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“Piecing together a skeleton”: Witchcraft and the Subversive Search for Answers in Selva Almada’s *Chicas Muertas*

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Abstract

Central to *Chicas Muertas* is the figure of la Señora, a psychic (*vidente* in Argentinian Spanish) whom Almada consults during her investigation of three feminicides. La Señora frames the narrative, often offering insights into the girls — their dreams, aspirations, and feelings — as well as information that couldn’t have been inferred from the investigation.

This paper investigates the role of subjugated and subaltern practices in relation to feminicide and how these practices become an alternative for communities and identities dismissed by law enforcement. Drawing connections between Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* and the modern practice of witchcraft in central Argentina, I propose that these local practices and networks undermine the role of the police and the often dismissive or sensationalist media narratives and change how these violences and feminicides are told and resolved. I look at how Almada centers these local practices and argue that this narrative focus disrupts not only dominant sociopolitical narratives of these feminicides but also the rationality of the true crime genre. Ultimately the “irrational” figure of the *vidente* in *Chicas Muertas* becomes crucial in humanizing these violent deaths and, as la Señora says, “[gathering] the bones of these girls, [piecing] them together, [giving] them a voice and then [letting] them run, free and unfettered, wherever they have to go.”

Keywords: femicide, feminist literature, Latin American literature, restorative justice, Selva Almada

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Selva Almada's *Chicas muertas*, that is, *Dead Girls*, follows Almada's investigation into three feminicides in *la Argentina profunda* and is encapsulated by the story of la Huesera, which la Señora, a *vidente,*[1] uses to frame the investigation. La Huesera is an old woman who gathers bones — "*junta y guarda todo lo que corre el peligro de perderse* / she brings together and saves all that runs the danger of becoming lost" (50). Once the bones are gathered, she pieces them into a skeleton, a wolf, and sings flesh and skin and fur onto the bones. She brings the wolf to life, sets it free, and as it runs, as the moon touches it, the wolf turns into a woman. This, la Señora explains, is Almada's role, to gather the bones of Andrea, María Luisa and Sarita, breathe life into them, give them a voice, and set them free.

To understand both *Chicas muertas* and the context it was written in, the concept of feminicide/*feminicidio* must be defined. While it is easy to define femicide (the killing of women for being women) the word femicide and its most simple definition also reduces the violence of the act to an individual one — a homicide done by a misogynistic man. In the Editors' Introduction to *Feminicide and Global Accumulation*, feminicide, and the choice to use *feminicide* instead of the more known *femicide*, is explained as a theoretical one, a choice that frames the discussion:

> "Latin American feminist organizations and theorists have developed the concept of feminicide as it enables us to refer not only to the killing of women for being female, but to the *systematic nature* of these killings and the *complicity of the institutions of the state and capital*. It is used by women in this forum not merely as a descriptor of the multiple forms of violence that women face daily, but directly, as a political operation." (4-5, italics mine)

Marcela Lagarde, as well, in "Del femicidio al feminicidio" distinguishes *female homicide* from feminicide, specifically within the context of translating Diana Russell (217). While Russell did not achieve much success in politicizing the term femicide in the United State, both *femicidio* and *feminicidio* were adopted in mass feminist movements in Latin America and have been used to organize politically and socially against the disappearances and killing of women in those countries. The term feminicide allows for a discussion of both the invisibility and normalization of these violences as well as the organized impunity and structural barriers that prevent the resolution of these murders. As Rita Segato writes in relation to Ciudad Juarez, "*los crímenes sexuales… [son] expresiones de una estructura simbólica profunda que organiza nuestros actos y nuestras fantasías y les confiere inteligibilidad… el agresor y la colectividad comparten el imaginario de género, hablan el mismo lenguaje, pueden entenderse* / these sexual crimes.. are expressions of a profound symbolic structure that organizes our acts and our fantasies and bestows upon them intelligibility… the aggressor and society share a gender imaginary, speak the same language, and understand each other." ("La escritura en el cuerpo" 19).

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[1] That is, a seer or psychic. One can think of *videntes* as counterparts to *curanderos* — while *curanderos* often tend to physical ailments, *videntes* often deal with fate, destiny, or the dead. Both these roles seem to be popular local practices/traditions within Argentina (and more specifically in the areas bordering Uruguay).

With that definition, we jump through *un hueco negro* to the beginning of modern Europe.

It was the “unpredictability implicit in the practice of magic, and the possibility of establishing a privileged relation with the natural elements, as well as the belief in the existence of powers available only to particular individuals, and thus not easily generalize and exploitable” that was persecuted in the in the witch hunts of the 16th and 17ths centuries (Federici 174). These women — “sorcerers, healers, performers of incantations and divinations” who were powerful in their own communities — were demonized by the state, and their knowledge deemed heretical or ignorant. The state began the violent process of primitive accumulation and enclosed the land, stamping out the serf resistance when it was encountered, and in this process of uprooting and eliminating the commons, destroyed these women’s role in their communities. Women had often “initiated and led” peasant revolts, and to break this popular resistance, the state and the Church forged the “ideals of womanhood and domesticity” through the “punish[ment] of many” and created divisions within the serf class by turning men against women, who were seen as threats akin to the devil (Federici 185-186). Thus, women who could not conform to the new ideals were cast out of the created society, and without their former, traditional roles, often became homeless or “unproductive” members of society.

These peripheral women often represented a power illegible to the state, one that was opaque and could not be understood within the bounds of capitalist relations. “The power that women had pained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal” were threats to the state and the Church (Federici 170). Institutionalized healing and medicine delegitimized the knowledge in these communities, and the Church denounced “heretical sects” that, despite their Christian foundation, often went against oppressive church doctrine (38). These women, usually single or old, often ended up poverty-stricken under capitalist relations as their roles were replaced by more “rational” epistemologies, and the criminalization of peripheral women demonstrated the violence with which the state responded to individuals who fell outside the new norm. This criminalization also revealed a key fear of the capitalist state: an alternative social structure based not on the value of capital but on illegible forms of knowledge and community. And so the existence of these women, who broke up the idealized image of a capitalist society through the physical presence of their unproductive bodies, had to be removed, publicly and violently, in the form of the witch trials.

In this paper, I hope to use Marcia Ochoa’s framework of *los huecos negros*, black holes, to stitch together the witch hunts of a European past and the continuing violence and deaths of women across the ocean, in *la Argentina profunda*. Ochoa attempts to “unify two quite distinct and temporally remote moments and places… [which] exist in a region formation [they call] *Tierra Firme…* solid ground. Unknown continent” (Ochoa). By working with the unknown, Ochoa is able to draw connections through the black holes in colonial, Western knowledge, “zones of unintelligibility to European ways of knowing” (Ochoa). This then allows for an accounting of “the un-knowing, the erasing and consuming of lives, history, memories, landscapes”; through work with and across these *huecos negros* we understand that “there are

no new pains—we have felt them all already"[2] (Ochoa; Lorde 128). The investigation that Selva Almada conducts into the lives and femicides of Andrea, María Luisa and Sarita exposes *un hueco negro* in modern society into which these peripheral lives become consumed and erased in death — *un hueco negro* whose shape maps onto the witch hunts in 16th and 17th century Europe. The zone of unintelligibility in *Chicas muertas* is magic[3] and the alternative forms of life, death, and searching that are connected with it. The same local practices Almada centers in *Chicas muertas* have long been a blind spot, a *hueco negro*, in the eyes of academia as well as the state. This is evidenced by the scarcity of "serious" academic sources on *videntes* or *las maes de santo*[4]. Studies of these local, "superstitious" practices lack value and become unintelligible in a Western, rational society. These practices were dismissed as ignorant and backward, a symptom of a lack of education relegated to superstitious, poor communities. But in *Chicas muertas*, the supernatural isn't simply a phenomenon of ignorance; it is a belief and a way of life that runs counter to modernity and its projects. The world of Almada's *Argentina profunda* rejects capitalist value judgments and remains intimate and interconnected.

La Señora, the *vidente* that Almada seeks out in her investigation, would have been dismissed completely in most novels in "realistic" or "true crime" genres; in *Chicas muertas*, however, la Señora frames Almada's investigation, often offering divinations that explain the contradictory or unclear accounts or speaking for the wishes of the dead. And Almada is not alone in this regard — the Quevedos and Andrea's boyfriend Eduardo also sought out videntes in their search for answers.

> Relacionados con los curanderos y manosantas, y tambien muy populares en Buenos Aires son los videntes. Si bien su característica común es Ia de 'hacer conocido lo desconocido' diferen en su capacidad de, una vez hecho el diagnóstico, influenciar la realidad por medios sobrenaturales. Algunos tan solo adivinan, otros además resuelven distintos tipos de problemas, especializándose en algún área (curaciones, reuniones de pareja) o no. (Carozzi and Frigerio 76)[5]
>
> [Related to *curanderos* and *manosantas*, and also very popular in Buenos Aires are videntes. Although they have the common characteristic of 'making the unknown known', *videntes* differ in their ability, once the diagnosis has been made, to influence

[2] Punctuation mine.

[3] I use this for lack of a better word — magic remains in a Western, English-language context something childish and whimsical. The way that I use magic here and later, however, breaks from this view. Instead, when I write magic, I am generally referring to practices or beliefs that remain outside of "rationality" and which claim a power that often connects or relates with that which is unknown or feared — death, nature or emotions.

[4] This is not to say that there are none, but that these studies are mostly quite recent due to their status as neither studies on "exotic" cultures (which historically was the way that Asia and Indigenous cultures were framed) nor studies of "civilization."

[5] Además de compartir, en ocasiones, las técnicas de adivinación, los videntes y quienes los consultan también comparten con las religiones afro-brasileñas tanto el concepto de que existe un destino personal que es posible conocer antes de que se haga presente al individuo, como el de que existen personas dotadas y capacitadas para develar ese destino mediante el empleo de técnicas adivinatorias. (76)

reality by supernatural means. Some only practice divination, others resolve different types of problems, some specializing in area (healing, finding love) and others not.]

What many in the city would call "myths" or "superstitions" becomes real and a way of life in *la Argentina profunda*. It is the *vidente's* role as answer-giver that parallels the position of the witches in 16th and 17th century Europe; in an inversion of the witch-hunts that rejected this form of unpredictable magic, here the answer-seekers, the Quevedos, Eduardo, and Almada, turn away from the "official" or "evidence-based" ways of finding out what happened to the dead women (often after being frustrated by the lack of information and response from the police or the courts) and seek out these practitioners of magic. The *vidente* signals a return to non-colonial and non-modern forms of community and power.

"We will, as we've done already, jump from one *hueco negro* to another, finding ourselves in different places and different times" (Ochoa). Before the colonization of the Americas, Europeans colonized their own, demarcating land and crushing resistance, ultimately creating a society based on alterity and division. When they came to the Americas, these violences came with them, a visceral disgust for anything unintelligible to them. "Sexual fears of colonizers led them to imagine the indigenous people of the Americas as hermaphrodites or intersexed," writes Lugones (7), and it is clear to see that this perceived "break" from the sexual dimorphism that characterized Western modernity again was met with extreme prejudice. The violence that was enacted against the indigenous people in the Americas, as with the witch hunts, was part of a process of primitive accumulation that required the criminalization of all that was outside of "modern society." The land of the Americas itself is one that contains in it a history of violence against the unknown, against alternatives. Thus when we turn to the present, we see an overlapping and layering of violences on peripheral "empty" land.

This violence returns in the present day in the form of feminicides. When looking at the statistics, it is clear that violence against women in Latin America is linked with poverty or financial instability (Wilson 4). In Ciudad Juarez many of the women and girls who disappeared or were killed were *maquiladora* workers, often migrating to the city in search of better economic conditions.[6] Not only is poverty thus punished with a higher risk of violence, but these women, already on the periphery, become themselves a black hole when they disappear, their cases often remaining unsolved and dismissed as the state is confronted with a failure of "civilized" society. *Chicas muertas* is a novel predicated on violence, on the feminicides of these three girls, and the way that Almada writes violence is crucial to this narrative's engagement with the history and cultural attitude surrounding feminicide. The way that Almada begins her investigation is with violence — and more specifically, violence told through the eyes of media, through news outlets. It starts with Andrea, with violence inside the home which is then later heard inside a different home. Andrea was killed in her bed and "*la noticia de la chica muerta, me llegó como una revelación* / the news of the dead girl came to [Almada] like a revelation" when she was thirteen years old (17). Suddenly home wasn't the safest place in the world. Suddenly violence and death could be delivered to a girl even within the confines of what was known. This revelation hits Almada within the boundaries of her own home, as she's with her

[6] "Their migration creates "a new phenomenon of mobile, independent—and vulnerable—working women" living in the city." (Livingston 61)

father grilling meat and listening to the radio. The death itself is glossed over, her father saying nothing about the news and moments later leaving to see a neighbor. Her father is not shocked, but then-thirteen Almada *is.* It is not the violence itself that is shocking — the violence itself, and the sensationalization of that violence, is familiar and mundane — it is the implications of the violence, where it happened and how, that shock young Almada.

As seen later in the book, it is clear that Almada as a child, as well as other young girls like Almada, were warned of the dangers that existed outside of the home to the exclusion of the ones within it. In a moment that blends reality with the supernatural, with fantastical monsters, Almada recounts the myth of el Sátiro, one of the many urban legends that populated her childhood. The figure of el Sátiro is specifically described as "*mágica* / magical," (55) and plays the role that these legends often do — that of warning. El Sátiro, who is the unknown, who is the stranger, is pitted against the familial and the familiar. "*Desde chicas nos enseñaban que no debíamos hablar con extraños y que debíamos cuidarnos del Sátiro* / As girls we were taught not to talk to strangers and to be careful of el Sátiro" (55). Here, magic becomes a way to deny reality, to make it more palatable. It is el Sátiro that girls should fear, not the men in the community that they know. Unlike the stories that Almada's mother tells her of the violences other women have faced, el Sátiro, like many folk legends, remains without an individual teller — in a way, el Sátiro is representative of the way that the community itself thinks, remaining without a face and becoming a subconscious understanding.

However, el Sátiro also serves another function within the text, becoming a representation of the unknown perpetrators of the feminicides. While there does seem to be an understanding that these violences are most likely the work of someone close to these girls, the actual perpetrator(s) remain faceless by the end of the book. Indeed, Almada creates more questions than answers precisely by telling us the narratives that she has pieced together, which are from the various members of the community and the relatives of the dead. Ultimately it is not the uncovering of identity that matters to Almada but the girls themselves, their lives, and the aftershocks of the violence[7]. Still, the specter of el Sátiro hangs over the narrative; his actions are felt not only in the unnamed men who populate Almada's mother's stories but in the media, who sensationalize these crimes, and in the police reports, which only add to the horror by stripping away the identity of the girls as once-living persons. El Sátiro represents the identity of those who have harmed, in a way, *because* he is the unknown. The men[8] who have violated or killed the women and girls within these pages become strangers, unknown, to those they harm. It is the intrusion of danger into intimate or familiar spaces that brings with it fear and horror, that make these men monstrous and unfamiliar. Like el Sátiro, the violence spreads and becomes a faceless undercurrent in the way that these girls are remembered and the ways in which they are forgotten. As Marcelo Brodsky writes in relation to the *desaparecidos* during the Dirty War, "*En esa acción de los malos, los nuestros se convertían*

[7] I can't bring myself to use the word "death" here as Almada questions the fate of Sarita through the testimony of her mother, who tells her that the DNA tests came back negative and that the body that they found, which was identified and attributed to Sarita wasn't hers.

[8] I say men tentatively here, keeping in mind that women can be accomplices or perpetrators of violence against other women; ultimately however, these violences represent a patriarchal and misogynistic system that positions men as powerful and women as objects to be harmed.

en desaparecidos y en nuestros relatos sin historia nosotros volvimos a desaparecerlos: les quitamos sus vidas / Through the harmers' actions, our companions become *desaparecidos*, and in our stories without history we made them disappear a second time: we took their lives from them." (14). What becomes more and more apparent throughout this narrative is the ways in which these girls have had more than that initial violence visited upon them. Through the media and in the eyes of the law, these girls were reduced to a singular violent moment, their second "disappearance," and the people that they were in full before their feminicide were erased. Thus, Almada's piecing together of their skeletons is an act of reclaiming the whole, of remembering the dead as they were when they still lived, and reclaiming every piece of bone from the land that swallowed them whole.

The aftershocks of these violences often define the identities of not only the perpetrators but their victims as well. The violence inherent in the voyeuristic nature of the news and in the detachment of the police reports only exacerbates this identity theft. In the third chapter, Almada writes that the Quevedos went to the police when their daughter disappeared, and the police "*les respondieran lo de siempre* / responded as they always did" with the assumption that the panic was an overreaction and that they should just wait, because surely María Luisa would come back — perhaps she'd even run off with a boy (41). Because even with the protests of Sarita's mother, it took a DNA test ten years later to confirm the body was not Sarita's, and the identity of that body, of the skeleton of a murdered girl, still remains unknown today. Because the only photo that Yogui, María Luisa's brother, has of his sister is the one that the police took of her body: a photo that he gave to the media in frustration at the inability of the police to do anything. "*No sé si te vas a animar a verla. Se la compré a un fotógrafo de la policía.* / I don't know if you'll want to see it. I bought it off a police photographer" Yogui tells Almada (98).[9] A different translation of the first sentence might say: *I don't know if you dare to see her.* Yogui knows that the photograph is not a kind one; he understands the inherent violence of the photo itself, and when giving it to a woman who would have been his sister's age had she lived, he is uncomfortable. The photo transforms his sister through the gaze on her dead body; she becomes an object on which violence was enacted, her form no longer alive and no longer moving. The photograph itself also makes clear the power dynamics at play in the (in)visibility of these violences. As a picture taken by the police, the photograph likely wouldn't have been released to the public had Yogui not bought it, and yet it would also be the favored evidence in a courtroom, more than any first-hand accounts of the scene. Yogui mentions that he specifically sold it to a publication that was known for publishing gory criminal cases. The fact that Yogui felt the need to sensationalize the violence enacted upon his sister's body just to have her case made public in itself is a form of violence; the media is more likely to sell a story if it is horrific—if it has evidence that it was horrific. There remains in Yogui's actions an assumption that it is only within the bounds of this horror that outrage can be mobilized.

As a counterpart to the sensationalist nature of the media, the distance of the police files underscores the violence inherent in legal investigation. In the fifth chapter, in the middle of the narrative of Tacho Zucco and his wife, Almada inserts a description of the murder scene

[9] Page 72 in the English translation.

from the police case reports. The voice of the report is detached and clinical. It describes the murder as if it were a mundane scene, and Andrea's body itself becomes depersonalized.

> ...se encuentra el cuerpo de la señorita María Andrea Dane, en posición de boca arriba, con la cara ligeramente inclinada hacia la derecha…con mucha sangra sobre su pecho, sábana, colchón parte de la cama, es decir el resorte del lado derecho… (69)
>
> [...the body of Miss María Andrea Danne lies face-up, head turned slightly to the right… with a considerable amount of blood on the chest, sheets mattress and part of the bed, specifically the spring on the right side… (49-50)]

The details allow for the distance. Even apart from the distance inherent in this style of writing ("*se encuentra* / it was encountered"), the specificity with which the scene is described strips the horror from it. Despite the description of the blood, the scene seems almost sterile — as if it were a scientist observing an experiment, noting down every small thing. The reference to the "spring on the right side" further hammers in the fact that this description is one that is meant only for documentation. It is not a natural way of seeing things; this is a trained method, one that carefully curates the distance necessary for 'fair' judgment and assessment.

This unflinching detachment stands in painful contrast to the descriptions of violence that end the stories of Almada's mother. The violence described in those scenes is hardly extensive, often just one or two sentences. These are warning tales, and the violence becomes the inevitable conclusion— these are stories told to warn against the violences that were enacted within them, to warn against the familiar and the trusted. The difference between the violence in the photograph and the police files and the violence within these stories is this: the violence within the photograph and within the files is a *still* violence. It is the stillness of the aftermath; the physical violence only evident through the marks on the body. The violence is assumed to have ended. In these materials the violence remains implied — the act has already taken place, and the police cannot tell the story of the violence itself but only the fragments. They leave the *huesos* where they are and never bother to bring these fragments together into a whole. This is also seen in the way that the police stop looking for answers to Sarita's case once they find a female body; through the assumption that the body was hers, neither woman received justice, or even recognition. However, the violence of Almada's mother's stories is within the narrative. It is a moving, dynamic violence — the reader sees it as it happens. These understandings and recounting of violence serve a very different purpose to that of the police descriptions: instead of documenting, they aim to warn, to share, to explain how the violence occurred and its context. Unlike the photographs, which are seen without context, without an understanding of the girls as once-living, the stories of Almada's mother follow the women. They are first and foremost about where she went and why she went there — how the violence happened and the culture that led to it.

The way in which Almada describes violence in and of itself is something deeply intimate. In both her mother's stories as well as her own experiences, violence is understood and confronted with a juxtaposed emotionality and horror as something normalized. There is something formulaic in the stories of Almada's mother — as soon as one starts reading, one can predict the shape of the ending. The premonition exists from the setup, not just from the first few sentences that give the context of where the girl was and who she was with, but because of

the fragmentary narrative structure of *Chicas muertas* itself. Every chapter is divided between multiple narratives, often switching between the three primary investigations into Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita and the personal narratives that Almada tells — ones that often mirror or contextualize the violence as normalized and common. In the midst of an explanation of Sarita's relationship with Dady Olivero from her sister Mirta, for instance, Almada mentions that "*visitar a un hombre solo que a cambio ayuda con plata es una forma de prostitución que está naturalizada en los pueblos del interior* / visiting a single man who splits you some cash in return is a kind of prostitution that's normalized in provincial towns" after writing about José Bertoni, her mother's uncle, and his relationship with La Chola and eventually her daughter (58) . "*Lo he visto en muchachas de mi familia, cuando era chica… Nadie pregunta nada* / I saw it with girls in my family when I was little… No one asks any questions" (59). Almada is able to narrate the stories of these three girls, girls who would have been women her age had they lived, in a way that is weighed down with her own personal experiences as well as the stories and understandings that surrounded her, a girl from a provincial town, and yet never fails to give each story the space that it deserves. There is an intimacy here — one that is reflected in the last sentence of the English introduction to *Dead Girls* when Almada writes: "My friends and I were still alive, but we could have been Andrea, María Luisa, or Sarita. We were just luckier" (iii). This is both a story that could have been Almada's and one that cannot be hers — a story that *is* common and recognizable, but one that Almada takes and says *we cannot forget the girls who did live, we cannot forget these individual lives.*

Chicas muertas, as a whole, contains the same intimacy that is present within the stories Almada's mother tells and the personal experiences that Almada weaves in. This narrative, this novel, breaks out of the intimacy of the home but retains the intimacy of the warning and the intimacy of knowledge sharing between women. Thus these stories are more than just a warning. They are, in the words of the mass movement #NiUnaMenos, a collective scream[10] as well as a collective memory project, one that maps these singular instances of violence in order to understand the structures that uphold it.

> En este sentido, dar cuenta de la pluralización de las violencias es estratégica: es una forma concreta de *conexión* que produce *inteligibilidad* y, por lo tanto, permite un desplazamiento de la *figura totalizante de la víctima*. Pluralizar no es sólo hacer una cuantificación, un listado, de las violencias. Es algo mucho más denso: es un modo de cartografiar su *simultaneidad* y su *interrelación*. (Gago 66)
>
> In this sense, a recognition of the pluralization of violence is strategic: it is a concrete form of *connection* that creates *intelligibility* and, therefore, enables a displacement of the *totalizing figure of the victim*. Pluralization of the meaning of sexist violence is not only about quantifying and cataloging different forms of violence. It is much more complex; it is a way of mapping its *simultaneity* and its *interrelation*.[11]

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[10] "Esta conmoción masiva, esta enorme y comprometida participación social, son un grito unánime." (https://niunamenos.org.ar/manifiestos/3-de-junio-2015/)

[11] In the ebook of the English translation *Feminist International*, this is the beginning of the second chapter.

Almada realizes that you cannot piece together a once-living being without intimacy, without weaving your own song into the skeleton — thus she creates a plurality of violences; it is no longer an individual story but a well-worn path. And this is what Almada does: she weaves her own narrative, her own bones, the fragments of the past when she herself must have felt the same fear, the same trepidation as these girls, into the bones that she gathers from relatives and friends, the skeletons that she has pieced together in familiarity. She narrates an intimacy, knows bone and flesh and skin so well that she can bring the wolf-women to life. She brings herself into the narration because this is how she sets them free — only through this process, painstaking and long, is it possible to break away from the apathy and retribution of the police, from the sensationalism and invisibility of the press. This intimacy, both in the way that *Chicas muertas* describes and understands violence as well as in the ways that these girls are pieced together in the narrative, becomes an alternative to more conventional understandings of these feminicides. She proposes that these violences are structural, that they are layered, social, and in a context in which they are normalized. Through *Chicas muertas* Almada doesn't only set the girls free, she proposes a liberatory framework, one in which feminicide does not erase the lives taken, one in which the silence and accusations of the uncaring are confronted and rejected.

The tasks of la Huesera can be divided into three: the gathering, the piecing together, and the singing to life. Once her tasks are done, the wolf transforms and the woman runs free. While on the surface there are similarities between the ways in which the law searches for pieces of evidence and the way la Huesera searches for bones, the divergent motivations and end-goals of these searches reveal the key distinction between the two. While law enforcement, when it takes these disappearances and feminicides seriously, works within a retributive framework, one which considers the job done once the perpetrator (or suspected perpetrator) has been found and put behind bars, la Huesera and Almada do not seek to "punish" the ones responsible; they seek these bones not to look for the cause of death but to reveal a once-living being. This is why the search for remnants feels so personal both for the Huesera and Almada herself. This is why la Señora finds it necessary to add in the story that wolf bones, *los huesos de los lobos,*[12] are la Huesera's favorite to gather. This is why Almada chose these three feminicides; if these girls had survived, would have been her own age. Bones accrue meaning not only because they were once living beings but also through their context. It is the body that they were attached to that ties them together and thus they become the bridge through which Almada is able to intimately understand and free the lives of these girls from death.

Here is what she pieces together: a portrait of each girl, their lives, their aspirations, their families and relationships. She constructs the skeleton through narrative, tells the reader not only *here she was, when she was alive*, but also *here is how she was mourned, how she was buried, how she was searched for*. So Almada goes to the families, learns how they grieved their daughters, sisters, girlfriends. Almada, who is from the same towns and provinces that these girls where from, who grew up in the same environments, becomes our guide to a place where modernity wears thin. The rules and impositions of Western rationality lose their grip here, and

[12] Almada 50

when the police hold no answers and dismiss the families' concerns, the ones who knew these girls go to *videntes*. *Videntes*, those who make known what is unknown "*hacer conocido lo desconocido,*"[13] hold as much or *more* authority in this region of Argentina and Uruguay. However, their authority poses a challenge to the "rational" world; what many in the city would call myths or superstitions becomes real and a way of life in *la Argentina profunda*. And Almada, who is from these same places, places weight in her non-fiction novel on the answers the *vidente* gives. Not only does Almada also consult a *vidente*, La Señora, during her investigation, la Señora becomes an integral part of the novel, a voice through which these girls can speak, and returns again and again throughout the novel, reminding the reader of the personhood of the dead. This is the process of reacquainting yourself with those now lost. *How do you piece together a skeleton?* You must be intimately familiar with the pieces, to know that yes, this one belongs to her and to be able to fit each piece in precisely where it goes. Remember: even before the DNA tests, Sarita's mother insisted that the found bones were not her daughters. To piece together a skeleton, one must be familiar with the once-living being. For the bones of a wolf, one must know the wolf. For the bones of a woman, one must know what it is to be a woman.

When Almada first goes to la Señora, she explains that she is there not to get a reading for herself but for the three women at the center of this narrative. Almada goes in with doubts — not of la Señora's ability itself but of whether the conditions are right. She worries that the reading may not work if it is not for herself or that the reading might "dredge up any festering trauma from the past" as well as worrying that perhaps the families' visits to other *videntes* meant that they were too early and that she was too late. But la Señora assures her and tells her the story of la Huesera, thus framing Almada's investigation and the purpose of this narrative. This understanding of the narrative purpose draws a star-map, to use the words of Ochoa, between stories, memory, life-giving, and the terrible understanding that this could have just as well been Almada herself. La Señora gives meaning to the "investigation" through her own viewpoint of reality, a world that is marginalized but that contains that which is not understandable (that which is opaque) to Western rationality: ghosts, divination, and mourning.

This is the periphery and we can begin to understand it through la Huesera. Like many of the women labeled as witches in 16th and 17th century Europe, la Huesera is old and does not have a productive occupation. Instead, she collects that which has been lost. Often these lost things are bones, remnants of the once-living. She is driven not by any productive force, but by a need that drives her across harsh landscapes on foot. La Huesera is an abject[14] figure, one

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[13] "Relacionados con los curanderos y manosantas, y tambien muy populares en Buenos Aires son los videntes. Si bien su característica común es la de **'hacer conocido lo desconocido'** diferen en su capacidad de, una vez hecho el diagnóstico, influenciar la realidad por medios sobrenaturales. Algunos tan solo adivinan, otros además resuelven distintos tipos de problemas, especializándose en algún área (curaciones, reuniones de pareja) o no. Si bien se valen de distintos métodos para adivinar, el mas tradicional en la sociedad argentina, y mas extendido entre profesionales y amateurs es el empleo de barajas españolas. En los últimos anos la popularidad de este método se ha visto eclipsada por el fuerte auge del Tarot." (Carozzi and Frigerio 76)

[14] That is, abject not to herself but to the 'modern sensibilities' — abjection here is constructed through her intimacy with the non-human. "thus they see that *I* am in the process of becoming another at the cost of my own

that blurs the line between human and non-human; she takes on animal characteristics — "*emite sonidos más animales que humanos /* makes sounds more animal than human" (50). Indeed, the figure of the woman herself in this story (and throughout the narrative) melds with animals — it is not only la Huesera who takes on animal characteristics, but also the woman that she brings back to life, the woman who was by bone a wolf. It is an opaque mode of living, of relationality. There are no other humans in the story of la Huesera, she is "alone" save for the remnants of the once-living for most of the story and it is clear that her search is a solitary and intimate one. But in another understanding, she is not *alone* — she is a part of the landscapes she traverses, the non-human beings that occupy these territories. She, like the 16th-century peasant women that Federici describes, implicitly retains a "privileged relation with the natural elements" (174). La Huesera, even before she brings to life the wolf, is magic. It is in her melding with non-human, animal characteristics; in her search, which takes her over mountains and streams and burning deserts without pause; in her purpose, in what she searches for. Even without the latter half of the story, which contains an impossible act, the act of reversing death, there is something familiar in the story that intrinsically ties la Huesera to witchcraft and magic.

In the same way, there is something intrinsically 'irrational' about Selva Almada's investigation. Like la Huesera, her search for the stories of these girls is not one that has a concrete end. There is no uncovering of perpetrators in this narrative; there are no answers. Almada doesn't hunt for clues like detectives do; instead, she traverses the landscapes that these girls had once walked to look for the impressions that their bodies made on the earth. La Huesera does not find whole skeletons — instead she walks for miles and miles to piece together each body.

> When we view living in the european mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. (Lorde 126)

There is no crime scene in her story; the violence is spread out and the whole can only be recovered through long and arduous searching. Almada, in her 2020 introduction, tells the reader, "Writing the book you now hold in your hands took me three months. The writing process was sustained and painful" (iii). Almada did not write *Chicas muertas* out of duty — no, there was something that tied her to the narratives of these girls. Even though they never knew each other, there is something intimate about the narrative. As Almada writes about the lives and deaths of Andrea Danne, María Luisa Quevedo, and Sarita Mundín, girls who, if they had lived, would have been her age, she weaves in fragments of her own life as well as the voice of

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death" (Kristeva 127) and "The corpse (cadavre: from cadere , to fall), that which has irremediably fallen, sewer and death, throws the identity of the one who is confronted by it into still greater turmoil, like some fragile and fallacious event." Thus la Huesera comes closer to the animal and thus closer to the bones of the animals, which signify death. The maintained distance between the living and the death is collapsed and the identity of la Huesera cannot be understood in Western or "intelligible" terms.

la Señora. This, too, is irrational. Police are often 'taken off the case' if they were too close to either the victims or perpetrators of a crime, with the assumption that they would be sacrificing objectivity and distance; Western modern society is one in which the highest form of truth is distant and removed from the messiness of any given situation. And yet Almada chooses to transgress this much vaunted distance, blowing the line between the public and private wide open through the inclusion of her own experiences and the stories that her mother told her.

La Señora too weaves in between the voices of the girls' friends and families. Once she is introduced to the reader, her presence returns again and again, often contradicting or clarifying the words of those Almada interviews by speaking for the girls. When Almada speaks to Yogui, Maria Luisa's brother, about his efforts to make the death of his sister known, la Señora says, *Maria Luisa loved her brother very much*. *She's happy to have him as her spokesman*. And when Almada explains the lack of opportunities for women in this region, la Señora clarifies, *Andrea wanted something different, it's not true that she dreamed of getting married, having kids, and becoming a teacher… she wanted out. She couldn't see any future where she was.* And with Sarita, the cards are silent, just as the DNA confirms that the body assumed to be hers is not. La Señora also seems to feel the pain of the girls in her own body. Sometimes "*las chicas se adelantan a las cartas* / the girls get in ahead of the cards", *I couldn't breathe, I was suffocating, it was so intense*. The girls are manifesting in la Señora, giving them a certain amount of autonomy to express themselves.

And the presence of la Señora changes the narrative fundamentally. By lending her voice to these girls, these stories become told *with and alongside* these girls instead of simply being *about* them. The form departs from the distance that true crime or police investigations take and returns to the realm of the personal and the intimate. Unlike the law, which seeks to uncover the perpetrators and enact retributive justice, it is clear that Almada, from the start of her investigation, wasn't looking to theorize about the crime itself but rather turn the focus to the systems of power that made these girls invisible and the collective ways in which these communities remember and search for answers. This is a novel about living in the midst of these types of violences and also a narrative about the devastation that these unresolved deaths leave behind. La Señora in a way brings these girls back to life, recalls their voices from death, and allows Almada to not only engage with them but also to set them free. Even though Almada's investigation leaves more questions than traditional "answers" the novel and Almada herself feel resolved by the end. "*Me agarré un poco, un momento más, todavía podía sentir a las chicas a través de ella. Me miró. O ellas me miraron y comprendí y también empecé a soltar.* / I held on a little, a moment longer, I could still feel the girls through her. She looked at me. Or *they* looked at me and I understood and began to let go as well." (182). Almada's narrative sets these girls free from the overwhelming shadow of their deaths, countering the lack of humanity present in the media and the police files.

Ultimately, *Chicas muertas* ends with resolution, the narrative coming to a close as the narrator, Almada, closes her investigation and makes peace with the cemetery. The alternatives that she proposes implicitly in this book are ones that frame and shape the narrative as a whole, including the way in which this novel, this book of nonfiction, interacts with the rest of the world. Unlike true crime novels like *In Cold Blood*, *Chicas muertas* becomes *un hueco negro* to the crime genre through its use of the peripheral, irrational figure of the *vidente* as well as its

treatment of the feminicides. Instead of a gory spectacle or a distant investigation, every step of this narration, every interview that Almada conducts, and every moment that she describes is painfully human. From the way that she becomes frustrated at Yogui's lack of contact to la Señora's voice that *Andrea wanted more than this*, *Chicas muertas* is pieced together through a journey that, instead of aiming to reopen a case thirty years old, seeks to put these bodies to rest as best it can be achieved. *Chicas muertas* is revolutionary in the way that it takes its subjects so painfully seriously — in the way that the narrative mourns and searches for answers with the relatives and the communities in the wake of the feminicides and in the way that it never belittles nor disdains the very real local beliefs. Almada ends the book, this narrative that took her three painful months, with a moment of solemnness and a moment of hope. Almada ends this book with the names and causes of death of the women killed in the first month of the year 2014. She reminds us that this work is not yet over, that we have a need for these alternatives still, that these narratives still need to become visible. But the last fragment in this novel is another story, this time one told by her aunt. It is still a story about violence, still a story about fear and about pain — but she gets away. *I've never been so afraid and I've never been so brave as I was then,*[15] she tells Almada. And so, Almada ends with hope, with the song of a small victory.

[15] English translation, pg 146: "Epilogue"

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