

Gender Violence on Stage: Exposing Patriarchal Toxins in Two Mexican Plays

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This critical analysis of two contemporary plays, *Un día de dos* (1982) by Leonor Azcárate and *Casa llena* (1982) by Estela Leñero, examines how toxic masculinity exposes an underlying manifestation of patriarchy and moral authority. The principal female characters in each play encounter in their relationships gender-based violence by male partners who conform to masculine ideals. This conformity normalizes control and abuse toward the two characters, who appear to be conflicted by what they believe is love and commitment to their partners. The women struggle to maintain any sense of autonomy, both physically and psychologically, as the men assert their historically and culturally claimed power. Azcárate and Leñero underscore outdated systems and practices related to marriage and love, calling on audiences to reimagine instead an alternative mode of thinking, one that provides women a space to seek autonomy in both the private and public sectors.

Keywords: Mexican theater. gender identity, gender roles, feminist theory, private/public spheres, masculine toxicity

Este análisis crítico de dos dramas contemporáneos, *Un día de dos* (1982) de Leonor Azcárate y *Casa llena* (1982) de Estela Leñero, examina cómo la masculinidad tóxica revela la manifestación subyacente del patriarcado y la autoridad moral. Los principales personajes femeninos de cada obra se encuentran en sus relaciones íntimas con la violencia de género por parte de parejas varones que se ajustan a los ideales masculinos. Esta conformidad normaliza el control y el abuso hacia los dos personajes, que parecen estar en conflicto por lo que creen que es amor y compromiso con sus parejas. Las mujeres luchan por mantener cierta autonomía, tanto física como psicológicamente, mientras los hombres afirman su poder histórico y cultural. Azcárate y Leñero subrayan prácticas y sistemas obsoletos relacionados con el matrimonio y el amor, llamando al público a reimaginar un modo de pensamiento alternativo, uno que brinde a las mujeres un espacio para buscar autonomía tanto en el sector privado como en el público.

Palabras clave: teatro mexicano. identidad de género, roles de género, teoría feminista, esfera privada/pública, toxicidad masculina

Let us not yield to the simple sophistry of the antifeminists who proclaim an inferiority attributable to sex. Sex, as well as race, does not constitute any biological, historical, or social predetermination. It is simply a collection of conditions, a frame of concrete references within which humankind makes the effort to attain fulfillment in the development of its creative potential.

–Rosario Castellanos, “Self-Sacrifice Is a Mad Virtue” (1988)

Introduction: Women Seeking Individuality

In seeking to assert individuality, women often are faced with challenges of varying degrees, including from their own partners. In some instances, this search for individuality can be considered a threat to men who circulate within a particular machista-centered system premised on male privilege and patriarchal standards. This is not to say that significant progress has not been made in terms of addressing gender bias and violence against women. One example of an accomplished female who used her work to foment positive change is Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974). As a pioneering Mexican woman who addressed gender inequality in the early 1970s and whose writing resonates with that of the French theorist and feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir, Castellanos boldly reminds her readers, in her seminal essay “Self-Sacrifice Is a Mad Virtue,” that sex does not predetermine women’s roles in society, urging her readers to consider instead the multilayered complexities of gender and the importance of individual agency (1988, 259–263). Castellanos’s critique of cultural conditioning unmasks a scripted and silencing role where women are culturally taught to wait for male approval while following a designated path to marriage and childbirth.

Leonor Azcárate and Estela Leñero, renowned Mexican playwrights who began to develop their high-achieving careers in the late 1970s and 80s, address the need to recognize gender identity as complex and relationships as dynamic in their respective plays, *Un día de dos* and *Casa llena*. Published together in 1986 under the fitting title *La pareja*, the plays center on young, heterosexual couples struggling to reconcile feelings of love and loneliness with incompatibility. Despite the title’s reference to *una pareja*, which suggests a team of two or a partnership, the couple’s relationship in *Un día de dos* is severely damaged, and in *Casa llena*, the featured pair are effectively an ex-couple who struggle to accept their recent separation.

This article proposes that both plays expose the intimate relationships of the couples as manifestations of toxic masculinity. Representative of socially destructive and damaging cultural norms of manhood, toxic masculinity is harmful to gender identities across societies and class distinctions. Whereas the couples in Azcárate’s and Leñero’s plays display a desire for love and belonging, their relationships expose instead a venomous, yet quite latent, masculine system layered with otherizing methods premised on

historically structured gender politics. The women protagonists in each play search for a gender identity that is noncontingent to their male partner's pathological demands and need to dominate the conversation as well as the actual living space. The space in which their encounters occur, a modest apartment in both plays, converts into a site of masculine empowerment, an arena of aggressive masculine enabling, where any emergence of gendered individuality is recast as male institutional and structural privilege. Repeated endeavors by the women to instill a sense of subjectivity are redirected by their male partners who attempt to maintain instead a rather macho, toxic relationship, one that is disguised, unsurprisingly, under gender hierarchies and situational power relations. The once-private sanctuary of their apartment becomes a metaphorically poisoned site where conventional gender expectations encumber the autonomy and personal safe space of the two principal women characters.

Azcárate and Leñero approach the topic of male violence and gender toxicity through the lens of heterosexual, middle-class couples in Mexico's contemporary society. Audiences would likely expect young couples represented on stage to fulfill a formulaic role of love based on historically scripted ideologies. However, any sense of normality is readily undermined by the underlying layers of violence, disrespect, and oppression. Through seeking to restore an ideal of blissful marriage and undying love, the women instead uncover the toxic forces that have infiltrated and disrupted their learned behaviors and expectations. Any resemblance of a happily-ever-after blueprint is reframed as an endangering formula steeped in hegemonic masculinity with the potential to be severely damaging to any claim of female self-empowerment.

Whereas other aspects of toxicity are present in these two plays, the focus in this analysis is specifically on masculine toxicity and how unsuspected male aggressions can be cleverly disguised under a concept of love and marriage. Applying a theoretical framework of toxicity invites audiences to reconsider violence without demonizing a socially ingrained macho culture. While machismo was originally specific to Latin American contexts, toxic masculinity is a broader concept that encompasses male aggression across cultures, classes, and racial or ethnic groups. This distinction allows audiences to view the structural violence and ills of gender toxicity from both within and outside Mexican society's official rhetoric.

Toxic Masculinity and Its Perils

Defined generally as a set of cultural understandings, structures, and practices of male gender privilege, toxic masculinity has been attributed to misogyny, homophobia, hypermasculinity, and male aggression (Harrington 2021; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Unlike other manifestations of masculine proclivities, toxic masculinity is a form of male aggression where the threat is seemingly invisible, and the infection essentially

can remain unnoticed and undiagnosed. Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell (2020) suggest in the introduction to their edited volume on hegemonic masculinity in superhero figures that “toxic masculinity focuses on the way that the extreme rejection of femininity through the performance of hypermasculinity creates unhealthy behavioral patterns and ideological beliefs that become toxic to men and, on a structural level, to their environments” (5). De Dauw and Connell’s definition of toxic masculinity is founded on a premise of male behavior types of heteronormativity in opposition to female types and, interestingly, they suggest that this negative behavior can alter men as well as their surroundings.

Stephen Whitehead (2021) in *Toxic Masculinity: Curing the Virus*, refers to ill-favored forms of masculinity as a “virus” (which also happens to exist in a certain contiguous space) and reminds his readers of the numerous pitfalls of binary male-female gender identity founded on biological determinism: “genitalia does not determine identity. It does not determine how a person thinks. It does not determine what a person is capable of” (27). In his brief historical dive into the myth of male gender privilege, Whitehead reminds his readers how both men and women “may unwittingly collude in toxic masculinity as well as being the primary victims of it” (21). This is a point that will be further analyzed within the context of both plays more specifically to understand how inappropriate masculine behaviors in the works appear so engrained in certain cultures and experiences that they do not just exist but actually *thrive* without questioning or examination.

Both private and public spaces alike (i.e., homes, institutions) can become sites where manifestations of patriarchy and hypermasculinity materialize and surface, sometimes in rather obscure manners. Luis Castañeda (2023) examines toxic masculinity and its ramifications for women authors as exemplified in the Argentine novel *Mona* (2019). Noting that the term toxic masculinity was originally coined by R. W. Connell in the 1980s, Castañeda identifies a “latent character and dehumanizing potential” in deceptive masculine aggression that can effectively “engineer noxious spaces where women imperceptibly and insidiously lose their humanity” (20). Referencing Sara Ahmed’s work on “white spaces” where nonwhite bodies often experience various degrees of displacement, Castañeda proposes the following regarding toxic masculinity: “One may argue that toxic masculinity operates in a comparable fashion: when men’s, women’s, and other bodies interact in the same locales, worlds that have been constructed by and for men. . . , [women writers] may selectively suffer from high levels of slow, latent, or invisible gender toxicity that do not necessarily affect their immune counterparts (who *are themselves* the poison). Thus, men walk --more--freely [*sic*] where women can’t” (21, original emphasis).

This point is crucial, as women may be unaware they are being poisoned by toxic relationships in spaces—public or private—shared by masculine institutions and male microaggressions. Presumed safe spaces for women could theoretically be inundated with a venomous toxin if the space has been subjugated by an aggressive, misogynist male partner.

Institutionalized Masculinity and Toxic Gender Roles

Although toxic masculinity may appear like machismo on the surface, these two concepts represent fundamentally different behaviors and cultural frameworks. Machismo is a hegemonic masculinity that is often passed down through generations as part of a social system embedded in cultural conventionality, identity, and pride. As a culturally specific form of traditional masculinity, often associated with Latin American contexts, machismo can have both positive and negative connotations; for example, as bravery, responsibility, and family loyalty as well as exaggerated masculine pride, strength, and dominance over women. Charissa Pizarro offers a good definition of machismo in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Multicultural Counseling, Social Justice, and Advocacy* (2024): “a construct that encompasses the expectations and prescribed behaviors and beliefs of how a male should behave in society and at home” (964). Moreover, she confirms that as a “multidimensional construct,” there are many factors, including generation or age, socioeconomic status, and cultural differences, that affect our conceptualizations of machista attitudes (965). Toxic masculinity is a broader critique of certain harmful behaviors and expectations, regardless of culture. Notably, toxic masculinity upholds rigid gender roles that are harmful to both men and women and is therefore always viewed negatively. The toxicity manifests itself in psychological and sociological patterns that often embody various forms of emotional manipulation, violence, and other unhealthy attitudes toward consent and relationships.

In Mexico, machismo has historically been articulated as analogous to the state’s identity. Successes and failures of the nation were paired with masculinity as Mexican male identity morphed and adapted along with political parties and nationally-sanctioned manhood constructions of what it means to be “true” Mexicans, i.e., “lo mexicano.” Carmen Patricia Tovar and Alejandro Puga (2021) propose that the roots of this nation and male gender pairing can be traced to 1946 when the postrevolutionary Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) was reformulated as the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (58). Tovar and Puga argue that it was not until the 1980s that this absolute construct for masculinity displayed initial signs of erosion: “This seemingly endless portability of the father-of-the-house/father-of-the-nation image reaches its apex in the mid-1980s, as Mexico City slips into an economic crisis due to inflation, and gives way to the crisis of the megalopolis after the 1985 earthquake. Moving forward, narrators of the city must interrogate constructs of the nation (and by association, constructs of

masculinity) for their relevance as much as for their continuity” (59). During this period, a direct correlation between the nation and masculinity began to shift along with “all of its patriarchal trappings” (58), and long-standing institutionalized masculinity was challenged by new models for a national patriarch.¹

Feminist Movements and the Restructuring of Hegemonic Masculinity

Initially published in 1982, *Un día de dos* by Leonor Azcárate and *Casa llena* by Estela Leñero were subsequently published under one cover in 1986 by the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla with the single title *La pareja*. This is important to note, given that the term toxic masculinity was newly formulated in the 1980s, several years before the onset of worldwide gender-advocating phenomena such as the MeToo movement. *Un día de dos* and *Casa llena* were produced and published during a period when women dramatists undoubtedly had an impactful presence on the Mexican stage.² By employing experimental structures such as new forms and nonrealistic scenarios, some women dramatists began to center the subject matter of their theatrical performances and dramas on understanding and dismantling otherizing practices in what could be considered a masculine, hegemonic, and rather unhealthy system.

Situating *Un día de dos* and *Casa llena* in the 1980s offers insight into how some Mexican women dramatists shifted focus from earlier feminist plays and productions. With the materialization of second-wave feminism in Mexico following the social protests of 1968 (Draper 2018; Gargallo 2008), women dramatists began to create performance pieces that reflected society’s repositioning of conservative, patriarchal logic and centered instead on women as active participants in arenas where access had previously been inconceivable. Draper explains how this shift in notions of domesticity and modes of living aligned with “a demand for democracy and equality through the suspension of fixed social categories and roles, where the participation of women and the reactions that emerged upon remembering them express a right to stand precisely where they were not envisioned: *to share that space which has been denied to them for decades and to do so in an egalitarian manner*” (134, original emphasis).

Kristen Nigro (1996) notes how a “so-called New Feminism” following the events of 1968 emerged from disillusioned women activists who realized that their participation in

¹ Some examples of new models mentioned by Tovar and Puga are Elena Poniatowska, José Agustín, María Luisa Puga, and Luis Zapata (59).

² Two renowned women dramatists of this time whose works have been staged extensively in Mexico are Sabina Berman (see her *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, 1998) and Carmen Boullosa (*Teatro herético*, 1987). Moreover, Reyna Barrera edited a comprehensive anthology of contemporary plays by Mexican women dramatists with a title emphasizing their new perspective: *Escena con otra mirada* (2003).

Leftist movements had been bound by the “same old patriarchal hierarchies,” i.e., washing dishes and preparing meals (59).³ Nigro proposes that this disillusionment likely explains a rise in plays by women dramatists in the 1970s featuring gender relations on a more intimate level instead of larger political struggles: “This new feminism could also help explain why since the 1970s much theatre written by women in Mexico has tended to focus on the particular rather than the general, on the local rather than the national, and on couples rather than families (the latter being the symbol par excellence that official rhetoric has long associated with the state)” (59). In an interview, Estela Leñero adds a noteworthy layer to Nigro’s characterization, suggesting that the exploitation of women has become more “sophisticated,” as a paradoxical form of cultivated toxicity: “Creo que la mujer ha estado en completa desventaja respecto al hombre en el mundo público y también en el mundo privado. Pienso que en la actualidad se han sofisticado mucho los modos de explotación, pero siguen existiendo” (qtd. in Varona 2014, 82). These two inclusive feminist ideologies, a demand for shared democratic space and a search for intimacy and equality in personal spaces, appear to coalesce in Mexico’s 1980s feminist theatrical arena.

Moreover, women authors in Mexico’s literary landscape witnessed in the 1980s and 90s a phenomenon that was named the *boom femenino*.⁴ During this period, publications by Mexican women experienced both national and international acclaim, overcoming numerous obstacles, including a lack of respect for their work that their male counterparts did not encounter.⁵ In “The Will to Be: Mexican Women Novelists from the Late 1960s to the 1990s,” Irma M. López (2010) situates the *boom femenino* within a socioeconomic framework following the 1968 social movements. Echoing Tovar and Puga’s explanation for the decline of Mexico’s masculine virility, López similarly illustrates two key moments of disorder and uncertainty during this time—the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 and Mexico’s economic recession during the 1980s: “The intellectual compulsion to revise the roles that each gender assumes within culture becomes clear, not only in order to oppose the political repression instanced by the Tlatelolco episode in 1968, but also to confront the economic recession that took place during the 1980s. Both the Tlatelolco event and this subsequent economic upheaval drastically affect the life of many Mexican families and cause both genders to question their traditional roles” (39). These two significant

³ This is not to suggest that women were not active participants in Mexico’s 1960s social protests. Elaine Carey (2005) provides several examples of how women contributed to the political movements in the 1960s, including as participants in the National Strike Council, brigades, *guardias*, and the Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas (58, 88).

⁴ The 1980s and 90s is an approximate timeframe that marks a recognizable growth in Mexican women’s writing in both the literary scene and academic communities; the timeframe is not exclusionary and is not intended to dismiss the earlier, remarkable contributions by other Mexican women authors. See Sara E. L. Bowskill’s chapter on “The Origins of the Mexican *Boom Femenino*” (2010).

⁵ Two prominent examples are *Arráncame la vida* (1985) by Ángeles Mastretta and *Como agua para chocolate* (1992, first published in 1989) by Laura Esquivel, both of which were adapted to film and released to international audiences as *Tear this Heart Out* (2008) and *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992).

events facilitated a critical reassessment of conventional societal expectations and the roles of couples within both the private and public domains. The disruption of traditional ideologies enabled a reconfiguration of family roles beyond the constraints of legacy gender structures. Nonetheless, it is important to underscore that, as López rightly notes, these adapting perceptions occurred primarily “at the middle class and urban socioeconomic level” (39).

Physical Maladies and Venomous Spaces: *Un día de dos*

With a particular focus on heteronormative, middle class, urban relationships, both *Un día de dos* and *Casa llena* dramatize the conflicting lives of two young couples, or in the case of *Casa llena*, an ex-couple, as they attempt to navigate situational power struggles premised on shifting gender roles and expectations. These two dramatic pieces demonstrate on a micro level how gender toxicity seeps into the couple’s lives and inundates their space, resulting in the near impossibility of reconciliation between male assertiveness and female self-awareness. On a macro level, the works underscore that “lo personal es lo político” (Nigro 2019, 116) and reinforce the need to first recognize and then condemn historically embedded but well-disguised cultural practices of toxic masculinity. In seeking to define and claim the right to move and speak freely in the private space of their homes, the women protagonists unfortunately find themselves struggling to mediate feelings of love and passion with a desire for individuality and self-edification.

From the opening scene of *Un día de dos*, Gloria and Alfonso convey an image of a conventional married couple who have been sharing the same living space for several years and are settling into their assigned gender roles. Their items are comfortably strewn about the apartment, and their morning banter appears nonchalant and banal as they discuss what to prepare for breakfast. The only hint of restlessness stems from Alfonso who has a cast on his leg and apparently has not been able to work or leave the apartment, for how long we do not know. Alfonso’s injured leg restricts his mobility, confining him to the apartment, and to add to his disgruntlement, Gloria decides to call in sick to work. This opening scene sets the stage for what develops into a verbally abusive situation between a seemingly benign couple conforming to prescriptive gender roles.

Geminal signs of a latent, toxic masculinity are inserted throughout the play in the form of references to bodily injuries and physical illnesses (some appearing to be psychosomatic), as well as lists of prescription drugs. First, there is Alfonso’s limited mobility and confinement in the apartment. Second, Gloria calls in sick, complaining of a stomachache and nausea, as she exclaims to Alfonso her hatred for work: “Odio, pero odio trabajar... lo bueno es que a veces uno se enferma...” (17). The injuries then begin to escalate as she later stubs her toe on a bowling ball left carelessly in the room, and Alfonso

begins to complain of a fever. Their ailments culminate in the final moments of the play when audiences witness the couple frantically offering each other medications to cure their suspicious aches. Their symptoms compound as their conversation develops:

GLORIA. ¿Quieres enterobioformo?
ALFONSO. Eso no me sirve de nada. Me duele el corazón.
GLORIA. Con una aspirina se te quita. O a lo mejor tienes gastritis.
ALFONSO. Tengo náuseas.
GLORIA. Me duele la pierna. Creo que me la fracturé.
ALFONSO. ¡Estás loca! No tienes en qué pensar.
GLORIA. Como que no puedo respirar y veo borroso... ¡Ay, Alfonso, no sé qué tengo! Se me duerme la frente y la lengua...
ALFONSO. Aquí tenemos Melox. Tómate un trago.
GLORIA. No, me siento mal. Siento como si una mano me estrangulara. ¡Ay... tráeme agua...! (41–42)

Whereas these examples alone do not exactly translate into gender toxicity, they do suggest that some form of sickness or an unhealthy environment, perhaps both exacerbated and real, has permeated their apartment and their relationship. Alfonso hints on more than one occasion about a correlation between his broken leg and their troublesome relationship, which leaves him feeling disabled and trapped: “No puedes entender que me siento como un inválido” (27); “Pero me tienes como un preso” (31). The playwright cleverly suggests in these developing scenes an enigmatic association between bodily illness, pain, and an unhealthy relationship. Meanwhile, audiences are left to wonder if characters are simulating their illnesses as an excuse to remain in the apartment and in the relationship. Are their maladies psychological or physiological or both?

Alongside the play’s many references to illness and medication are recurring patterns of verbal aggression. An example appears in the opening scene, when Gloria and Alfonso’s casual breakfast chat suddenly turns into a venomous argument over something trivial. While Alfonso is in the bathroom, Gloria solicits his help with a crossword puzzle clue she’s working on. Their exchange unfolds as follows:

GLORIA. Poncho... Gordito... ¿Cuántos milímetros tiene un centímetro?
ALFONSO. ¿Mh?
GLORIA. ¿Mil? ¿Como mil? (. . .)
ALFONSO. Te dije que diez. Qué no oyes. A ver, ¿cuántos tiene?
GLORIA. Tú no dijiste diez. Entonces estoy sorda o loca...
ALFONSO. ¡Cómo te voy a decir que mil, tonta! (18)

Ultimately, the disagreement intensifies to the point where Gloria becomes visibly distressed and begins to cry, asserting: “Me quiero morir. Y no me quieres y me dijiste pendeja y nunca tengo la razón y soy una pendeja y no me quieres y me quiero morir” (19). Alfonso replies with a single intimidating and aggressive sentence: “¡Pues muérete, carajo!” (19). As evidenced by Alfonso’s aggressive replies, the couple’s relationship is not without complications, and their unexplained illnesses are not the only signs of a latent toxicity.

Interspersed with the episodic bodily pains and verbal attacks are scenes with Blanquita, an enigmatic figure who interrupts the couple’s arguments and attempts to “cure” their ailments. A one-dimensional character with brusque manners and no apparent emotional sympathy for the couple, Blanquita has been contracted to ensure Alfonso receives the prescribed injections for his injured leg. She first appears on stage when she interrupts the disputing couple over their misunderstanding over the crossword puzzle. During her initial appearance, she repeatedly attempts to forcefully inject a syringe needle into Alfonso, while he loudly expresses discomfort each time. She then accepts payment and precipitously exits the stage. In the final scene of the play, the unempathetic nurse returns to the stage three times. The first two reappearances by Blanquita, who is now referred to as simply *Enfermera*, foreshadow the final venomous exchange between Alfonso and Gloria. In the first reappearance, Alfonso suffers from what appears to be a heart attack. Gloria, visibly upset, asks the nurse if he can be saved, to which she replies with a cold, abrupt, “Lo dudo mucho” (40). When Alfonso stops moving, Gloria begins to shout: “¡No! ¡No! ¡Yo lo maté! ¡Yo lo maté!” (41). The scene goes dark.

The nurse leaves the stage only to return a few moments later to assist Gloria, who now has an undiagnosed ailment. This second exchange ends with Alfonso being the one to exclaim: “¡No! ¡Cómo es posible! ¡Yo la maté! ¡Yo la maté!” (43), followed by the nurse exiting the stage. During the closing moments of the play, Blanquita makes one final reappearance after an odd scene between the couple who, from opposite sides of the stage, mirror each other while insisting, “Yo no la/lo maté” (44). Blanquita, who emerges as an enlarged and seemingly caricatured figure, according to the stage directions, attempts to inject both Alfonso and Gloria “con una enorme jeringa” that appears “más grande de lo que anteriormente se veía” (44).

Is it Blanquita’s role to cure the couple’s ailments and/or their relationship? Is she utilizing prescription medicine as a remedy for their toxic relationship? The only certainty about this rather perplexing character is that she adds to the mystery of the infected environment in the apartment. The dispassionate nurse does not offer any answers to the question of whether Alfonso and Gloria are legitimately ill or suffering some other form of toxicity. Yet her appearance does reinforce the idea that there is some degree of socially destructive patterns of behavior in the couple’s relationship.

Intersections of Microaggressions and Toxicity

Given the subtle nature of toxicity, it can often go undetected in the form of microaggressions. In *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, Derald Wing Sue (2010) defines microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (5). Sue further clarifies that “perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the recipient of the communication” (5). One example of microaggression is when someone presumes a black person is dangerous or violent and instinctively clutches their purse or checks their wallet even if they are not cognizant of their feelings (Nadal 2020). Whereas such subtle acts of microaggression may appear minor and harmless, repeated experiences can further marginalize groups and produce feelings of frustration, anger, and worthlessness (Sue 2010, 6). Moreover, microaggressions can be a tool of toxic masculinity, especially toward women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and men who do not conform to traditional masculine norms. They help enforce gender roles and subtly reinforce the idea that masculinity must be stoic and dominant, much like toxic masculinity.

In *Un día de dos*, two scenes depict microaggressions stemming from the male partner, Alfonso, that are clearly targeted at Gloria. Whereas some might argue that Gloria often intercedes with her own quips and admonishing remarks, her behavior suggests that an invisible toxicity has unknowingly—or perhaps knowingly but unwillingly—seeped into their relationship. In the first example of microaggression, Alfonso resorts to obligated prescribed roles of machismo that are cleverly disguised with touches of affection and desire. The couple decide in this scene to end their relationship, and Gloria is witnessed fervently packing Alfonso’s items for him in suitcases; however, when Gloria steps offstage through the bathroom door, Alfonso removes the clothing from the suitcases, stating, “Yoya... esta maleta está mal hecha... Yoya...” (30). When Gloria returns to find the clothes strewn about the room, she becomes vividly upset. Alfonso’s response to Gloria’s emotional reaction is laughter followed by a brazen attempt to seduce her. The sequence unfolds as follows:

ALFONSO. No me grites, ¿eh? (*La lleva a la cama.*)
GLORIA. No te estoy gritando.
ALFONSO. Ándale, ven, un ratito...
GLORIA. No quiero nada...
ALFONSO. Un besito nada más.
GLORIA. ¡Que no! ¡Ya estoy harta! ¿Sabes? He sido tu madre, tu abuela, todo. ¡Carajo!

ALFONSO: Eso dices. Pero me tienes como un preso. No me dejas en paz ni un minuto. (31)

This scene clearly portrays what Sue refers to as a demeaning exchange where the perpetrator is unaware of their potentially damaging effects (5), all while operating under the disguise of a healthy relationship. Alfonso disrespectfully tries to redirect Gloria's anger by seducing her. In turn, Gloria responds with a line quite recognizable among women: she feels confined by hegemonic normativity understood as historically defined gender roles of wife, mother, grandmother. Alfonso's retort is to accuse Gloria of making him feel like a prisoner who desperately seeks a moment of peace alone.

The second example of microaggression occurs when another young couple stops by unannounced for a visit. Recently returning from their honeymoon in Acapulco, Gilda and Javier appear at the end of scene two after another tense moment when Gloria asks Alfonso for a divorce. Gilda, who dominates the conversation while Javier simply responds with brief chuckles, is seemingly unaware of the tension between Gloria and Alfonso. Her romantic frame of mind is apparent in her comment about Gloria and Alfonso's shared maladies being compared to a honeymoon: "Los dos se enfermaron al mismo tiempo. ¡Qué romántico! Es como una luna de miel" (32). Recently married, Gilda and Javier represent the antithesis of Gloria and Alfonso, projecting an image of happily married bliss. Conversely, Alfonso and Gloria continue with their pernicious criticism of each other: "Aquí no te fijas. Yoya no ha levantado la casa," and "Este regadero es el estilo que tiene Alfonso de sacar la ropa sucia," (36) until their dialogue ultimately intensifies into an uneasy situation. The following exchange demonstrates the culmination of their toxicity:

ALFONSO. ¿Ya ves lo que haces con tus invitados?

GLORIA. Ya cálmate, Alfonso.

ALFONSO. ¿Saben qué? ¡Estábamos a punto de coger cuando llegaron ustedes! Así que las visitas tienen sueño...

GLORIA. No le hagan caso, está borracho...

GILDA. Bueno, yo creo que nos vamos.

ALFONSO. (*va hacia Gilda y la alcanza*) De ninguna manera. No te vayas, preciosa. Con todo el respeto que me mereces, Javier. (*Javier tiene un acceso de tos, los dos se apresuran a salir. Gilda esquiva a Alfonso y gira hacia el otro lado de la cama.*)

GILDA. (*antes de salir*) Les hablo después, chao... (*Salen.*)

GLORIA. ¡Esto sí no te lo perdono, Alfonso! ¿Oíste? Ahora sí te vas. No te soporto. (38)

Alfonso attempts to recuperate his macho image by first awkwardly stating that the couple were interrupted in a sexual act and, second, by flirting with Gilda in front of both Gloria and Gilda's new spouse. This scene with the happily married honeymooners set in opposition to Gloria and Alfonso's toxic relationship establishes a dynamic where private and public spaces collide. When Gilda and Javier enter the scene, they interrupt the very private space of the couple and introduce an element of public sharing. The argument is no longer contained by the young couple in their small space, and the toxicity of their relationship spreads to both Gilda and Javier, who precipitously leave the apartment.

Like a pendulum, the couple's relationship swings back to one of caring and concern in the final scene of the play when their illnesses surreptitiously become more deadly. Their actions reveal an inner conflict between conforming to conventional love story roles and realizing that these roles are tainted by violence. First, Alfonso appears to have a lethal heart attack, which leads Gloria to repent for her negative behavior: "Me arrepiento de haberte tratado tan mal. No me dejes sola" (41), and ends with her exclaiming: "¡No! ¡No! ¡Yo lo maté! ¡Yo lo maté!" (41). At this moment, the stage goes dark for a few minutes, and when the lights eventually resume, audiences discover that the couple has swapped their roles of repentant lover / victim. Gloria now shows symptoms of dying because, according to Blanquita, "está agonizando" (42). This time, Alfonso proclaims his undying love: "Te quiero más que a nadie," and "Yo no soy nadie sin ti. Te quiero. Te deseo. Has sido todo para mí, mi madre, mi abuela, mi prima, todo" (42), ending with the same exclamation of "¡Yo la maté!" (42).

The stage goes dark again, and in the final moments of the play, they simultaneously recite a litany of medicines from opposite ends of the stage—"Sulfaitiazol / Pembritín / Jarabe Toa / Mejoral / Metronidazol / Dipirona" (43)—and slowly walk toward center stage, where they embrace. When the police announce their arrival offstage, they separate and walk to opposite ends of the stage, each pronouncing: "Yo no la maté / Yo no lo maté" (44). Did they murder each other or are these thoughts of violence provoked by constant bickering between two people sharing a confined space? Each character emphatically denies that they killed the other in what appears to be a reciprocal act, all the while proclaiming their undying love and devotion.

Un día de dos by Leonor Azcárate cleverly uncloaks a dominant historical narrative about couples and the proverbial "happily-ever-after" fairy tale. The private space where heteronormative relationships are presumed to blossom is recast as a toxic environment where insults are exchanged, and verbal violence permeates the scene. Previous notions of a couple's private space as representative of a sanctuary are emphasized on center stage as outdated and failed. Instead, through the enactment of a troubled relationship mired in marital problems, Azcárate invites audiences to envision a more open and inclusive dialogue about gender identities and roles, as well as what it means to be in a healthy

relationship. Couples struggling with toxic relationships must learn to face their issues and not conceal them with “injections,” medicine, or outmoded promises.

How to Reclaim a Toxic Space from an Uninvited Ex-Partner: *Casa llena*

Written in 1982, *Casa llena* by Estela Leñero was recognized with the Premio Punto de Partida from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México the following year. The play centers on a conflict between a young, recently separated couple, Sara and Martín, over a space they once shared, a small apartment with a persistently leaky kitchen faucet. In an interview Leonor Azcárate was asked to comment on Leñero’s works and explained: “Con un lenguaje coloquial que convive con los silencios, en el transcurso del tiempo, la dramaturga en *Casa llena* plantea el tema de la pareja, en este caso una ex pareja de jóvenes que hacen sus pininos en el amor, que se ejercita en el desencuentro y la desolación” (qtd. in Palapa Quijas 2013).

The title of the play, *Casa llena* (Full house), suggests a space replete with family and love, a refuge of sorts; conversely, it implies a place understood to be at full capacity, where any additional item or person would be seen as a threat or an invasion into the location. Sara’s recently claimed apartment is effectively invaded by Martín who, even though he no longer resides there, relentlessly reminds Sara that the apartment was at one time shared between them. What ensues on stage is an uncomfortable argument between the ex-couple that turns physically violent, and their toxic relationship escalates in the final scene when Martín storms out, slamming the door behind him while water sprays uncontrollably from an unrepaired kitchen faucet.

The maliciousness in this couple’s relationship is embodied in Martín’s occupation of Sara’s personal space that he slowly transfigures into a rather toxic environment. In the opening scene, the audience learns that Martín convinced the building manager to let him into Sara’s apartment without her prior knowledge. When she returns from the supermarket carrying several bags of groceries, she finds Martín comfortably lying on her bed reading a book. Sara’s initial question to Martín hints at the possibility that this is not the first time she has returned home to find him occupying what is now her space: “¿Y **‘ra**, qué haces aquí?” (49). When Martín stands up to assist Sara with the heavy bags, audiences witness her first attempt at claiming her independence: “Son mis cosas, yo las alzo” (49). As Martín surreptitiously tries to peer into the bags to see what Sara has purchased, quickly remarking when he is discovered: “Tenía curiosidad de saber qué comes” (51), their conversation turns into a series of dry, short statements by Sara interspersed with unnecessarily negative comments from her ex-partner:

- SARA. Sopa Ramen, frijoles de lata.
MARTÍN. Huácala.
SARA. Pollo, sopas de pasta, cocas.
MARTÍN. ¿Agua negra con gas? (. . .)
 *Se quedan callados sin saber qué decir. Sara empieza a recoger las
 bolsas vacías. Martín lee lo que dice la lata de frijoles.*
MARTÍN. *(despectivo)* ¿Y esto es lo que comes? (51–52)

Martín continues to direct a series of questions at Sara, but his intent does not appear to be to learn more about her; rather, he seems to be looking to re-establish a connection between the two of them by simulating an interest in her daily routine, albeit in an adversarial manner. His efforts fail miserably, which is evidenced by Sara's indifferent behavior as she glances at her watch and then ignores Martín when he attempts to move closer to her. Sara appears impatient about his leaving the apartment but does not demand that he vacate the space... yet. Her feelings toward Martín's presence come across as ambivalent in the opening moments of the play.

By the end of the first scene, Sara's indecisive attitude toward her ex-partner turns to exasperation when Martín refuses to leave her apartment, a space that she considers to be her private sanctuary. Even when she confirms her ownership of the space, "es mi casa," he refuses to go, claiming that it is too dangerous for him to be out alone late at night. The scene concludes with Sara offering Martín the couch to spend the night, but instead he climbs into her bed despite her insistence that he leave her alone: "Déjame, Martín. Suéltame, ¿qué te crees?" (63). By inserting himself into Sara's private space (apartment, bed), Martín effectively invades the area and diffuses what Castañeda refers to as "high levels of slow, latent, or invisible gender toxicity that do not necessarily affect their immune counterparts (who *are themselves* the poison)" (2023, 21). Martín deviously manipulates the situation to his advantage and reclaims Sara's private, personal space as his own, leaving her vulnerable, without refuge, and without any immediate means to escape him. He refuses to accept Sara's rejection of him and her attempts to remove him from her presence. Furthermore, Martín appears to be not only immune to his own venomous actions but also completely unbothered by how uncomfortable he has made Sara, most likely due to his own egocentrism.

The poisoning of Sara's space intensifies in the second scene of the play as Martín continues taking over both the apartment and his ex-partner. He insists on reinserting himself into her life—"Tengo derecho a saber" (71) —despite Sara's best efforts to redirect him—"Lo que yo necesito es que te calles o te vayas. Desde que empezaste a hablar no has oído nada de lo que yo he dicho. ¿Qué crees que el único que piensa aquí eres tú? (70)." Martín ignores Sara's wishes and continues to condemn her lifestyle choices, her acquaintances, and even the apartment space itself. Sara becomes visibly frustrated and,

determined to separate herself from Martín's toxic environment, remarks, "Si no te vas de esta casa, me voy yo," to which Martín replies, "Te acompaño" (74). At this point, Sara realizes that it's not just the apartment that Martín wishes to appropriate but Sara herself. Space is a metaphor for her life, and Martín plans to aggressively and completely dominate both. At the beginning of the third and final scene, audiences witness Martín moving his items back into the apartment, and it is irrefutably evident that the space has been flooded with his toxicity. Sara stares in disbelief as she retorts, "¡No tienes límite, Martín!" (79).

Myra S. Gann (1998) examines masculine spaces in four of Leñero's works, including *Casa llena*. For Gann, private spaces (i.e., homes, apartments) that were traditionally viewed as "safe" places for women can become sites of masculine authoritarianism and female vulnerability:

Casa llena shows us that apartments, houses, or "homes" in general, in spite of the commonplace view that they are places for women (feminine spaces), correspond more closely to the male model of space than to a feminine one: they are physically closed and clearly defined; if inhabited by more than one person, hierarchies are inevitably established in them; and, though they seemingly exist to provide shelter and protection, they can actually make a woman more vulnerable to domestic violence by making it easier to locate her (235).

Gann concludes her discussion of *Casa llena* by emphasizing that Sara's ability to inhabit and determine the nature of a space will always be limited by the machista society in which she lives (236). Kirsten Nigro (2004) comes to a similar conclusion, indicating that "metafóricamente, esta batalla [between Sara and Martín] es equivalente a la que tiene lugar a escala superior en la sociedad, donde las mujeres son constantemente amenazadas con la pérdida de su espacio privado" (116). Leñero's play invites audiences to reconsider traditional private spaces of the home as belonging to and inseparable from a world of men, and, for women to survive (i.e., avoid a violent encounter) in these spaces, they find themselves obligated to perform historically prescribed and anticipated gender roles, despite their best efforts to redirect their partners.

Is It Just a Leaky Faucet? Memories, Manipulation, and Masculinity

Unlike *Un día de dos*, where the unhealthy relationship manifests itself in the form of physical ailments and medications, in Leñero's play the toxicity is embedded in the memories of a broken relationship that Martín struggles to repair. There are several references to time in this play, including Sara asking more than once "¿Qué horas son?"

(58) while glancing at her watch, her frequent references to “antes,” and Martín’s monologue about his father’s watch. On the one hand, Sara intends to move time forward, frequently reminding Martín that it is getting late and that he needs to leave before it becomes risky. On the other hand, Martín yearns to return to a memorable time when their marriage was thriving. He begins by reminding Sara of past moments they shared in Oaxaca: “Antes íbamos muy seguido, ¿verdad?”; “Tengo ganas de volver a probar en el mercado esos tamales” (57). Sara’s responses to Martín’s recollections are brief and noncommittal: “Sí,” “Antes,” “Nada” (57). She reminds him on more than one occasion that their relationship is no longer the same as it once was, “antes, ahora es distinto” (61), and “¿Crees que el tiempo no pasa y que las cosas siguen igual?” (71). Sara’s efforts, nonetheless, appear to be in vain, as Martín ignores her repeated glances at her watch and her promptings, albeit without much authority, for him to leave.

Martín’s recounting of the story of his father’s watch is a pivotal moment that raises questions about the intersections of time, memories, and toxicity in this play. He opens the monologue by mentioning how neither he nor Sara are aware of the time: “Hasta no se sabe qué horas son. Por ejemplo ahorita, ni tú ni yo tenemos idea de la hora” (58). This statement is completely inaccurate, as evidenced by Sara’s many attempts to redirect Martín’s attention to the passing time and the late hour. Martín is once again either ignoring Sara or rearranging his perspective and conversation to align with his own desires. He then continues to explain how his father “no podía vivir sin su reloj; todo el tiempo preguntando la hora” (58). This parallels Sara’s actions when on multiple occasions she asked Martín if he was aware of the time. The watch story concludes with Martín deceiving his father into waking early by changing the time on his timepiece. Martín seems to want to share this memory with Sara because he finds it amusing: “¿Por qué no te da risa?, es chistoso” (58). What he fails to understand or perhaps refuses to accept is that Sara is keenly aware of the time of day and the fact that it is getting darker by the minute. She repeatedly asks Martín “¿Qué horas son?” because she wants him to leave, and there is no trickery and no amusement in her persistent questioning.

Due to Martín’s complete self-absorption, he either misreads Sara’s signals or simply chooses to ignore them. Sara reminds him that even when he reminisces or dreams about her, it is within the parameters of his own agenda: “Además solamente sueñas y piensas en mí según te convenga. Pareciera que no existo y que ni sentimientos tengo” (70). Martín’s attempts at reconnecting with Sara through memories only result in the elicitation of short, noncommittal responses from her. By the end of the first scene, Martín has found his way back into Sara’s bed as she complains in disbelief, “Allá están tus cobijas. Quítate. (*Pausa. Mueve el cuerpo de Martín*) No te hagas el dormido, quítate de aquí, pero ahorita. (*Vuelve a moverlo.*) Martín, Martín... ya no te hagas... No tienes madre, Martín” (63). Sara remains uncertain at this point on how to address the masculine toxicity that has inundated her apartment.

One discernible symbol of the couple's permanently damaged relationship is the persistently leaky kitchen faucet. Audiences first witness the broken faucet in Scene One when Martín is sharing his story about adjusting the time on his father's watch. During his self-absorbed recounting of the story, he is entirely oblivious to the spewing water that is inundating the kitchen, that is, until he finishes his monologue and notices that Sara has not laughed. Once the leak has been contained, Martín relates the gushing water to Sara's attitude: "Qué me late que el agua se derrama según el estado de ánimo en que estés," to which Sara replies with a modest, "Tal vez" (60). From this moment forward, Martín begins to reoccupy Sara's apartment. His posters are displayed on the apartment walls, boxes full of his personal items are deposited around the space, and his clothing is properly hung in the closet. Martín's toxicity has permeated the space through a series of bitter, vitriolic attacks, and Sara finds that she must consider more drastic measures to eradicate his presence or risk losing any semblance of autonomy. She begins by removing his posters, then his books, as she more confidently asserts this time "Y éste es *mi* lugar" (84). The play ends with the two becoming physically violent as the kitchen sink begins to spew water once again. Martín eventually vacates the apartment, leaving Sara soaking wet and with her apartment in shambles. The broken kitchen faucet exemplifies the couple's damaged and irreparable relationship as well as the destructive force of masculine toxicity. A system of male domination and toxicity is mirrored in the space in *Casa llena*, and the apartment is left in ruins, not unlike their relationship.

La pareja: Systemic Toxicity, Some Final Thoughts

Through their performances of female characters struggling to survive systemic toxicity, Azcárate and Leñero expose a worldview assumed to be male, one of institutional and structural privileges in which heteropatriarchy is reinforced as representational of nationalism and normality. The private spaces where relationships are anticipated to thrive become exposed in both plays, inviting audiences to recognize a potentially latent gender toxicity imbued in their official understandings of love and marriage. Each principal female character performs a series of progressive acts of defiance; in *Casa llena*, these defiant acts eventually lead Sara to discover an alternative realm of potentiality, one that perhaps does not involve a male partner. The female character in Azcárate's play parallels her partner's actions in the final act, and there are undeniable moments of defiance that highlight some of the ramifications for gendered normality as well as the inescapable, destructive nature of toxic masculinity, especially if it goes unnoticed. Whereas Azcárate's play accentuates the pitfalls of verbal violence and Leñero's piece centers on physical violence and aggression, both dramas defy conventional notions of love and suggest women can empower themselves by appropriating cultural and historical narratives that have disempowered them.

By framing the analysis around gender toxicity rather than machismo, these plays are reinterpreted through a feminist lens that is not shaped by political rhetoric tied to national ideals of masculinity and gendered power. Considering that machismo is closely embedded in sociocultural constructs, most particularly related to Latin America, any criticism of it could be misinterpreted as demonizing men and culture. This in turn could be problematic when addressing an audience of theatregoers because it would potentially alienate them from the intended message on gender violence. Conversely, toxic masculinity does not share the same cultural ethos, and utilizing it as a critical framework for understanding the plays enables conditions for understanding violence as not inherent in the culture and not interconnected specifically to Mexico's national identity.

In Azcárate's and Leñero's plays, a dominant order—and the notion of male subjectivity as a singular ideal—is disrupted. Through a process of disassociating their identification from their male partner's authoritative (and possibly culturally embedded) manifestation of entitlement, the female protagonists challenge the authority of a dominating gendered and culturally / historically narrative voice. The exposure of an unwelcome and cleverly disguised toxicity in the couple's relationships suggests a fracture in the romance narrative, destabilizing a rather narrow happily-ever-after systemic position. Yet the couples in Azcárate's and Leñero's plays struggle throughout to preserve their clearly unrepairable relationships that have been inundated with toxicity, and audiences are left to question why. What are the ramifications for nationalism, cultural pride, and narrow understandings of normality if women passively accept their silence and their role within a dominant narrative? Both plays ask audiences to consider acknowledging the voice of an alternative narrative on foundational love and politics by exposing gender toxicity and its socially destructive consequences.

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