America, associated with reproductive services – both by the people who perform or benefit from them and by the ones aiming to prevent them or reduce them to practices with the only aim of procreation (Ortiz/Ortiz Coss 2021; Bustamante 2023; Quezada 2000).

In the case of New Spain, the Inquisition records in the Mexican National Archive contain numerous cases of alleged witches who were persecuted because of their activities as midwives (Ortiz/Ortiz Coss 2021). The earliest registered case of a *partera* (midwife) persecuted by the colonial diocesan courts dates back to the year 1536 (AGN, Fondo Inquisición Vol. 38/2), years before the most intense phase of witch persecution in the Spanish colonial world in the 1550s and 1560s (AGN, Fondo Inquisición Vol. 38/10–41/2). The convicted *parteras* were, as was the case in most of the inquisitorial processes, enslaved women of African or indigenous heritage. This is not surprising in two respects: on the one hand, this particular group of people was preferentially persecuted by the Inquisition for witchcraft and sorcery; on the other hand, it actually *was* predominantly women of these origins who practiced as midwives, which was a profession markedly different from the other medical ones that Christian dogma sought to implement in the new kingdom (Quezada 2000, 23). It was also a profession that entailed abortion services to people, as providing abortifacients was prohibited to physicians in the Catholic doctrine, and those services were punished to an extent where midwives were attributed diabolical intentions, making them one of the number one targets of the Inquisitions (Ortiz/Ortiz Coss 2021). As Nora Jaffary has demonstrated, patterns of suspicion, surveillance, and prosecution of midwives persisted beyond the colonial period, with nineteenth-century medicalization and penal reforms recoding earlier ecclesiastical concerns (Jaffary 2016).

## **Fluidity, borderlands subjectivity, and (post)colonial imaginaries in Mexico**

Not only were alleged witches often accused of transforming themselves into animals – harpies, snakes, toads, cats, spiders, crows, owls, goats, pigeons (for example cases archived in AGN Fondo Inquisición Vol. 1299, exp. 18; Vol. 360,

exp. 35; Vol. 482, exp. 3) – and accusations disproportionately often concerned the economically disadvantaged trying to invoke forces of nature (Federici 2021, 188), they were also sometimes portrayed as people with the ability to change their gender. In many of the tales and legends passed over centuries in Mexico and all of Mesoamerica, witches appear as people who nowadays would be assigned to the queer, non-binary or gender fluid spectrum (for example the stories collected in Robe 1970 or Morábito 2014). As persons with a lot of reproductive power and with the ability to end pregnancies, witches were rapidly associated with non-reproductive sexuality and were themselves confined to the spheres of non-compliant sexualities dissident from the Catholic dogma and ascribed gender identities far off from the norm (Joyce 2021).

To frame fluidity within a Mexico-centered historical matrix, I draw on María Lugones's concept of the "coloniality of gender," which identifies the colonial/modern gender system as an axis of the broader "coloniality of power", following and complicating Aníbal Quijano's writings on the topic. In Lugones's account, the invention of "race" reorganized domination by naturalizing hierarchy through a biological fiction, while coloniality permeated all domains of social existence: control of sex and sexual access, collective authority, labor, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and the production of knowledge, producing new geocultural and racial identities ("Europe," "América," "indio," "africano"). Accepting the axial logic that shows gender as constituted by and constituting coloniality, Lugones critiques hyper-biologized treatments of gender that presuppose sexual dimorphism, heterosexual normativity, and patriarchal distribution of power. Instead, she insists that race and gender are indissolubly fused, or else "woman" remains a racially normative category that renders women of color invisible (Lugones 2007; Quijano 2000). In order to situate fluidity within a decolonial, Mexico-centered framework, I draw on Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands/new mestiza consciousness. Melchor's Bruja's oscillation between identities and roles (woman/man, *curandera/hechicera/bruja*, caregiver/outcast) embodies, as I will demonstrate later on, what Anzaldúa would later call *nepantla*, an in-between state in which contradiction and transformation coexist, and where survival requires constant crossing and translation (Anzaldúa 1987). *Nepantla* is the Nahuatl term for being "in the middle of" (Troncoso Pérez 2011), providing a useful lens for the fluid movements of what I call 'witchly corporeality'. *Nepantla*, as an analytical category developed by Anzaldúa, forms part of her later works:<sup>4</sup>

"I find people using metaphors such as 'Borderlands' in a more limited sense than I had meant it, so to expand on the psychic and emotional

4 For a detailed analysis of the shift in Anzaldúan thinking from borderland to *nepantla*, see Wrobel 2025, Koegeler-Abdi 2013.

borderlands I'm now using 'nepantla.' With nepantla the connection to the spirit world is more pronounced as is the connection to the world after death, to psychic spaces. It has more spiritual, psychic, supernatural, and indigenous resonance." (cited in Keating 2015, xxxiv)

In fact, most of Anzaldúa's metaphors can be applied to this kind of witchly corporeality. For example, *la facultad*, a metaphor introduced by Anzaldúa already in her early works: the heightened perception cultivated through risk and marginalization (Anzaldúa 1987, 38–39), serves to illuminate clandestine reproductive care and adaptive solidarity under conditions of social hostility. Anzaldúa defines *la facultad* as the "capacity for shape-changing and shape-shifting of identity" (cited in Keating 2015, xv).

Read alongside María Lugones's account of the colonality of gender, the Anzaldúan lens clarifies why fluid embodiment becomes at once necessary and punishable within racialized regimes of knowledge and power. While Anzaldúa's work is anchored in the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, it has a strong subjective, bodily implication and its epistemic and ethical insights are pertinent to Veracruz's 'internal borderlands,' where port geographies, narco-economies, and feminicidal violence produce layered thresholds of belonging and exclusion (von Ohlen 2024, 204–207).

This framework clarifies why colonial witchcraft discourses in New Spain policed *curanderismo/hechicería* and *brujería* differentially and helps explain how contemporary imaginaries mark la Bruja's fluid embodiment and reproductive care as simultaneously necessary and punishable. S. Jonathon O'Donnell even argues that "witchcraft exceeds and extends between bodies – human and demon alike – binding them into transcorporeal relations of copresence, enfolding them into and as queer networks of power that resist and disrupt the expropriations of orthotaxy and the heliopolitics of its worlding" (O'Donnell 2020, 65). Already in the Early Modern era, gender fluidity was something that seemed to combine well with their transformative powers regarding animals – both in the logic of the inquisitors as in the self-identification of many of the persecuted. This way the persecution of witches also implied the persecution of diverse sexual practices and gender identities (Federici 2021, 217), which, in turn, implied the suppression of non-reproductive sexuality. This applies all the more to the colonial inquisition courts, which were in general more interested in curbing witchcraft and sorcery than their peninsular counterparts.

The historical relationship between reproductive practices and witchcraft in Latin America and especially Mexico continues to this day. The legalization and decriminalization of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy and sexual and reproductive health in general are among the main current demands of the

(queer)feminist struggles throughout the continent. At the time of the novel's publication and early reception, elective abortion was decriminalized only in Mexico City (since 2007) and, from September 2019, Oaxaca. Veracruz reformed its Penal Code in July 2021 to allow voluntary termination up to 12 weeks. In September 2023, the Supreme Court declared the Federal Penal Code provisions criminalizing abortion unconstitutional, obliging federal health institutions to provide abortion care while states align their laws (Congreso del Estado de Oaxaca 2024).

## Fernanda Melchor's genderfluid Bruja in "Temporada de huracanes"

A literary figure that unites all the aspects discussed is the witch in Fernanda Melchor's "Temporada de huracanes". The novel can be understood as a literary treatment of structural gender-specific violence in contemporary Veracruz that interweaves a fictionalization of misogyny, queer- and transphobia with specifically configured modern variants of witch persecution, deeply inscribed in the social and state structures. Melchor decided to take the path of fiction in order to rewrite a newspaper article that she had previously come across in the 'crime' section of the tabloid press – known in Mexico as *nota roja* – which stated that "the sorcerer" of a village in the state of Veracruz had been found murdered and that a young man, allegedly his lover, had killed him because the sorcerer had cursed him in revenge after an argument. Melchor was particularly impressed by the way in which the author of the article presented this as fact. In order to be able to address homophobia and transphobia as well as misogyny and violence against women, she transformed the *brujo* from the *Nota Roja* into a *bruja* in her novel. She created a character who is also repeatedly read as a homosexual man by various characters in the novel. In "Temporada de huracanes", the witch thus functions as a fluid personality who defies heteronormative notions of gender and onto whom the hatred, fears and despair of the men in the fictional village of La Matosa are projected (von Ohlen 2024, 194, 197). In relation to this, in an interview with the author, Melchor stated:

"The question of the witch has a lot to do with Mesoamerican cultures, with indigenous religions, and that's the difference: when you say 'witch' in Germany, you think of the burning of witches and you think of the witch in Hansel and Gretel, you think of something very specific. In Mexico, a witch can be a woman who is very evil and very bad, or a person who knows how to heal with herbs, or a woman who knows how to read cards, so the term is a bit broader. And there is something special about

Latin American witches: They change gender. Latin American witches are sometimes men and sometimes women. So I said to myself: that's the answer. I have to play with this character. At first it seems to be a relationship between an older woman and a young man, but then you realize that it could also be the relationship between an older man and a young man. So I could talk about both feminicide and homophobia." (Melchor 2019, cited in von Ohlen 2024, 198, my own translation)

The plot of the novel centers on the murder of the main character, who is only introduced under the name la Bruja. In La Matosa, a fictional village in the Mexican state of Veracruz that connects Mexico City with the port city of Veracruz, the fragmentary story of a (trans)feminicide unfolds, depicted from different perspectives, which shakes the community to its core and provides an opportunity for the collective to address other experiences of violence in the village. The different versions of the crime are presented in individual chapters by the characters Yesenia, the perpetrator's cousin and witness to the crime, Munra, the perpetrator's stepfather and also a witness, and the accomplice Brando. The main perpetrator, Luisimi, does not have his "own" chapter, and neither does his victim, la Bruja. There is also a separate chapter dedicated to Norma, who is only thirteen years old, although it does not focus on the course of the crime but on excerpts from her biography and her relationship with Luisimi.<sup>5</sup> The Norma chapter is central to the research issue at hand in that it contains the most meaningful fragments of la Bruja's solidarity and struggle for reproductive justice.

As a gender-fluid person, the witch has a complex relationship with the other villagers. The witch is met with hatred and aversion, as well as fear and respect for their attitude and their (reproductive) magical powers. Not only can the witch perform abortions, but their own existence is the result of a gang rape (or a pact with the devil made by their own mother, as rumored by the village community); their mother, also a witch, reproaches them for even existing ("debí matarte cuando naciste, debí tirarte al fondo del río" (Melchor 2017, 33) ["should've drowned you at birth, should've thrown you to the bottom of the river" (Melchor/Hughes 2020, 27pp.]]).

The witch seems to absorb the search for a form of belonging within the realms of their own transformative powers. Depending on the situation, they perform as a gay man willing to pay for sexual activities ("cuando el chisme de que la Bruja pagaba llegó hasta Villa y el resto de las rancherías de ese lado del río aquello se volvió una procesión, un peregrinar continuo de muchachos y hom-

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5 In my monograph on feminicide in law and literature I offer a more detailed analysis of the entire novel through the lens of literary polyphony, which in this case enables the described effect of fluid and diverse external attribution through a variety of voices (von Ohlen 2024).

bres ya hechos que se peleaban por entrar primero" (Melchor 2017, 29) ["and once word that the Witch paid for it reached Villa and the rest of the ranches on that side of the river, it turned into quite the procession: a constant pilgrimage of boys and grown men would fight over who got to go in first" (Melchor/Hughes 2020, 25)] or as a loyal comadre always willing to help other women ("Fueron ellas las únicas, en suma, a las que la Bruja decidió ayudar y, cosa rara, sin cobrarles un solo peso, lo cual era bueno porque la mayor parte de las chicas de la carretera con dificultad comían una vez al día" (Melchor 2017, 31) ["Basically, those girls from the highway [...] were the only ones the Witch chose to help for free, without charging a peso, which was just as well because most of them could barely earn enough to eat once a day" (Melchor/Hughes 2020, 26)]).

Their fluidity and their decidedly non-marking as permanently trans, gay, non-binary or similar within the text, paradoxically contribute to their acceptance among the villagers – la Bruja can neither clearly formulate their gender identity in their own words (there is only one dialogue containing la Bruja's direct speech), nor is an attribution made by the other characters that could be described as entirely accurate. These ambivalences, which on the one hand are the source of the suppression of the free development of their gender identity, on the other hand allow them to adapt to the different scenarios of violence and to act according to the situation. This applies in particular to one of la Bruja's main activities: abortions.

The witch, who breaks out of the heteronormative order by not fitting into binary gender concepts, is throughout the novel characterized by variations in grammatical gender – sometimes by the same character and even in one and the same sentence. This seemingly random variation reaches a pinnacle in a description of the crime by one of the perpetrators, Brando. In his declaration, Brando, who is attracted to his friend Luismi himself and feels non-heteronormative desire, is at the same time trapped in his own homophobia:

"[...] pinche culero exagerado, si nomás fue un choto el que mataron; tampoco era como que Brando se dedicaba a eso, y además, la neta, al chile que la Bruja se lo merecía; por choto, por feo, por culero y por manchado. Nadie iba a extrañar ese pinche maricón de mierda; Brando ni siquiera estaba arrepentido de lo que había pasado. ¿Por qué habría de estarlo? En primer lugar, él ni siquiera le enterró el cuchillo; nomás le pegó unos vergazos para que se ablandara, ¿no?, cuando recién entraron en la casa, y luego después, cuando la subieron a la camioneta del Munra. Pero el que la mató fue Luismi; la culpa de todo era de Luismi; él fue quien le enterró el cuchillo en el cuello, le dijo a Rigorito. Brando

nomás al final lo agarró del mango y lo tiró al canal.” (Melchor 2017, 157pp.)

“[...] the fucking drama queen; it was only one fag they’d stabbed, it wasn’t like that was what Brando did for a hobby, and besides, the Witch deserved it: for being a dirty fag, for being a cunt and a bully. No one was going to miss that cocksucking witch, Brando didn’t even regret what had happened. Why should he? First, he didn’t even plunge the knife in, he just knocked her around a bit, softened her up, right? When they first got into the house, and then later, in the back of Munra’s van. But Luisimi was the one who killed her; it was all Luisimi’s fault; he was the one who stabbed her in the throat, he told Rigorito. Brando only grabbed the knife by the handle at the end and threw it in the canal.” (Melchor/Hughes 2020, 140pp.)

At this point, the specificity of Spanish grammatical gender constructions is lost in translation, it is however central to the argument: Brando at times uses masculine adjective endings (*choto, feo, culero, manchado*) for the defamation of the witch, sometimes feminine attributions (*la Bruja, cuando la subieron*). This linguistic reality shows the extent to which even those characters who persist in binary notions of gender have simultaneously internalized the fluidity of *la Bruja*, which is indicative of the fact that the novel offers no simple solutions (von Ohlen, 2024, 266).

## La Bruja’s reproductive solidarity

This is illustrated in particular by the relationship between *la Bruja* and the pregnant teenager Norma: *la Bruja* helps Norma to end her unwanted pregnancy, which can be traced back to stepfatherly abuse. The two characters share a short key scene in which the main character’s solidarity with the girl is expressed through their free-of-charge assistance. Beyond that, the witch presents as benevolent towards any person seeking their assistance as long as they present as honest and as marginalized and vulnerable as themselves. The fact that this positive quality of the witch can be expressed at all is a narrative masterstroke, as the verbal characterization of the witch by the other characters is negative to the point of contemptuous and hateful throughout the novel. The fact that the main character is nevertheless perceived as positive is due to the formal design of central passages, all of which contain the constellation of fluidity, reproductive rights and solidarity.

In Norma's chapter, a heterodiegetic narrator employs sustained free indirect discourse with internal focalization through Norma, allowing la Bruja's only direct speech to rupture the otherwise mediated diegesis. The Spanish text's morphosyntactic gender markers (for example, alternating masculine and feminine adjectives and articles) operate as formal signals of fluid identity and contested recognition. La Bruja's empathetic solidarity with the 13-year-old Norma is highlighted both on the formal level – there is even an excess in punctuation including a series of exclamation marks, a rare thing in "Temporada de huracanes" – and on the level of the *histoire*. Before assisting with the abortion, the witch needs to make sure that Norma is safe. Initially, their skepticism and reluctance are remarkable, and, as the reader learns towards the end of the chapter, somehow justified – Norma ends up in a hospital where she is subjected to even more violence and it remains unclear until the end of the novel whether she survives the intervention or not.

As Norma receives her abortifacient potion at la Bruja's house, the witch breaks the silence and through the voice of Norma's heterodiegetic narrator the reader gets to experience for the first time real words coming out of their mouth. It is no coincidence that this opens up a meta-level of the narrative: Not only do we read the witch's voice in their own words, we also perceive them auditively through Norma's narrator's description, as can be illustrated in the following key passage:

"La Bruja no había querido aceptar ningún dinero, un billete de doscientos pesos que Chabela de cualquier forma dejó sobre la mesa y que la Bruja miró con tanto asco que Norma pensó que seguramente lo quemaría en el momento en que ellas se largaran de aquella casa, lo que hicieron inmediatamente después de que la Bruja les entregara el brebaje, para gran alivio de Norma. Pero una vez afuera, cuando ya habían cogido la vereda para regresar a la casa de Chabela, escucharon que la Bruja les gritaba desde la puerta entreabierta de la cocina, con aquella extraña voz que tenía, ronca y atiplada al mismo tiempo, y Norma se volvió y se dio cuenta de que la Bruja se dirigía a ella, aunque se había vuelto a echar el velo sobre la cara: ¡Tienes que tomártela toda!, gritaba. ¡Tómatala entera y aguántate las bascas! ¡Vas a sentir que te desgarras por dentro pero aguanta ... ! ¡No tengas miedo! ¡Tú puja y puja hasta que..! ¡Y entiérralo! Chabela tiraba de su muñeca con brusquedad; le clavaba un poco las uñas. Esa pinche loca cree que soy nueva en esto, gruñía, y se hacía la que no escuchaba nada, y apretaba aún más el

paso. ¡Mejor quédate..!, suplicó por último la Bruja, pero su voz llegaba ya muy débil a esa distancia.” (Melchor 2017, 104pp.)

“The Witch hadn’t wanted any money and she looked at the two hundred pesos that Chabela put on the table with such disgust that Norma was sure she would burn it the moment they left the house, which they did immediately after the Witch handed them the potion, to Norma’s great relief. But once outside, on the dirt track that led back to Chabela’s, they heard the Witch calling after them from the kitchen door in that strange voice of hers, somehow both gruff and high-pitched at once, and Norma spun round and understood that the Witch was calling her, even though she’d already pulled her veil back down over her face: You have to drink it all! she shouted. You’ll retch but you have to drink it all! It’ll feel like your insides are being torn out, but hang in there...! Don’t be afraid! You just push and push until...! And then bury it! Chabela was pulling her by the wrist, digging her nails in ever so slightly. Does that freak think I was born yesterday? she muttered, picking up the pace and pretending not to hear the Witch’s shouts. Better still, stay here to take it...! the Witch cried in one final plea, but her voice was already faint.” (Melchor/Hughes 2019, 91pp.)

The punctuation, which is completely out of line with the rest of the novel, indicates urgency (exclamation mark!), openness (three dots...) and fragmentation (unfinished sentences) at the same time. The blank spaces that accompany the main character’s broken speech, in combination with the dialectical comments of the narrative instance in terms of gender ascriptions (“aquella extraña voz que tenía, ronca y atiplada al mismo tiempo”), refer to the reproductive injustice to which both Norma as a pregnant teenage girl and the witch as a genderfluid companion of abortion are subjected. Norma only has the choice of either carrying a child to term at just 13 years old, the product of rape by her stepfather, and raising it with a young man (Luismi) who is a drug addict and who would become the murderer of the one person who truly cares for Norma, or performing an abortion in unsanitary, unsafe and precarious conditions. The witch, in turn, has no choice at all. Their profession demands helping the indigent community and their wisdom and knowledge implies an obligation to rise above their own trauma, danger and fear of persecution. The conditions of clandestinity and socioeconomic precariousness, the use of non-conventional medical methods combined with a rural, marginal setting enhances the social sanction of being seen as a sinner and of being criminalized (Bustamante 2023, 219). This way, la Bruja inserted in their surroundings becomes a corporeal threshold: Rather

than only denoting a place at the edge of the nation (or a state, in the case of Veracruz), the borderlands in an Anzaldúan sense name an embodied condition of living across contradictions, racialized hierarchies, gender norms, classed vulnerabilities, and regimes of reproductive governance. In Veracruz's layered history of colonial extraction, migration, and contemporary violence, subjects inhabit thresholds that cut through the body: they "navigate" *nepantla* as an in-between state and cultivate *la facultad* as a somatic vigilance born of danger and necessity. Read this way, the witch-body of the novel's Bruja and their belonging in oscillation materializes the borderlands as corporeal and affective terrain, where fluid embodiment becomes both necessary for survival and a target of policing and punishment.

Viewed against the archival record, several recurrent patterns surface in Melchor's representation. First, the criminalization and clandestinity of abortion services (and the stigmatization of those who provide them) are refracted through Norma's abortifacient scene and subsequent hospital treatment as a suspect. Second, the racialized and classed targeting of healers and the moralization of reproduction reappear in la Bruja's unpaid care for marginalized girls and highway sex workers. Third, rumor and hearsay function as community policing that precipitates violence, as seen in La Matosa's speculative origin stories about la Bruja (rape or a "pact with the Devil"), echoing inquisitorial dynamics of denunciation and notoriety. Fourth, the ambiguous line between *hechicería* (often associated with alternative healing practices) and *brujería*, frequently blurred in colonial proceedings, returns in the villagers' vacillation between reading la Bruja as healer or malefactor, a slippage the text formalizes through alternating gendered address and insult in Brando's account.

The witch's desperate attempt to accompany Norma to the end of the process is thwarted by another character. Chabela, Luismi's mother, feels a bond with Norma as she reminds her of herself when she was younger. She not only warns Norma about her own son, with whom the girl has begun a relationship, but also accompanies her to the witch's house to obtain the abortifacient potion. Unlike the witch, however, Chabela is unable to determine the progress of Norma's pregnancy and underestimates the risks. Against the witch's wishes, Chabela takes Norma back home so that Norma can complete the abortion on her own. The witch's selfless offer of reproductive solidarity is not fully accepted, and Norma will pay the price. What is also striking in this passage is that the fluidity with which la Bruja is otherwise always characterized is not given any place in Chabela and Norma's narrative during the abortion, aside from the description of the voice. La Bruja is marked as female and this attribution leaves no

room for ambivalence at this point. And yet, the identification with femininity at this point speaks as a reinforcing medium of solidarity, while at other points the masculine component is given relevance or gender simply plays no role. The historical arc from ecclesiastical prosecution to nineteenth-century medicalization and penal regulation in Mexico (Jaffary 2016) clarifies how the novel's scenes of hospital criminalization and clandestine care resonate with durable structures rather than isolated episodes still valid in the 21st century.

La Bruja's murder ultimately can be interpreted as an invocation to enhance visibility for the precarity of both parties involved in these types of clandestine reproduction services, as a kind of worst-practice example incrustated in the novel's stylistic peculiarity. Its seemingly conflicting literary procedure of combining fragmentation and omission with emphasis and empathy must also be read, however, as a call for an anti-essentialist discourse that respects the multifaceted layers and ambivalence of reproductive (in)justice.

## Concluding remarks

Taken together, these close readings illuminate a structural continuity rather than isolated motifs. Read through María Lugones's coloniality of gender and Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands, the novel renders a continuity between colonial ecclesiastical classification and contemporary policing of reproductive labor. In New Spain, crude descent markers and a biologized logic of difference naturalized hierarchy as if inscribed in the body (Martínez 2008). Lugones's framework shows how these racialized classifications fused with gendered regulation to determine who could heal, reproduce, or transgress. Anzaldúa names the lived effects of such heteronomous ascription as *nepantla*, an in-between where identity is negotiated under coercive binaries. In this light, la Bruja's oscillation across gendered and caste-coded readings and the morphosyntactic slippage materialize the borderlands as a corporeal and affective terrain.

The transformative potential of the novel regarding questions of reproductive justice lies in its particular formal composition. La Bruja's unconditional solidarity for the pregnant teenager, the women in the village and the sex workers seeking help is marked through emphatic empathy that is always syntactically combined with expressions concerning their versatile belongings in terms of gender. Attributions of others are mixed with figurative representations that give non-verbal expression to the main character's gender identity. Their own internal and external fluidity seems to be a cornerstone of the possibility of

empathy with various characters that could not be more different one from the other, including their future murderer Luismi.

The pregnant women who seek their help read *la Bruja* as a trans woman and accept her as a woman, while the men, who, the more homophobic they appear, the more attracted they feel to the witch, usually read them as a gay man - another attribution that they do not actively resist. After being killed by a lover, the village collective assumes an animalistic transformation. Norma too is not only a victim of rape, but also one of the consequences of unsafe and clandestine abortion. After hemorrhaging she ends up in a hospital, being treated as a criminal. The witch, in turn, did foresee Norma's fate. The literary procedures emphasize their concerns by pointing out the relevance of the passage in a variety of ways through their formal composition. The novel, thus, should be read as a call for action in preventing unsafe reproductive conditions for people who are already vulnerable.

The connection between fluidity and witchcraft is also so strikingly close at this point because both are presented as something subtle and dynamic by their very nature. As soon as reproductive practices are also part of this dynamic, new constellations arise that also need to be examined in non-literary reality.

## Data availability statement

The research material used in this study is mainly freely available in the digital repository of Mexico's National Archive under <https://repositorio.agn.gob.mx/>. For quotations from literary works, rights are held by the publisher.

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