

## *Que Dios se apiade de todos nosotros, Indeed*

GRACE MARTIN, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

---

"The robot has been created to outgender its apparent gender. It is the ultimate womanly woman, occasioning 'concealed sighs' in the gentlemen of the court and 'envious breathing' in the ladies. But the absolute femininity of the robot is not intrinsic, not part of its nature (and I use the term deliberately), but a part of its programming. The robot is programmed to draw upon conventional feminine gestures in order to charm Arrhodes to his doom."

(Jo Alyson Parker, "Gendering the Robot")

"While popular culture texts enthusiastically explore boundary breakdowns between humans and computers, gender boundaries are treated less flexibly [...] Cyborg imagery has not so far realized the ungended ideal theorized by Donna Haraway."

(Claudia Springer, "The Pleasure of the Interface")

**M**ankind's dream of creating artificial humans has a long, rich history. From Pygmalion and Pinocchio to Star Trek's Lt. Commander Data, there is a wealth of narratives dealing with the question of what makes a being human. In acclaimed Western science fiction texts such as Bradbury's "I Sing the Body Electric" and Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, humanness is directly proportional to an artificial being's looks, intelligence and, above all, capability to experience emotions. Latin American science fiction, however, seems to adhere to different parameters when qualifying artificial characters as human. Gender performances and sexuality, in particular, play a major role in blurring the boundaries between the organic and the artificial in texts such as "Minerva" (1974) by Enrique Araya, "A la luz de la casta luna electrónica" (1973) by Angélica Gorodischer, *Flores para un Cyborg* (1997) by Diego Muñoz Valenzuela, and *Que Dios se apiade de todos nosotros* (1993) by Ricardo Guzmán Wolffer.<sup>1</sup> The latter is

---

<sup>1</sup> In "Minerva," the protagonist mistakes a remote-controlled, ventriloquized fembot for a woman because it performs beyond his expectations in bed. In "A la luz de la casta luna electronica," pseudo-hero Trafalgar Medrano suspects the matriarchs of planet Veroboar are robots and yet doubts himself because the body and sexual performance of one of their representatives read very human to him. Finally, in *Flores para un Cyborg*, the protagonist builds a cybernetic clone of himself to effect revenge on former

especialmente representativa de esta proporcionalidad entre el rendimiento de género y la humanidad, donde cuanto más fuerte es el rendimiento, más humano parece una máquina.

Guzmán Wolffer's hero, Sergio Lupus, is a lawyer and detective in charge of a murder case in a futuristic, dystopian version of Mexico City. Despite his initial revulsion toward robots, Lupus soon finds himself lusting after his oversexualized—and one hundred percent mechanized—investigation partner. The more sexually the robot behaves, the less the protagonist sees it as a machine and the closer the fembot comes to being human. The construction and narrative importance of this cybernetic female protagonist, the robot Leticia (later renamed Magnolia), as well as its contrast with another key—yet obscured—character, referred to only as “la morena,” are of special significance, as they call attention to pivotal questions intersecting gender, race, alternative sexualities, and scopophilic pleasure in the construction of posthuman female characters in Guzmán Wolffer's novel. I contend that the character Leticia/Magnolia not only adheres to my theory that sexuality is a central marker of humanness in Latin American science fiction, but does so in an anachronistic way that links posthuman sexuality with monolithic, patriarchal gender roles and values. In addition, I argue that sexuality, race, and the posthuman intersect in very problematic ways in *Que Dios se apiade*. Although Guzmán Wolffer's novel has some intriguing aspects that critics have found to be uniquely Latin American and praise-worthy, such as its criticism of political corruption in Mexico, environmental decline, and border issues<sup>2</sup>, the novel ultimately adapts to clichéd whitewashing and (hetero)sexist practices from international and canon science fiction rather than challenging them.

### **Leticia/Magnolia: A Cybernetic “Bombshell” in Post-Apocalyptic Mexico**

Guzmán Wolffer's Leticia/Magnolia is a female robot physically indistinguishable from an organic woman. Not just any organic woman, but one who is young, sexy, and very European. In Guzmán Wolffer's fictional world, the mass-production and marketing of “ideal” artificial women is commonplace. Humanoid robots are made

---

members of a dictatorial regime. Yet, the only way for his robot to be “un hombre completo” and on the same level as humans is to receive a penile implant, an all-access pass into “[el] mundo de los machos recios” (Muñoz Valenzuela 190).

<sup>2</sup> As Trujillo Muñoz observes, *Que Dios se apiade* offers “una metáfora extremosa del México actual [...] por la conciencia histórica que se cuele por todo el tejido narrativo” (270). Additionally, the novel displays a palpable “Latin Americanness,” as evidenced by its reliance on “soft” sciences and religious themes rather than “hard” scientific data. This is, in fact, a distinctive trait of regional Science Fiction as posited by critics like Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina Gavilán (*Cosmos Latinos*, 4) and Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz (271).

and used for various tasks, including manual labor, law enforcement, and, inevitably, sex. Significantly, many of the cybernetic beings designed for non-sexual tasks still conform to physical standards meant to please the heterosexual male eye. Such is the case of "Series 46-ñp," used exclusively in police investigations:

*La serie 46-ñp era una de las últimas que nos habían enviado de los lejanos países de Oriente. Robots con el prototipo de la mujer elegante: altas, de excelente figura y mejor cara, fuertes y bien programadas. Tal capacidad de adaptabilidad resultaba muy útil para transitar en algunos sectores. Su estructura metálica era la misma con la que habían construido los robots antimotines. Salieron tan buenos esos robots que no hubo necesidad de otros (17)*

Not only do these machines look like flesh-and-blood people, but they are designed to behave humanly enough to deceive anyone, "aun en la cama" (17). As private agents, it could be understandable that a "46-ñp" robot might need to use believable seduction techniques in certain scenarios. However, some obvious questions remain: Why are all the robots in this special series female? If they are designed to work undercover, then why build them all to look like supermodels unlikely to be walking around en masse in post-apocalyptic Mexico City? Perhaps Guzmán Wolffer is just following his predecessors and sticking with a staple trope in the Science Fiction and comic book genres: gratuitous female sexiness.<sup>3</sup>

As observed by both Trujillo Muñoz (269) as well as Bell and Molina Gavilán (17), *Que Dios se apiade* shows a clear influence of the comic book genre. Indeed, the novel has very graphic, almost cinematic moments<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, Lupus, the main character, is reminiscent of lone-wolf, psychologically troubled heroes a la Wolverine (*X-Men*), Rorschach (*Watchmen*), or even Batman. As Bell and Molina Gavilán point out regarding this and similar texts, "Female characters may play key roles and be smart and strong, but they must also generate sexual tension" (17).

---

<sup>3</sup> This is especially evident in science fiction films, including both iconic works (such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*) and lesser known movies (including 1980's flicks *Weird Science*, by John Hughes, and *Cherry 2000*, by Steve de Jarnatt), which feature overly sexualized female robot characters. Similarly, the comic book scene is rife with hypersexualized female characters, be it in superhero (Wonder Woman, Bat Girl, Black Widow, Miss Marvel), villain (Cat Woman, Poison Ivy, Mystique), or love interest (Louis Lane, Gwen Stacy) roles.

<sup>4</sup> The way some images are described in the novel gives the impression of watching a multi-angle film scene. On pages 30-31, for example, a highly visual description of a swarm fighting a predator, which then culminates in the last insect standing being mercilessly squashed by Pérez Grieg, is used as a metaphor for the oppressive power of bureaucracy and alternates descriptions reminiscent of various camera angles such as close-ups, extreme close-ups, and establishing shots.

This is certainly the case for Leticia/Magnolia. The fembot protagonist's physical features are constantly emphasized and described in such a graphic, sexualized way that it is easy to visualize passages about her looks and body as if they were panels in a graphic novel.

When the reader is first introduced to Leticia/Magnolia, her voice is her first trait to be described, and the character is immediately linked to old Hollywood stars: "La voz sonaba agradable, seductora. Como Kim Novak" (40). But not only does Leticia/Magnolia sound like this American actress from 50's and 60's films, she looks almost exactly like her as well: "Medía un metro y ochenta, aproximadamente. De buen cuerpo. Su cara ciertamente recordaba a la de Kim Novak, hacía juego con la voz" (40). The robot is, then, a "new and improved" version of the actress, being taller (the real Novak is 12 centimeters shorter than her robot double), stronger than any organic woman or man, and perpetually young. In the narrative, science has allowed man to take a starlet's idealized looks and perfect them even further, thus turning previously unattainable beauty standards into a reality achievable only by humanoid machines. The novel clearly presents this artificial femininity as more desirable and valuable than organic versions of female gender and sexualities.

The inability to age or decay is a major feature that renders the cybernetic female body as superior to its organic counterpart and recurs in this and similar narratives. *Que Dios se apiade* emphasizes this through the stark opposition between positive physical descriptions of young women and extremely negative descriptions of aged female characters. Smooth skin, firm limbs, and perky breasts are common synecdoches to signal the presence of young female characters, whether it be Leticia/Magnolia or minor characters such as la morena, the nurse, or prostitutes. Conversely, the descriptions of aged women in the novel almost always include harsh words in varying shades of disgust. A mature member of the time traveling cult is always called "la arruga" or "la arrugada" (20, 36). Lupus compares gigantic mutant insects to his former mother-in-law, suggesting that it takes special effort to look more horrible than her (54). And, in a very lackluster attempt at humor, the protagonist/narrator speculates that the chef at the restaurant where he eats lunch must have hypnotized her husband into marrying and having so many children with her, "porque tenía la jeta como si se la hubiera cagado un rinoceronte y del cuerpo ni hablar" (33-34).

Amanda Fernbach asserts that "the classical psychoanalytic account of fetishism is associated with conservative cultural fantasies about fixing women and producing idealized flawless icons of femininity" (23). In this sense, Fernbach explains,

economic forces such as the beauty and advertisement industries calm castration anxieties stemming from sights of aging and imperfection by creating the illusion of flawless artificial femininity. To this end, they promote products and procedures aimed at vanishing blemishes, wrinkles, scars, cellulite dimples, and spots—anything that would disrupt perfectly smooth, glossy, forever young skin. Something similar happens in post-human Science Fiction: synthetic skin, eyes, and hair never have to shrivel up and die. In case of damage, they can be easily replaced. A robot's immortal skin is a safe haven from unsightly creases and sags, wounds revealing the horrifying truth: the aged female body is castrated, the imagined phallus isn't really there. The artificial woman—a literal one in this case—is thus not only an ideal, but also a fetish. Lupus' fixation with Leticia/Magnolia is, then, a reflection of this male character's own fear of the castrating threat of old age and decay.

Leticia/Magnolia embodies yet another problematic beauty standard: her whiteness. Although this robot was built by a Japanese engineer and is part of series 46-ñp, an illogically Spanish denomination for Asian-made machines, she is a cybernetic clone of blonde, blue-eyed Kim Novak, has the height and brawn of a Nordic princess, and the singing voice of "las Walkirias" (57). As both protagonist and narrator, Lupus never ceases to praise his robot companion's notoriously European physical attributes. He often refers to her as "guapa" (40), "hermosa" (48), "espléndida" (45), "toda una joyita" (56) and even "lo máximo" (59). The physical qualities of other young, stereotypically attractive female characters of varying ethnicities are also exalted throughout the novel. Nonetheless, it is Leticia/Magnolia, the "whitest" of them, who enjoys the most privileged position of them all, both socially and economically, and appears to be more publicly powerful and active. In addition, the erotization of minor female characters like the woman who stares at Lupus' crotch while he moves the gun in his pocket (24) and La morena's nurse lover is largely based upon these characters' blonde, Europeanized physiques. Meanwhile, all other eroticized female characters (except for La morena) are ethnically neutral—any physical traits beyond the usual "busto prominente" and "nalgas magníficas" are conspicuously absent. It is worth noting that the whitewashing of posthuman entities in science fiction is a generalized phenomenon that has been identified by critics in other regional contexts of the genre. Jennifer González, for example, explains the visual representation of robots and cyborgs in North American, European, and Japanese texts has been deeply influenced by, and also tends to be a faithful reflection of, "an industrially 'privileged' Euro-American perspective" (61). It is not surprising, then, to find similar whitewashing dynamics at play in Guzmán Wolffer's novel, especially when considering the pervasiveness of

such practices in Mexican mass media, especially television<sup>5</sup> (Marañón Lazcano and Muñiz 7-8).

The boundless sexuality and tireless desire to have sex of female robots in *Que Dios se apiade* is a third standard setting the artificial, homogenized woman above organic, pluralistic ones in the text. The narrative reimagines brothels as filled with robotic prostitutes (60) and heterosexual male desire has shifted from organic to cybernetic fixations, leading to the emergence of “roboerotic” magazines (32) and new technologies designed to enhance sexual experiences between humans and humanoid machines (59-60). Even Leticia/Magnolia herself, a robot designed primarily for police investigations, had been originally ordered by a State official for the main purpose of fulfilling his own cyber-erotic fantasies:

*“Supuestamente el robot es para él. Hasta dejó a la esposa en su casa. Está como loco esperando a la robotita, totalmente enajenado. El otro día me mandó a comprar revistas roboeróticas. De esas en las que las robots fornican con personas, o con animales; es un degenerado”. (32)*

The National Director of Food Affairs appears to be a degenerate here. But is it because of his fondness for pornography or for robots? At first, the latter seems to be the case. The protagonist of *Que Dios se apiade*, himself, starts out emphatically repudiating sexual interactions between humans and robots:

*“sólo alguien trastornado podría considerarlos como objetos eróticos, para eso había muchas mujeres u hombres cuya escasa capacidad mental los situaba a igual o menor nivel que las máquinas, pero eran humanos finalmente. Fornicar con un robot, ja. Cualquier día se le meten a la tostadora”. (34)*

Yet, as the narrative unfolds and Lupus becomes more acquainted with Leticia/Magnolia, his initial abhorrence of sex with robots morphs into a lustful fixation. Lupus’ sexual appetite for Leticia/Magnolia seems insatiable, and once her character disappears from the story, he doesn’t seem to have the same level of passion for human women. At the end of the novel, for instance, inspector Pérez Grieg invites Lupus to party with him and some human prostitutes, but he declines

---

<sup>5</sup> In their study of indigenous representation in Mexican television, Marañón Lazcano and Muñiz assert that “los latinoamericanos buscan un estilo de vida similar al de los estadounidenses aprendido a través de los programas de televisión” (7). The authors point at an evident racism, especially against characters of indigenous background, in Mexican television, which they attribute to representation patterns based on “la idea de la supremacía blanca, capitalista y patriarcal” (7).

his superior's offer and goes home to mourn his now destructed robot partner in solitude (137). Although these human prostitutes are portrayed as enticing, Lupus has no trouble declining their favors when, previously, he could hardly resist Leticia/Magnolia's flirtations. What could make an artificial being more sexually attractive than an organic one? A machine's customizable and ever-ready-and-willing nature may be the answer.

Leticia/Magnolia is, above anything else, an irremediably libidinous character. After spending merely one day with Lupus, the robot voluntarily initiates a sexual encounter with him while he is taking a shower (44-45) and continues with similar flirtations and advances throughout the novel. Leticia/Magnolia dresses herself provocatively when she is at home with Lupus (56), and often removes her clothing with the only purpose of sexually enticing her organic partner (44, 58). Her sexual appetite gets so out of hand that Lupus feels the need to personally consult Yáñez, the person in charge of ordering and delivering robot agents for the State, on the matter: "Vengo a consultarlo sobre el modelito que me dio, fijese que se pasa todo el tiempo pensando en hacer el amor, tiene la mente como humana y se comporta como si quisiera enamorarme. Necesito entender lo que pasa" (59). Yáñez has nothing but technical answers to Lupus' question: "Lo de que sea buena en la cama es muy comprensible, fijese en estos diagramas; como puede ver, el modelo tiene células hipersensibles en las zonas erógenas que señala el dibujo, ha de ser movidísima a la hora de la hora, pero así está hecho el diseño" (59-60).

Lupus never describes Leticia/Magnolia's sexual performance qualitatively, so Yáñez' automatic assumption that she is "buena en la cama" points at a problematic representation of female sexualities. Equating "often" with "well" suggests that a desirable female sexual partner's main—or perhaps only—qualifications are her willingness and availability. Recalling MacKinnon's criticisms of modern, "pop" (patriarchal) sexuality, sex alone is, often, mistakenly equated with pleasure, especially for women (164). Similarly, MacKinnon warns against desirability standards raised by pornographic media, where "women men want, want men" (168). This reflects virtually all representations of attractive women in Guzmán Wolffer's novel, who are always focused on sex in one way or another. Leticia/Magnolia seeks coitus from Lupus to no avail; La morena and the nurse engage sexually in almost every scene featuring them<sup>6</sup>; The secretary in one of the

---

<sup>6</sup> While these two characters don't "want men" as proposed by MacKinnon, they are still portrayed as the kind of sex-starved actresses typically found in lesbian pornography aimed at heterosexual male audiences.

short stories by La morena rapes and then murders her boss for turning her down as a sex partner in the past; a random, sexy, blonde passerby stares at Lupus' crotch with interest; and the prostitutes, both human and robotic, make a living through sex. The construction of female sexualities in *Que Dios se apiade*, then, rests mainly upon libido and accessibility (to men), and female characters' erotic appeal is directly proportional to these variables for both cybernetic and organic beings. Following that logic, a machine that can be programmed to always say yes and which can never physically, mentally, or emotionally tire from having sex will, most likely, seem more appealing than a flesh-and-blood woman.

Additionally, and despite mentions of hypersensitive erogenous sensors in robots, pleasure in both artificial and organic female subjects is largely ignored. Leticia/Magnolia's sexual initiatives, for example, seem to be aimed at pleasuring Lupus but not herself: The robot performs fellatio on him before engaging in any other sexual act (44-45), she grabs at his genitals (50), (heavily) hints at wanting to have sex with her partner on several occasions, but her experiences of pleasure are never articulated, described, or even suggested. As Jo Alyson Parker notes in her discussion of the female robot protagonist in a different literary work, Stanislaw Lem's "The Mask", "the robot lover makes responses that mirror in form those of the human lover. But like the Foucauldian theory with which it has affinities, Lem's story thereby neuters these desiring subjects, thus bypassing an exploration of the mechanisms of female desire" (185). This seems to be the exact same case in Guzmán Wolffer's novel, where the supposed desire so emphasized in Leticia/Magnolia is never fully fleshed out. Lupus is overtly and redundantly featured as the target of her desire, but her experience of desire itself is not remotely acknowledged. She is only meant to provide pleasure but not receive it, as Yáñez himself confirms: "Eso del enamoramiento podría encuadrar en lo que el manual llama 'el mejor servicio que podrá encontrarse jamás'" (60).

In regard to human characters, such as La morena, the nurse, and the meta-fictional secretary, accounts of sexual activity and presumed "pleasure" are shallow, repetitive, and clearly tailored to satisfy heterosexual male scopophilic pleasure. They are rife with brash, virtually pornographic depictions of heaving breasts, hard nipples, soft lips, and voluptuous hips and buttocks. And yet female genitalia are seldom brought into the picture. Similarly, the acts of showing and viewing are the main focus of major sex scenes, further confirming the hetero-male voyeuristic character of the text. This occurs, for example, during the most detailed encounter between la morena and her nurse lover, where the former "estaba boca abajo con las caderas levantadas, mostrando el ano y los labios vaginales" (29, my italics). Similarly, in

another scene featuring a lesbian erotic exchange between members of a time-traveling cult, the male driver in their car acts as an avid spectator: “pon[e] atención en [sic] los sonidos de las mujeres” (36). Female sexual pleasure, then, is dictated by hegemonic scopisic standards and, when not absent, one-dimensional at best for non-cybernetic characters in Guzmán Wolffer’s novel. This phenomenon, however, is not recent. In her renowned study “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey identifies similar patterns in the construction of female characters in classic Hollywood films. Mulvey asserts that the female figure “stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (35). This is exactly the case with female characters in Guzmán Wolffer’s novel, they are not full-fledged women but rather “images” of women onto which a variety of clichéd fantasies can be attached. In this sense, the presence of Leticia/Magnolia is perfectly logical because the narrative needs not a woman, but rather a visual representation of womanhood that can be programmed with any patriarchal design. While (re)programming can be achieved in humans, robots are far more suited for such a process.

It is evident, then, that cybernetic “femaleness” in *Que Dios se apiade* is regarded as superior than its flesh-and-blood version. A fembot can flaunt physical features that human women could never attain. It will never grow old, and it can be built and programmed to bring wild, heteronormative sex fantasies to life in exchange for nothing. Within this narrative, then, sexuality appears to be the major factor defining value and even humanness in machines. Despite the few praises Lupus gives Leticia/Magnolia for her analytical skills and unexpected sense of humor, it is the robot’s sexual involvement with the male protagonist that makes him overcome the initial “uncanny valley” effect he experienced regarding humanoid machines. At the end of *Que Dios se apiade*, the lustful dynamics between Lupus and Leticia/Magnolia are hastily rebranded as “love,” and a pseudo-philosophical soliloquy about love conquering all things ensues as Leticia/Magnolia “dies” when she jumps into a magic portal to stop the villain, Milton Rose, from reaching the world of the gods. Even then, however, this deus ex machina fails to convince us that love is the trait making Leticia/Magnolia human-like and endearing despite being a machine. Such “love” is almost entirely based on a series of gratuitous semi-pornographic events. As the robot’s manual points out, Leticia/Magnolia was built to provide “excellent service.” This is just a performance, the execution of a program designed to fulfill the user’s wants, needs, and wildest desires.

It has been widely theorized, however, that traditional organic, human notions of “love”—and sex, and gender, and behavioral patterns—are all programmed and performed as well. Post-humanist narratives often explore this idea, that is, they play with the possibility of man-made bodies unbound by the laws of the flesh. And yet “these contemporary texts represent a future where human bodies are on the verge of becoming obsolete but sexuality nevertheless prevails” (Springer 35). This paradox is evident in *Que Dios se apiade*. A marked rigidity regarding feminine roles and behaviors is accompanied by surprising flexibility regarding its embodiment. Sexual innateness and so-called biological features become irrelevant. The idea, the experience, and the perception of sexuality are all that matters here. Anybody—and any kind of body—could potentially be a man or woman as long as the illusion of gender is executed well. Perhaps the tiresome intensity of performed gender in Guzmán Wolffer’s fembot, her excess flirtations, oversexualized body and coquettish gestures are all meant to make this illusion believable through overcompensation. One must concede that, in the end, Leticia/Magnolia does not make for a convincing woman. But neither do any of the human female characters in *Que Dios se apiade*. They are shallow images of women that exist only for the sake of enacting patriarchal fantasies, without provoking any lasting thoughts or reflections. While Guzmán Wolffer’s representation of female characters would not be out of place in the comic book or soft-core porn genres, it stands out as a missed opportunity in the posthuman scifi context, especially when the robot is such a malleable, versatile subject and the author does hold an influential amount of visibility and recognition in his field.<sup>7</sup>

### **La morena: A “Natural” Body Rejected by Technology**

La morena is perhaps the most intriguing and complex character in *Que Dios se apiade* de todos nosotros. As a Black lesbian, she stands out in a narrative where heterosexuality and Europeanized features are the favored standards for female characters. Although her job is far from lucrative—she works as an archive clerk for the State—la morena is financially independent, lives alone in an apartment of her own, and is portrayed neither as economically nor socially desperate or destitute. Her love life, while somewhat secretive, is thriving. Moreover, a considerable

---

<sup>7</sup> Guzmán Wolffer is a member of the Mexican Science Fiction and Fantasy Association and has received several literary awards, including first place in the 1996 Campeche National Poetry Competition, a prize in the 1992 literary competition of Oaxaca, and an honorable mention in the 1997 national vampire-story contest. The author’s readership is one of the highest in his genre as well, prompting the production of subsequent editions of some of his work (Bell 100).

portion of the novel is dedicated to her daily ritual of writing short stories and the scenarios she envisions based on the murder case files she sorts at the State archive. And yet this character is virtually disconnected from the main plot, which renders her actions, intriguing literary creations, and fatal destiny inconsequential to the narrative as a whole. Unlike Leticia/Magnolia, the cybernetic heroine, *la morena* doesn't even have a name<sup>8</sup>, just a racially evocative nickname.

Despite the above, *la morena* becomes important when viewed next to Leticia/Magnolia, with whom she forms clear binary oppositions on various levels. The first and perhaps most obvious contrast between the two is the cybernetic vs. organic issue. *La morena's* ethnicity becomes especially significant here, as black female bodies have been traditionally used as a symbol of "the natural body" and, as such, her figure is "a racial other, associated with the body in opposition to technology" (Fernbach 167). Whereas Leticia/Magnolia represents a literal and perfect embodiment of technology, *la morena* ultimately becomes a body rejected and destroyed by technology: her computer kills her as soon as she finishes typing her last short story, a horror narrative (Guzmán Wolffer 116). Later on, her lover finds a collection of floppy disks containing images of *la morena's* body, first full of life and sexual energy, then suddenly lifeless and fragmented (127), as if the machine had eaten up her corpse. Even when pitted against her desktop computer, *la morena* is presented as an Other in relation to technology: "La computadora y sus signos brillantes en la pantalla interrogaban las manos morenas, con hambre de palabras" (114). Notice how the machine is not only the subject in this sentence, but also a humanized entity who can question others and feel hunger. Conversely, *la morena* is downgraded from person to isolated body parts, at the mercy of the seemingly voracious computer.

Yet another significant contrast between Leticia/Magnolia and *la morena* is that of White vs. Black, especially in regard to female sexualities. Both characters are presented as extremely libidinous: Leticia/Magnolia seeks sex from Lupus around the clock and *la morena* engages sexually with *la enfermera*, her partner, every time the latter two are featured together in a scene of the novel. Nonetheless, *la morena's* body is more frequently and overtly fetishized and fragmented than Leticia/Magnolia's. Whenever *la morena* appears in the narrative, there is a gratuitous abundance of "labios carnosos" (21, 127), "prominente busto" (21, 28),

---

<sup>8</sup> It is significant that, while the female robot has not one but two names, all other women characters (except for Mirth Rose, the dead woman whose case Lupus investigates) remain nameless and are only referred to based on their professions (*La enfermera*, *La cocinera*, or *Las prostitutas*) or their physical features (such as *La rubia* and *La morena*).

“nalgas grandiosas” (22, 28, 29, 33), “senos desnudos” (28, 29, 36) “pezones” (36, 39), and “desnudez” (96). Additionally, both sexual and non-sexual physical features are often used as metonyms for her character. Expressions such as “las manos morenas” (28, 114) or “los cabellos negros” (73) are often her only referents. Patricia Hill Collins identifies Western perspectives on Black female body parts—especially primary and secondary sexual features—as historically infused with ideas of commodification that link Black women to (potential) prostitution: “current portrayals of Black women in popular culture—reducing Black women to butts—works to reinscribe these commodified body parts” (133). As in the case of Sarah Bartmann<sup>9</sup>, “the Hottentot Venus,” la morena is undeniably “reduced to her sexual parts” (Hill Collins 137). And much like Bartmann’s body after death, la morena’s features are showcased one by one, as if dissected, for exotic visual pleasure and entertainment above anything else. The compulsive mentions of her nude breasts or the size of her buttocks are completely inconsequential to the narrative or the character’s agency, yet they recur pervasively. Voyeurism, then, is what seems to drive the inclusion of la morena in *Que Dios se apiade*. Not only in regard to her race, but also her sexuality.

In her readings of (techno) fetishes in contemporary pop culture, Amanda Fernbach asserts that “lesbian fantasies are a staple of heterosexual erotic iconography” (77). It is not surprising, then, that the lesbian sub-narrative in Guzmán Wolffer’s novel should be constructed under hetero-male-centric parameters. Bringing to the fore a non-heteronormative relationship rivaling that of the two (stereotypically heterosexual) main characters may, on the surface, seem laudable. But upon closer inspection, the passionate romance between la morena and la enfermera turns out to be more of a Cinemax softcore-style garnish than the thought-provoking subplot it had the potential to be. Just as the depictions of Leticia/Magnolia’s sexual activity, the scenes featuring encounters between la morena and her lover are extremely graphic and tailored to satisfy male voyeuristic desires. Fragmentation also permeates these passages. Metonyms such as “los cabellos rubios” (39), “el uniforme blanco” (126), “las curvas y los pezones” (126), and “la lengua mojada” (127) reference the lesbian characters instead of nouns or pronouns designating a whole woman. Although the acts of touching passionately and cunnilingus are frequently emphasized in the scenes between la morena and the nurse, their specific

---

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Bartmann was a South African woman exhibited around Europe as a freak show attraction in the 19th Century. Denominated the “Hottentot Venus,” Bartmann was taken on tours where rich audiences paid fees to see her nude body. Features such as her buttocks, breasts, and genitals were considered highly exotic for their unfamiliar size and shape. After her death, Bartmann’s remains were dissected and continued to be publicly displayed for wealthy European viewers’ entertainment (Hill Collins 136-37).

experience of pleasure—other than vague mentions of “placer” (29, 128) and “prolongado éxtasis” (128)—is not discussed. The visual aspects of these activities are highlighted instead. This strictly voyeuristic construction of lesbianism differs jarringly from those in other Spanish-language lesbian Science Fiction narratives, such as *Planeta Hembra* (2001) by Gabriela Bustelo. Although Bustelo’s work also features statuesque female characters, her novel does not eschew women-centric depictions and explorations of female pleasure and, instead, puts them at the center of the narrative.<sup>10</sup> *Que Dios se apiade*, meanwhile, favors the (heteronormative) male gaze through and through, as if male-oriented visual depictions of sex and female-oriented sensorial descriptions of it were mutually exclusive.

Evidently, la morena’s characterization as a sexy lesbian with a hearty sexual appetite is a gratuitous element in the narrative, or what is commonly known in the comic-book and science fiction genres as “fan service.” Nevertheless, this trait further strengthens her contrasting relationship to Leticia/Magnolia, who despite being a machine behaves in a staunchly heterosexual fashion. And while both characters are described as very sexually active, their erotic interactions occur in opposite contexts: Leticia/Magnolia is very public with her flirtations and affections, while la morena is extremely private about hers. The robot grabs her partner’s genitals in a public parking lot (Guzmán Wolffer 50) and does not object to his attempt to touch her sexually while they are in a hospital room, in the presence of doctors and nurses (102). Conversely, la morena and her partner do not disclose their relationship with any other characters. Every one of their encounters occurs behind closed doors and generally late at night, when their contact is less likely to be noticed. All of their sexual interactions are set in la morena’s apartment, with the exception of their first time together, which occurs in an empty, closed exam room at the hospital where the nurse works (29). Additionally, after la morena is found dead in her apartment and her body is removed by the police, no scenes depict the nurse being notified of the incident nor being interrogated about it, as would be customary with significant others in possible homicide cases. She is simply left to discover an empty apartment and images of her lover’s lifeless body on a floppy disk. Even after such dire events, the lesbian relationship between la morena and

---

<sup>10</sup> On chapter forty-six, for example, Báez—the heroine—and her friend Alva go to Clitty, a nightclub where female performers and strippers perform for an all-female audience. The main act, a woman who calls herself Bang Bang, shows the audience how she can achieve orgasm without any sort of physical stimulation: “Los jadeos de la Hembra [sic], entrecortados y guturales, alcanzaron un cénit. Al ritmo de una cascada de gemidos agudos, un chorro de flujo intermitente salió de su vagina y mojó el suelo del escenario, dejando un pequeño charco entre sus zapatos azules” (Bustelo 142). Curiously, the obsessive-compulsive mentions of breasts and butts so prevalent in Guzmán Wolffer’s novel are absent here. And yet, the scene successfully communicates female pleasure.

the nurse must remain a secret. It is perhaps ironic that in a reality set nearly a century after this novel was written, where machines have become indistinguishable from humans and present-day illicit activities such as prostitution and drug use are not only legal but also ubiquitous, non-heteronormative sexualities should still be depicted as taboo.

Fernbach observes, in reference to Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, that what she calls the "phallic woman"—one who challenges male ownership of desire and feels equal or superior to men—is ultimately punished by death for daring to refuse the male gazes upon her and for desiring the feminine (62). Similarly, N. Katherine Hayles interprets the (gruesome) death of Lisa in John Varley's "Press Enter" as punishment for challenging male figures of power and usurping "the masculine role of [computer] penetration" in her activities as a highly effective hacker (168). In this sense, and for the same reasons, la morena shares the same fate as Salome and Lisa. First, she rebuffs sexual advances and abuses from men (22, 28-29) and then, refuses to be a passive object of desire; instead, she actively constructs her experience of pleasure and desire in opposition to hegemonic parameters. In a world where men are the policy-making and enforcing "licenciados" while women remain their wives, secretaries, prostitutes, and cooks, la morena creates and dictates the rules for her own worlds, which she constructs through writing. The agency this character gains by writing stories—some of which could be construed as anti-chauvinistic<sup>11</sup>—and by using computer technology to her own advancement puts her in a privileged position close to that of male characters. However, no good deed goes unpunished. As an adversary to all hegemonic values due to her ethnicity, sexuality, and non-compliance with monolithic gender standards, la morena is killed off abruptly and inconsequentially. After her death, everything related to this character—her body, her lover, and even the stories she crafted—virtually disappears. All that remains are vapid sexual remarks: "¿Y la nalgona del archivo?" asks Lupus, to which Pérez Grieg simply replies "se murió, tal vez de lo buena que estaba" (138).

Intriguingly, la morena is not the only phallic woman to end this way in *Que Dios se apiade*: the nurse and Leticia/Magnolia also find unsavory deaths as retribution for

---

<sup>11</sup> One of the meta-fictions written by La morena focuses on a vindictive secretary who tortures, rapes, and kills her boss for not acknowledging her as a suitable sexual partner during the many years they worked together. The secretary threatens to kill her boss if he cannot satisfy her sexually within the span of three hours, after which poisonous gas is set to fill his hermetically-sealed apartment. In the end, she leaves him to die in the lethal cloud while she escapes unharmed (36-39). Although this appears to be a basic—and stereotypical—metaphor for female retaliation against male hegemony, one cannot help but laugh at such a reductive version of "feminist" fiction writing: angry sex to hurt men.

defying hegemonic heteronormative codes. The nurse, who dared initiate the lesbian relationship between herself and la morena, dies painfully and gruesomely, stabbed and raped by multiple floppy disks and then electrocuted by la morena's computer (127-128). Separately, Leticia/Magnolia, despite fully adhering to hegemonic gender roles and sexualities, ends up outsmarting all male characters and discovering on her own how to defeat the villain, Milton Rose. She steals the "hero" spotlight from Lupus, and then must die. But the fembot sidekick dies as a sort of martyr: she jumps into the same cosmic portal as the villain, rips his head off, but then has all of her insides crushed beyond repair as her reward for saving the world from a crazed, time-traveling wizard. Contrarily, the prostitutes, the "ugly" cook, and all other female characters not challenging hetero-male hegemony, remain alive.

Killing off phallic and sexually unfettered female characters is not a rare occurrence in the science fiction genre. In *Blade Runner*, Pris and Zhora, both replicants—machine organisms indistinguishable from humans—who explore their sexualities openly and to their own (monetary) gain, die violently at the hands of über masculine protagonist Deckard. In contrast, Rachel—a far more virginal, sexually repressed replicant—not only lives on but is protected by Deckard himself, despite his instructions to destroy all replicants who have illegally infiltrated human-only areas. Similarly, in Fritz Lang's silent-era classic *Metropolis*, the sexually liberated, extroverted, mechanical Maria is burned at the stake for being a "witch," while the chaste, motherly, human Maria is spared. The old and tired virgin vs. whore binary finds a safe haven within Science Fiction. And while *Que Dios se apiade* does not represent this opposition in an exact literal sense (the prostitutes are, after all, among the few female characters not killed in the end), the phallic woman's inevitable punishment definitely holds true here. While the "whore" is no longer a prostitute but a woman who owns her own sexuality and defies patriarchal codes, the "virgin" can in fact be a total whore. So long as she does not challenge patriarchy and lets it control her body (and sexuality), she remains a saint.

## Conclusion

Gender and ethnic representations in *Que Dios se apiade de todos nosotros* are not only problematic but also symptomatic of the shortcomings of a genre that, supposedly, should allow authors and readers to envision a future with unlimited paradigms and possibilities. The treatment of gender in the novel proposes an ideal of femininity based on artificiality and complete patriarchal design. The fembot

Leticia/Magnolia, a—both literally and symbolically—male-constructed embodiment of womanhood, is depicted as unique, special, and ideal in contrast to flesh-and-blood female characters in the novel, who are by and large devoid of voices, histories, even names. Patriarchally-programmed gender is thus presented as more desirable and deserving of subjectivity—if only in small, controlled doses. Yet, at the same time, championing this cybernetic—yet outdated—version of femininity further confirms what Parker and other critics had suspected all along: “the robot’s experience of gender allows us to see that what we regard as intrinsic male and female responses may be determined instead by cultural programming” (179).

Donna Haraway envisioned the posthuman era as a new dawn where the cyborg—a hybrid, an “illegitimate offspring”—would abandon all loyalties to its father, the goal of a nuclear family and the imperative of heterosexuality as a means to that end (151). In this sense, Leticia/Magnolia fails as a representation of the posthuman because she embodies and enacts a completely antithetical agenda. No matter how many circuits and alloys make up her structure, she is not a cyborg but a repackaged version of archaic gender roles wrapped in glossy, scifi-scented plastic. Conversely, *la morena* may be portrayed as a fleshy human in *Que Dios se apiade*, but she is a truer cyborg in the end: despite her ethnic exoticization, she forfeits the heteronormative Eden, commands her own experience of sexuality and pleasure, and joins herself with technology in her pursuit of agency through electronic writing, even if that very technology betrays her in the end. It is significant, however, that the novel closes with a (white) robot elevated to the status of a superior, saintly human by virtue of her sexual favors and ultimate sacrifice for a man, while a (black) human woman is wiped from history via a cruel, anonymous death after daring to be a phallic woman, a rebellious hybrid much like Haraway’s cyborg.

Gender and humanness convene dangerously in *Que Dios se apiade*, where their optimum configuration advocates heteronormativity, submission to patriarchal desire, and the superiority of youth, fitness, and whiteness. The latter is especially problematic within the Latin American context: it renders historically significant mestizo, indigenous, and African ethnicities and cultural legacies invisible, as if they did not have a place in the futures foreshadowed by science fiction. Such an issue, however, is present in posthuman SF around the world. González interprets whitewashing and absence of racial diversity in such texts as some authors’ attempt to depict social equality through homogenization. Despite any good intentions, “the problem with this kind of *e-race-sure* is that it assumes differences between

individuals or groups to be primarily superficial—literally skin deep” (González 71). The lack—and violent elimination—of ethnically diverse characters, as well as the absence of clearly indigenous and mestizo figures in Guzmán Wolffer’s novel becomes increasingly conspicuous when considering that the entire novel takes place in a futuristic Mexico City with socioeconomic turmoil and disparity at its heart, thus making the text’s homogenized representation even more incongruous. Although Guzmán Wolffer is not the only author guilty of such a literary faux pas, adhering to the e-race-sure practices of Anglo science fiction also erases uniqueness and originality from his novel. Similar arguments can be made regarding the treatment of gender in the text. Only when this and similar Latin American science fiction authors learn to break away from the bad habits of canon scifi will their regional versions of the genre gain the visibility and recognition they deserve.

### Works Cited

- Bell, Andrea. “Ricardo Guzmán Wolffer.” *Latin American Science Fiction Writers: An A-to-Z Guide*. Ed. Darrel B. Lockhart. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2004. 100-103. Print.
- and Yolanda Molina Gavilán. "Science Fiction in Latin America and Spain." Introduction. *Cosmos Latinos: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain*. Ed. Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina Gavilán. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003. 1-19. Print.
- Blade Runner*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Prod. Ridley Scott and Hampton Francher. By Hampton Francher and David Webb Peoples. Warner Bros., 1982. DVD.
- Bustelo, Gabriela. *Planeta Hembra*. Barcelona: RBA, 2001. Print.
- Fernbach, Amanda. *Fantasies of Fetishism: From Decadence to the Post-human*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002. Print.
- Graham, Stephen. "Anti-Utopian Ripostes: Cyberpunk Science Fiction and Critical Urban Social Science." *The Cybercities Reader*. Ed. Stephen Graham. London: Routledge, 2004. 389-90. Print.
- Gonzalez, Jennifer. "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research." *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*. Ed. Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kathryn Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2000. 58-73. Print.

## Polifonía

- Guzmán Wolffer, Ricardo. *Que Dios se apiade de todos nosotros*. México: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993. Print.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Life Cycle of Cyborgs: Writing the Posthuman." *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs, and Cyberspace*. Ed. Jenny Wolmark. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999. 157-73. Print.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. "The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood." *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. 123-48. Print.
- MacKinnon, Catharine. "Sexuality." *The Second Wave: a Reader in Feminist Theory*. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997. 158-80. Print.
- Marañón Lazcano, Felipe and Carlos Muñiz. "Estereotipos mediáticos de los indígenas: Análisis de las representaciones en los programas de ficción y entretenimiento de televisoras en Nuevo León." *Razón y Palabra* 80 (2012): 1-23. Web.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. 34-47. Print.
- Muñoz Valenzuela, Diego. *Flores para un cyborg*. Santiago: Grijalbo Mondadori, 1997. Print.
- Parker, Jo Alyson. "Gendering the Robot: Stanislaw Lem's 'The Mask'" *Science Fiction Studies* 19.2 (1992): 178-91. Print.
- Springer, Claudia. "The Pleasure of the Interface." *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs, and Cyberspace*. Ed. Jenny Wolmark. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999. 34-54. Print.
- Trujillo Muñoz, Gabriel. "Ricardo Guzmán Wolffer: El abogado de las causas perdidas." *Biografías del futuro: La ciencia ficción mexicana y sus autores*. Mexicali, México: Universidad Autónoma De Baja California, 2000. 269-74. Print.