

Spanish and Latin  
American Women's  
Crime Fiction in the  
New Millennium



# Spanish and Latin American Women's Crime Fiction in the New Millennium:

*From Noir to Gris*

Edited by

Nancy Vosburg and Nina L. Molinaro

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Spanish and Latin American Women's Crime Fiction in the New  
Millennium: From *Noir* to *Gris*

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For Ro and Daryl



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	ix
Nancy Vosburg	
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
Establishing <i>Anotherness</i> : Ecocritical Crime Writing about the Trafficking of Women in Ángela Vallvey’s <i>El hombre del corazón negro</i>	
Shanna Lino	
CHAPTER TWO.....	17
<i>Black, black, black</i> by Marta Sanz: From “Hyperhysterical” Crime Fiction to Social Realism	
Pilar Martínez-Quiroga	
CHAPTER THREE.....	31
Don’t Speak, Don’t Tell: Silencing, Secrets, and Alicia Giménez Bartlett’s Latest Petra Delicado Novels	
Nina L. Molinaro	
CHAPTER FOUR.....	47
Police Procedural, Hard-boiled, or Thriller?: Hybridized Novels by Reyes Calderón	
Jeffrey Oxford	
CHAPTER FIVE.....	63
Detecting the Orient: Maruja Torres’s Cozy Crime Novels	
Nancy Vosburg	
CHAPTER SIX.....	75
Female Victims, Heroines, and Law Enforcers: The Polyphony of Identities in Susana Martín Gijón’s Novels	
Eva París-Huesca	
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	89
New Latin American Crime Fiction: <i>Elena sabe</i> by Claudia Piñeiro	
Patricia Varas	

CHAPTER EIGHT .....	107
Detecting Women: Crime Fiction by Contemporary Chilean Women Writers Barbara Loach	
CHAPTER NINE .....	129
Working for a Living: Gender and Inheritance in Sonia Coutinho's Dora Diamante Adventure Katherine Ostrom	
CHAPTER TEN .....	145
"O Matador" as Disoriented Detective in <i>Mundo Perdido</i> by Patrícia Melo Suzie Wright	
CONTRIBUTORS .....	163



# INTRODUCTION

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Women's crime fiction in Spain and Latin America has proliferated at such a rate that it is almost impossible to keep up with the latest publications. In the last three or four decades, particularly with the advent of democratic governments in previously dictatorial nations, the dramatic changes in women's roles and employment opportunities have been reflected in the increasing number of female inspectors, commissioners, and detectives, both official and private, as well as female amateur sleuths from a wide variety of backgrounds. At the same time, we have witnessed a spate of non-mainstream protagonists, particularly in Spain, including Isabel Franc's bumbling lesbian police detective Emma García, Susana Hernández's highly competent lesbian police detective Rebeca Santana, and the hot mess lesbian P.I. Cate Maynes, the creation of Clara Asunción García. Women's crime fiction has moved out of niche publishing houses and bookstores and into conventional sales venues, and desktop and ebook publishing has expanded even further the possibilities of women's participation as authors in this lucrative genre.

Crime fiction written by women in Spain and Latin America since the late 1980s has been especially successful in shifting attention to crimes often overlooked by their male counterparts, such as rape and sexual battery, domestic violence, child pornography, pederasty, and incest. Women's crime fiction has also been effective in addressing and integrating social, economic, and political issues, such as institutional corruption, class division, criminalized oppression of immigrant women, and crass capitalist market forces in the countries in which the narrative action originates. As the formulaic conventions of the crime genre continue to be challenged and disrupted by women writers, bringing gender concerns to the fore, the very boundaries of the genre itself are becoming blurred, as crime novels intersect with romance novels, dystopian futuristic science fiction novels, ecocritical fiction, and literary fiction. The disruption of what could be considered the "classic" crime novels (i.e., the North American *noir* of writers such as Dashiell Hammett,

Raymond Chandler, and Jim Thompson) and its conventions has led to recent debates about whether we are now actually in a “post-*noir*” period, as suggested by Laurentino Vélez Pelligrini. Vélez Pelligrini asserts that in using this term, “no estamos hablando del fin del ‘*Noir*’, sino de la caducidad de algunas de sus reglas narrativas y articulaciones ficcionales” (April 12, 2016).<sup>1</sup> His terminology here is a response to questions raised by Empar Fernández and Anna Maria Villalonga in a debate about whether the “classic” canons of crime fiction, together with their symbolic configurations, representational systems, and narrative structures are still valid given the dramatic changes that societies have undergone. In their 2016 debate Fernández introduced the notion of a “gris asfalto novela” (“gray asphalt novel”), a concept that Villalonga, in conversations with Fernández, then elaborated as,

una narrativa d’antiherois, de gent enfrontada als seus fantasmes, d’atmosfera, de fatalisme, de personatges que de vegades es troben en el lloc equivocacat. Parlem de crims entre amics, entre coneguts, entre familiars. Parlem de culpa, de revenja, de rancor, d’injustícia. Parlem de solitud, de necessitats, de la humanitat malmesa [sic]. Parlem, en definitiva, de tots nosaltres. (January 12, 2016)<sup>2</sup>

From there, the subtitle of our collection of essays, “from *noir* to *gris*.” All of our contributors approach their selected authors and works from the current millennium with the spirit of exploring and explicating the innovative fictional articulations in each of the novels analyzed, many of which no longer correspond to the “classic” conventions of the *noir* genre. The essays in our collection reflect the continuing evolution of women’s crime fiction in the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian world, presenting analytical studies on both new and old authors, all of whom offer a veritable banquet of approaches and conceptions regarding the possibilities that crime fiction offers. Our lead essay, by Shanna Lino, explores the nexus between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the

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<sup>1</sup> “we’re not talking about the end of *noir*, but rather the expiration of some of its narrative rules and fictional articulations.” All translations throughout are mine. I am indebted to Melissa Stewart of Western Kentucky University for providing me with the links to these recent debates.

<sup>2</sup> “a narrative of anti-heroes, of people confronting their own phantoms, of atmosphere, of fatalism, of characters that sometimes find themselves in the wrong place. We’re talking about crimes between friends, between acquaintances, between family members. We’re talking about guilt, about revenge, about rancor and injustice. We’re talking about solitude, about necessities, about humanity itself. We’re talking, definitively, about all of us.”

environment in Spanish writer Ángela Vallvey's *El hombre del corazón negro* [*The Man with the Black Heart*] (2011). Lino links Vallvey's critique of the Spanish sex trade to capitalist systems of mass production and consumption. According to Lino, the criminalized oppression of immigrant women in the novel offers a particularly fruitful example of eco-humanitarian degradation. Chapter Two, by Pilar Martínez-Quiroga, discusses Spanish novelist Marta Sanz's *Black, black, black* (2010) as both a commentary on the current economic, political, and social crisis in Spain and a challenge to the gendered dichotomy between men and women. Sanz accomplishes the latter by subverting the borders between literary genres and recovering a class-based critique of society. Moreover, as Martínez-Quiroga demonstrates, *Black, black, black* effectively straddles the line between parody, or "hyperhysterical" crime fiction, and mimetic realism.

What volume would be complete without an analysis of bestseller Spanish author Alicia Giménez Bartlett's latest installments in her Chief Inspector Petra Delicado series? Nina L. Molinaro, author of *Policing Gender and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's Crime Fiction* (2015) and one of the leading experts on Giménez Bartlett's series, addresses the ways in which women silence, and are silenced by, other women in crime fiction, specifically in *El silencio de los claustros* [*The Silence of the Cloisters*] (2009) and *Nadie quiere saber* [*No One Wants to Know*] (2013), which constitute the eighth and ninth novels in this popular police procedural series. In each text, according to Molinaro, the author continues to justify, by means of the crime fiction formula, the need for state-sanctioned vigilance over, and correction of, deviant women, who are forced to confess their secrets to other women with the authority to silence them.

In the fourth chapter in our volume, Jeffrey Oxford, a leading expert on Reyes Calderón's fiction, analyzes the characteristics of the thriller in order to posit that the Spanish author's five Lola MacHor novels (2008-2012) in fact include elements from the police procedural, the hard-boiled detective novel, and the thriller. He further reads the novels in light of the four variants of thrillers: the academic thriller, the religious thriller, the political thriller, and the psychological thriller.

While Catalan writer Maruja Torres is perhaps best known for her journalistic work in the newspaper *El País*, she recently published two novels that fall within the genre of detective fiction, *Fácil de matar* [*Easy to Kill*] (2011) and *Sin entrañas* [*Heartless*] (2012). With both novels situated in the Middle East, and featuring former journalist and amateur detective Diana Dial, Torres has reinscribed the conventions of the mid-century British cozy, or intimate novel, made popular by such writers as Agatha Christie and Sara Caudwell. In Chapter Five, Nancy Vosburg

analyzes the two novels from the perspective of the transcultural inscription of Christie's Mesopotamia-set novels and the interest in and representation of the Orient, which also leads to an exploration of gendered othering in the two novels.

In Chapter Six of our volume, Eva París-Huesca analyzes Susan Martín Gijón's trilogy of crime novels which present a new "imaginario criminal," or criminal imaginary, and move away from the implausible classic formulas of the solitary hero in order to emphasize the social and affective networks that produce a new public order. While underscoring the necessity of the participation of a wider collective to resolve crimes in the new millennium, the novels of this young Spanish author denounce domestic violence, pederasty, exploitation of immigrants in the labor market, and sex trafficking. According to París-Huesca, Martín Gijón's novels urge their readers to fight invisible crimes and construct societies based on collective and institutionalized solidarity.

Patricia Varas analyzes Argentinian writer Claudia Piñeiro's *Elena sabe* [*Elena Knows*] (2007) in light of the well-known tradition of crime fiction by women and men in Latin America in the seventh chapter of the volume. In *Elena sabe*, according to Varas, Piñeiro explores the social and familial implications of a series of crimes that cannot be punished by the judicial system or avenged by the victims. Varas maintains that the author incorporates components from the metaphysical detective story in order to comment on social and gender issues that have arisen in Argentina since the dictatorship. Piñeiro presents crime as a corollary of social, political, and cultural forces; according to Varas, the specific crimes featured in *Elena sabe* demand new ways of reading at the same time that they seek to address a female readership.

Barbara Loach, in Chapter Eight, examines the contributions of three women writers to the historical tradition of crime fiction in Chile, specifically Marcela Serrano's novel *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* [*Our Lady of Solitude*] (1999), Elizabeth Subercaseaux's four crime fiction novels, published between 1999 and 2012, and Isabel Allende's *El juego de Ripper* [*Ripper*] (2014). Loach details the ways in which the writers, in all of these novels, adapt the conventions of crime fiction employed by their male peers to gender-specific concerns. As one example, the novels all feature female detectives who collaborate with others and are socially marginalized because they must carry out their investigations in unconventional ways.

Chapter Nine features Katherine Ostrom's exploration of the achievements and limitations of Brazilian writer Sonia Coutinho's feminist crime novel *Os seios de Pandora* [*Pandora's Breasts*] (1998). As Ostrom points out,

Coutinho criticizes the hard-boiled, hyper-masculine version of crime fiction from the U.S. and instead draws upon alternative models of crime fiction developed by Sara Paretsky and Agatha Christie. These and other women writers have transformed the genre by making room for female characters and feminine values, and Ostrom demonstrates how the novel follows this pattern.

The last chapter in our volume focuses on yet another Brazilian novelist, Patrícia Melo, and her pair of crime novels, *O Matador* [*The Killer*] (1995) and *Mundo Perdido* [*Lost World*] (2006). Suzie Wright contends that both texts foster the deployment of violence in order to underscore the structural sources of that violence within contemporary Brazilian society. Melo delves into the societal mechanisms that encourage criminals to commit crimes, rather than foregrounding the act of detection or the resolution provided by punishment. As Wright shows, criminality in the two novels stems from institutionalized corruption, class division, and the omnipresence of capitalist market forces.

This overview of the chapters in our volume gives an apt indication of the many ways in which contemporary crime fiction, particularly that of Spanish and Latin American women writers, has moved beyond the classical conventions of the North American *noir* to offer up alternative models of criminality and its detection. There are, of course, many other women writers who are creating new kinds of crime fiction models; those included in our volume are representative of only some of the newer trends in the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian world. We hope this volume will contribute to continued debates and theories about the evolving nature of this popular genre, and prompt readers to “investigate” further both the writers represented here and other emerging voices in Spain and Latin America.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# ESTABLISHING *ANOTHERNESS*: ECOCRITICAL CRIME WRITING ABOUT THE TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN IN ÁNGELA VALLVEY'S *EL HOMBRE DEL CORAZÓN NEGRO*

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Ecocritic Patrick D. Murphy asserts that the illusory construction of the self/Other dichotomy heretofore employed in the service of psychoanalytical, feminist, and post-colonial criticism that is aimed at dismantling Western dominant hierarchical power relations has in fact served to reify and protect these paradigms. He proposes, therefore, that a relational model of *anotherness* would better function to produce an ethics of answerability and reciprocity across groups and to recognize the interdependence and natural necessity of diversity (1998, 40). Concurrently, ecofeminist theorists such as Mary Mellor have explored the specific interface between the biological and ecological processes surrounding human society on the one hand, and women's subordination and oppression on the other, and they have stressed that a "concern for the vitality of the ecology of the planet is directly related to a concern for women's lives and experiences" (Mellor 1997, 7). In this essay, I argue that in the 2011 crime novel *El hombre del corazón negro* [*The Man with the Black Heart*] by Ángela Vallvey (San Lorenzo de Calatrava, 1964- ), the Spanish author portrays the investigation into a complex web of Russian mafias that traffic young Eastern European women to Spain for the sex trade as a process that necessarily correlates the exploitation of women with that of the environment at the hands of neo-liberal, capitalist, and, previously, soviet-style communist systems of mass production and consumption.

As we shall see, the oppression of the mostly female cast of characters in Vallvey's novel is consistently presented through an ecofeminist lens that reaffirms and condemns the intricately interconnected abuses of global power that repeatedly lead to ecological and humanitarian crises such as industrial toxic dumping and the modern-day slave trade. In my essay, I ground myself in criticism that binds feminism with ecology in order to read contemporary Spain as a multicultural, industrialized society that is a prime locus for eco-humanitarian degradation. I aim to demonstrate that Vallvey's crime novel deploys this fruitful pairing in order to reveal that a borderless Europe does not presuppose a free Europe and that the forced movement of people and the production of environmental contamination across the region is a matter that requires the assumption of a shared responsibility and response.

## Spanish Crime Fiction and Human Trafficking

In the last twenty years, the thematic representation of immigration in Spanish crime writing has become an indisputable phenomenon. Increasingly, authors of the *novela negra* have turned to issues surrounding multiculturalism, integration, and xenophobia as developing national realities that they find apt for exploration within the generic codes of the *noir*. This genre, which has a relatively high readership among Spanish nationals, plays an important role in exposing the complexities, cultural prejudices, and institutional inconsistencies that contribute to tensions within Spain as it shifts from being a net provider to being a net recipient of immigrants.<sup>1</sup> However, it is one thing to write about processes by which immigrants actively seek out illicit traffickers in order to attempt a desired international relocation, and it is quite another to delve into the branch of human trafficking that involves the active recruitment, deception, capture, and enslavement of young women and girls for the purpose of sexual exploitation. This is the subject of Vallvey's *El hombre del corazón negro*, a novel that loosely employs the structure of a police procedural in order to recount the story of a Moldovan teenager named Polina who flees her intolerable familial circumstances of chronic poverty, hunger, and alcoholism by secretly applying to become a nanny in Paris. Tragically, she is instead deceived and enslaved by a series of horrifyingly violent

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the portrayal of female immigrants in contemporary Spanish crime fiction, see my 2013 essay, "Víctima, detective, y *femme fatale*: En busca de estrategias de empoderamiento femenino ante la inmigración en la novela negra española."



prostitution rings that repeatedly rent, sell, and then resell her to brothels and individual rapists in Istanbul, Athens, Rome, and ultimately the Spanish southern coast and Madrid.

With this storyline, Vallvey inserts her narrative into a growing group of texts that consider the ethical responsibilities associated with those people who participate in human trafficking and, even more notably, with the passive lack of responsibility assumed by an apathetic citizenry that largely ignores the suffering of its victims. A recent example of this kind of writing is *La botella del naufrago* [*The Shipwreck Survivor's Bottle*], also from 2011, by Antonio Jiménez Barca (Madrid, 1966- ). This Spanish crime novel similarly deploys a disparate cast of characters in order to save a young enslaved woman from the grip of her captors.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Vallvey's writing must be considered vis-à-vis other women writers who have, over the decades, called attention to the plight of displaced peoples on Spanish soil through the lens of crime fiction: these include authors such as Maria-Antònia Oliver (Manacor, 1946- ), Yolanda Soler Onís (Comillas, 1964- ), and, most recently, Marta Sanz (Madrid, 1967- ).

In Oliver's crime novels, featuring protagonist Lònia Guiu, the Majorcan detective recurrently encounters trafficking rings that exploit young women and children within and across international borders. In *Estudi en lila* [*Study in Lilac*] (1985), she uncovers an illegal Filipino immigrant ring; in *Antípodes* [*Antipodes*] (1988), she exposes a complex operation that sends Majorcan teenage women to Australia to work in brothels; and in *El sol que fa l'ànec* [*Blue Roses for a Dead... Lady?*] (1994), the most revolting example of trafficking is discovered as young Eastern European children, some as young as three years of age, are found locked up, beaten, and raped by and for the pleasure of high-standing officials and authorities in the Balearic Islands. In a storyline that shares similarities with the *dénouement* of Vallvey's novel, Oliver's detective Guiu collaborates with environmental activists to preserve the beaches of Majorca whose overdevelopment of hotel chains has devastated the once pristine coastline. In so doing, Oliver establishes, nearly thirty years before *El hombre del corazón negro*, the intimate connection between human and ecological exploitation in Spain.

In another female crime writer's novel on human trafficking, Soler Onís's 2003 *Malpaís* [*Bad Country*], the text reminds Spanish readers of a relatively ignored "safe" form of immigration: that of high-income Northern

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the ethics of responsibility in Hispanic crime fiction that deals with (female) human trafficking see my 2013 essay, titled "In Search of a Responsibility for the Other: Human Trafficking across the Straits of Gibraltar and of Florida in Antonio Jiménez Barca and Amir Valle."

Europeans who choose Spain as a southern, exotic destination for their seasonal or retirement residence. These wealthy migrants, it should be noted, purchase and rent out units in those same complexes that are contributing to the degradation of many of Spain's coasts, and their construction often depends upon the support of corrupt local governmental officials. By contrasting the presence of a French immigrant who moved to the Canary Islands in the 1970s with African immigrants beginning to find their way to the same archipelago in 1992, the year in which the novel is set, the author points to the explicit difference in reception between these two types of immigrants and highlights the need to keep in mind the broader, more elaborate structures that contribute to the movement of people across Europe as well as the multiplicity of meanings that Spain's coasts and beaches take on as loci occupied by foreigners of various origins. As a final example, Sanz's *Black, black, black* (2010) depicts immigrant characters' difficulties as they resist acculturation and confront xenophobia in one of Madrid's central, middle-class neighbourhoods, together with a storyline about gentrification and real-estate bubbles that, in the end, is crucial to the resolution of the novel's murder investigation. All the while, the text operates as a metaphysical detective novel that is grounded in the postmodern tenet that any ultimate truth is unattainable and leads its readers to question the ways in which and degrees by which our understanding of ethics and justice is predetermined by our cultural mores (Lino 2015, 38).

It is on the foundation built by the aforementioned Spanish female crime writers that Vallvey constructs her ecocritical text; like her predecessors, Vallvey deploys crime fiction and the tools provided by her novel's criminal investigation in order to reveal the intersections between real-estate speculation and the modern-day sexual slave trade whose growth and development are at the immense expense of concurrent ecological and female exploitation. Indeed, as the above examples demonstrate, and as I have argued elsewhere, what seems to characterize crime novels on (forced) migration written by women, in comparison to those of their male counterparts, is the broader perspective with which the topic is broached. Whereas male-authored novels tend to focus on the individual's journey and struggles, female-authored texts draw deeper connections between the polemics encountered by these precariously positioned individuals and the intimate concerns of ordinary Spaniards, including issues such as physical (dis)ability, gentrification, private-versus-public healthcare, (un)employment, and environmental contamination (Lino 2015, 39). These types of interconnection, especially human-ecological ones, are central to ecofeminist theories and are phenomena that ecofeminists such as Greta

Gaard cite as being more characteristically female since “studies have repeatedly shown a sense of self as separate is more common in men, while an interconnected sense of self is more common in women [...] Whether these self-conceptions and affiliated ethical systems are innate or culturally learned is uncertain” (1993, 2). With this framework in mind, it is the intricately crafted thread that Vallvey uses to connect human trafficking to ecological devastation that makes her novel so compelling and serves to guide her reader through a comprehensive approach that better appreciates the combined forces driving both tragedies.

### **Consuming Flesh: Women as Merchandise in the Open Market**

The physical market as a locus of trade of various types is ubiquitous in Vallvey’s novel. These spaces function as symbols of commerce and provide a background for the author’s critique of the way in which humans are bought and sold as modern-day slaves and too easily reconfigured as consumer products of a free-market economy. The first example pertains to Turkey:

Estambul está llena de mercados callejeros [...] comprar y vender al aire libre continúa siendo una costumbre muy arraigada, además de un espectáculo barroco, divertido y estridente en el que, con suerte, se puede encontrar una ganga [...] a Polina y sus compañeras involuntarias de viaje, las vendieron en un mercado [...] Seguramente no se trataba de ninguno de los mercados mencionados, esos que aparecen en todas las guías, aunque Polina no sabría decir cuál fue porque jamás supo dónde se encontraba. Quizás la vendieron en el mercado de los jueves, en el de los martes, o en el del viernes. Probablemente en ninguno de ellos. Aunque sin duda se trataba de una especie de mercado, aparentemente preparado para recibir compradores rusos. (Vallvey 2011, 163-64)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Istanbul is full of street markets [...] to buy and sell in the open air is a deeply rooted custom, in addition to a baroque spectacle, strident and amusing in which, with some luck, one can find a good deal [...] Polina and her fellow involuntary travelers were sold in a market [...] It surely wasn’t one of those well-known markets, the kind that are listed in guidebooks, although Polina couldn’t say for sure because she was never able to figure out exactly where she was. Perhaps they sold them in the Thursday market, or the Tuesday or Friday one. Probably, it wasn’t in any of them. But there was no doubt that it was some kind of market, one that was apparently geared up for receiving Russian buyers.” This translation into English, as well as all others that will appear from *El hombre del corazón negro*, is my own.

Similarly, on the outskirts of the Spanish capital, a Ukrainian migrant who works in Spain's construction industry and is being blackmailed by his traffickers—the same mafia that exploits Polina—is regularly beaten and tortured within the space of an open-air market: “Todos los domingos, Víktor [...] llegaba hasta el Intercambiador de Aluche, en Madrid. Justo enfrente de la estación semienterrada, ya al aire libre, se formaba un mercadillo para inmigrantes polacos y ucranianos [...] El mercadillo Aluche era el lugar donde adquirir la prensa ucraniana. Víktor la compraba, antes de la acostumbrada cita con sus extorsionadores polacos” (Vallvey 2011, 176-77).<sup>4</sup> While in this case the market is not the location where migrants are literally bought and/or sold, it is the site where they are nevertheless treated as pawns in an inescapable industry, a locus for extortion and torture as they slowly try to pay back their debts for attaining a passport on the black market and for migrating to Western Europe by irregular means.

Beyond the symbolic space of the market, the explicit treatment of humans (and in particular of women) as consumer goods is a prominent *leitmotif* in Vallvey's *El hombre del corazón negro*. Repeatedly throughout the novel, the processes surrounding the trafficking of women for the sex trade are described by the agents of that industry using uninhibitedly the lexicon of the free market: women are “products” or “merchandise” that have a specific and fluctuating “value” or “worth” depending on today's “supply” and “demand.” In reference to fifteen-year-old Polina's first in a series of traffickers, for example, the omniscient narrator states: “Kakus no la violó—ella era para él una mercancía demasiado valiosa, una galga virgen” (Vallvey 2011, 248).<sup>5</sup> Throughout the novel, she and other trafficked women are continually “bought,” “sold,” and even “rented” at “low cost” and are put “on sale,” their “quantity” and “quality” measured according to market conditions:

Polina había tenido una media de veinte clientes diarios. Ella, como todas las chicas del prostíbulo, ofrecía rebajas sin competencia de las que se lucraba el jefe, el Comprador. Estaba permanentemente de saldo. Su mercancía tenía éxito. Su cuerpo, su alma, eran un artículo con excelente

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<sup>4</sup> “Every Sunday, Víktor [...] would arrive at the Aluche Exchange, in Madrid. Just in front of the semi-underground station, up above, a little market would form for Polish and Ukrainian immigrants. [...] The Aluche Market was a place where one could buy the Ukrainian newspaper. Víktor would always buy one, right before the usual meeting with his Polish extortionists.”

<sup>5</sup> “Kakus did not rape her —he saw her as too valuable a piece of merchandise, a virgin prize.”

salida entre unos consumidores ávidos e insaciables, que valoraban la cantidad por encima de la calidad. (Vallvey 2011, 304)<sup>6</sup>

Polina and the other women who are popular among the male clients at this brothel are permanently placed on sale, always on special offer in an inhumanely deprecatory structure that equates them with the types of mass-produced goods sold in discount stores.<sup>7</sup>

Devastatingly, when Polina is first handed over to a Turkish trafficker in Istanbul, the frightened teenager realizes that she is not even bartered as a comprehensive entity but as a product with component parts that can be dismantled and whose value can be negotiated independently: “en honor a la verdad, habría que decir que no compró a la niña, sino solamente su virginidad puesto que pensaba deshacerse de ella en cuanto perdiera su principal atractivo. De manera que quizás no compró a Polina, sino que la alquiló” (Vallvey 2011, 249-50).<sup>8</sup> In this scenario, Polina is not even the good being purchased, which is instead her virginity; she is the packaging

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<sup>6</sup> “Polina had had an average of twenty daily clients. She, like all of the girls in the brothel, offered up unmatched deals, on which her boss, the Buyer, would profit. She was permanently on sale. Her merchandise moved. Her body, her soul, were a product that really sold well among those avid and insatiable consumers, who valued quantity over quality.”

<sup>7</sup> Women’s and girls’ relative lack of worth internationally is further reinforced in the novel in a chapter relating to the female detective Sigrid’s status as an adopted orphan, in which she rants: “¡Pero es que las niñas siempre son una carga!, no valen tanto como los niños; de modo que el feminicidio continúa a la orden del día. Desde que la ecografía se democratizara, los fetos de niñas eran abortados sin un titubeo. Y muchas de las que nacían, porque sus madres no podían pagar siquiera el aborto, eran abandonadas en un hospicio, o desamparadas en cualquier vertedero hasta que morían. Las hijas son una carga para las pobres economías del Tercer Mundo. Lo mejor es deshacerse de ellas cuanto antes, o venderlas cuando están algo crecidas a cambio de unas monedas que permitan a sus familias hacerse con una choza de cemento provista de televisor y karaoke” (“Girls are always such a burden! They aren’t worth as much as boys; so, feminicide continues to be the order of the day. And many of the ones that were born, because their mothers couldn’t even afford to abort them, were dropped off in some sort of orphanage, or abandoned in some garbage dump until they died. Girls are a burden for the poorest economies of the Third World. The best thing is to get rid of them as early as possible, or to sell them when they’re a little older in exchange for a little change that might allow their families to build a cement hut equipped with a TV and karaoke machine”) (Vallvey 2011, 294).

<sup>8</sup> “truth be told, one would have to assert that he didn’t actually buy the girl, just her virginity, given that he planned to get rid of her as soon as she lost this most attractive feature. So he didn’t really buy Polina at all, he just rented her.”

of that good and she (her body) will be tossed out once the product (her virginity) has been consumed. In this sense, the negotiations surrounding Polina not only reflect an abusive, male-dominated capitalist framework whereby women are diminished to mere consumer goods; rather, they reveal a more particular, twenty-first-century maturation of that consumerist structure in which women's worth is exponentially reduced to that of disposable packaging, to the flimsy wrappings, the discarding of which is for so many an afterthought. Indeed, from the very beginning of her life as a trafficked child, Polina becomes part of the "waste" of the sex industry, and her imminent re-sale, framed as "disposal," forms an integral part of Vallvey's ecofeminist critique.

The notion that humans are "by-products" of business and of markets is another constant throughout the novel. Reminiscing about the trajectory of his career and referring not only to the women whom he trafficked for the sex trade but also to the migrant workers whom he exploited, blackmailed, and tortured, the head Russian *mafioso* in Spain, Misha, states that he "[p]refería no acordarse de sus víctimas, aunque él no las consideraba como tales, sino molestos inconvenientes que hubo que liquidar porque interrumpían el curso de los negocios" (Vallvey 2011, 336).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he boasts that in his funeral-business cover-up, "han reconstruido cadáveres que nos habían entregado dentro de una bolsa para guardar carne en el congelador. Personas sin piernas" (Vallvey 2011, 358),<sup>10</sup> thereby demonstrating how humans can be and are routinely treated on par with supermarket meat.

Similarly, when police detective Sigrid Azadoras analyses the bodies of two murdered sex-trade victims in the city's morgue, she too notes that they are like supermarket meat, enveloped in cellophane (body bags), and left without any identifying markers other than their expiration date: "dos chicas muertas, una de las cuales probablemente no había cumplido veinte años [...] En las tarjetas de identificación de los dos cadáveres solamente figuraba un número y la fecha aproximada del deceso. Ni nombres ni fechas de nacimiento ni lugar de origen" (Vallvey 2011, 262).<sup>11</sup> Misha further diminishes the value of the victims' bodies in the context of his

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<sup>9</sup> "preferred not to remember his victims, although he didn't consider them as such, but as bothersome inconveniences that had to be liquidated because they were impeding the course of his business."

<sup>10</sup> "they've reconstructed cadavers that were handed to us in bags as if to store meat in the freezer. People without legs"

<sup>11</sup> "two dead girls, one of whom probably wasn't even twenty [...] On the tags of the cadavers all that appeared was a number and the date of their death. Not even a name or birth date or place of origin."

fraudulent funerary operation when he describes how his headstone carver, a former tattoo artist, likens human flesh not simply to animal meat but to inanimate stone: “Tengo un experto tatuador que nos hace trabajos especiales sobre lápidas. Dice que no hay mucha diferencia entre la carne y la piedra para un buen ruso” (Vallvey 2011, 359).<sup>12</sup> In every case, the narration reminds its readers that the value of humanity is easily degraded for the sake of profit, and it does so by drawing parallels not only between human sub-valuation, transport, purchase, and sale akin to those processes in the context of non-human goods on the free market, but also to their ecologically irresponsible production, whether it be the industrial-scale production of meat, the increasing disposability of harmful packaging, or the devastating impacts related to the mining of stone and other quarries.

## Environmental Devastation and Ecocritical Writing

In a volume titled *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism & Literature*, literary ecocritic Richard Kerridge states that today’s

real, material ecological crisis [...] is also a cultural crisis, a crisis of representation. The inability of political cultures to address environmentalism is in part a failure of narrative. Yet these concerns will not be kept out of narrative. Environmental preoccupations are registering, now, across a wide range of texts and discourses, some of them not obviously concerned with ecology or “nature.” (1998, 4)

In fact, critics of Vallvey’s novel, who find it to be a disjointed 541-page tome with an identity crisis and too many loose ends,<sup>13</sup> fail to appreciate in their critiques why, for example, the novel is dedicated simultaneously to first, the more than six-hundred thousand liquidators, or clean-up workers,<sup>14</sup> of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, and second, “Para las Polinas y Feruzas que arrastran su pena por los burdeles, las cocinas y las

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<sup>12</sup> “I have an expert tattoo artist who carves all of our headstones. He says there isn’t much difference between flesh and stone for a good Russian.”

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Ricardo Senabre’s review in *El cultural* from March 25, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> The preface to Vallvey’s novel states: “En memoria de los *liquidadores* de Chernóbil; sus rostros sin nombre encarnan lo más noble y heroico del ser humano” (“In memory of the Chernobyl liquidators; their nameless faces epitomize that which is most noble and heroic in human beings”) (2011, 10). The liquidators were made up primarily of soldiers and the civil guard but also included fire-fighters, farmers, factory workers, and other volunteers who are widely credited with having contained the nuclear devastation in its immediate aftermath and preventing the spread of further radiation throughout the globe.

calles del mundo” (2011, 10).<sup>15</sup> In the same vein, previous critiques have not addressed why a text that seems to be principally about human trafficking at the hands of *mafiosi* also repeatedly gestures toward cases of environmental degradation across the Eurasian continent as the result of globalized mass production and consumption. I suggest that these seemingly disparate topics are actually part of a meticulously articulated deposition on the interrelation between humanitarian and ecological consciousnesses and that their combined presentation in Vallvey’s narrative reflects a theoretical argument whereby a heightening of awareness across both realms may be mutually beneficial to their respective aims.

To that end, throughout *El hombre del corazón negro*, the narrative perspectives of the novel’s chorus of characters recall and describe, for example, the destruction of forests and desert ecosystems for the mass development of canals and train lines required for cotton production in Tashkent, Uzbekistan during the Cold War (Vallvey 2011, 59); they passionately testify to the devastating short- and long-term effects that the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear-reactor explosion had not only on the Ukrainian people but on human and non-human populations across the entire region (Vallvey 2011, 66-72); and they recall the uncontrolled use of chemical fertilizers, defoliants, toxins, and poisons of every formulation, so long as these were effective. Some narrative fragments also refer to the massive reservoirs and dams that were constructed in order to sustain the immense volume of irrigation required in the U.S.S.R., a state where “[p]roducir lo era todo, y [el Estado] utilizaba cualquier cosa que estuviese en sus manos para conseguirlo” (Vallvey 2011, 99).<sup>16</sup> In sum, those characters who fall victim to the poverty, manipulation, and corruption of a Soviet system that exploited them as much as it did its natural environment, and to the abuses of the organized criminal networks that have subsequently taken over much of the region’s institutional framework, are also first-hand witnesses to the impact that these same destructive forces have had and continue to have on their natural environment.

At the same time, the novel’s police protagonist, Sigrid Azadoras—who is a karate-practicing, mixed-race adoptee from the Dominican Republic, raised as a Spanish citizen by her Spanish mother—makes periodic reference to her purposeful energy conservation: she only keeps one dim light on in whatever room she is using in her small apartment; she

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<sup>15</sup> “To all those Polinas and Feruzas who drag behind them their sorrows through the brothels, kitchens, and streets of this world.”

<sup>16</sup> “to produce was everything, and the State would use anything at its disposal to achieve it.”



refuses to turn on the heat and instead wears additional layers of clothing while at home; she travels to and from work on a moped rather than driving a car, and so on. Therefore, taken as a whole, these seemingly secondary storylines function to reveal an ecological awareness that develops in tandem with the more overtly critical narrative about the treatment of women and girls as merchandise in the modern-day sex trade. Relevantly, Mellor finds that the most fundamental distinction between ecofeminist perspectives and those of other environmental thinkers and activists is the latter's failure "to see the fundamental role of gender inequality in creating the ecological crisis" (1997, 2). She further asserts:

Human embeddedness in the environment is related directly to human embodiment. Ecological impacts and consequences are experienced through human bodies, in ill health, early death, congenital damage and impeded childhood development. Women disproportionately bear the consequences of those impacts within their own bodies (dioxin residues in breast milk, failed pregnancies) and in their work as nurturers and carers. (1997, 2)

As I observed above, female bodies (or components thereof) are routinely depicted in Vallvey's novel as the sites of use, abuse, and consumption in ways that highlight their embeddedness in the environment. They are also the sites of contamination in the form of sexually transmitted diseases. Surprisingly, when Polina reminisces about her five years in Athens en route to Spain she characterizes them as "not so bad": "Cuando dejó la vieja metrópoli había cumplido veintitrés años. Sentía que se estaba haciendo vieja, pero al menos las enfermedades de transmisión sexual cada vez la visitaban con menos frecuencia: su cuerpo era duro igual que una piedra del río Prut" (Vallvey 2011, 308).<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy that as Polina matter-of-factly contemplates the way in which her body has been exploited by others, she likewise describes how it has become tolerant to pollutants, and she does so by making explicit reference to an important natural element of her Moldovan homeland. At the same time, she emphasizes her feminine body's intimate relation to ecology.

However, my argument for reading *El hombre del corazón negro* as an ecocritical novel does not stem only from its thematic references to the ways in which humans interact negatively or positively with their

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<sup>17</sup> "When she left the old metropolis she had turned twenty-three. She felt that she was getting old, but at least STDs visited her less and less often: her body was tough, just like a stone from the Prut River."

environment; its designation as a novel with ecocritical underpinnings may also be asserted by its formal arrangement, that same complex structure that so befuddles some of the novel's critics. As Justyna Kostkowska has analysed in other women-authored ecocritical texts, "[b]y decentralizing and dispersing the master narrative of a single 'objective' point of view, these texts encourage stepping out of the traditional attitudes and belief systems and serve as models of ecological diversity in relationship" (2013, 9). Therefore, Vallvey's novel is ecocritical also because it incorporates eco-politically laden experimental narrative strategies such as those that Kostkowska has identified in the writings of British women authors Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith. I will outline four of these ecocritical narrative strategies below as well as their development in *El hombre del corazón negro*.

First, Vallvey's novel employs a polyvalent narrative point of view, a strategy that emphasizes our interconnectedness to each other and to non-human entities with which we coexist. Each of Vallvey's chapters is narrated from the perspective of one of the sixteen characters that appear listed in the opening *dramatis personae*, including not only the young trafficked woman Polina, the Chernobyl survivor Feruza, and the investigative duo Sigrid and Marcos, but also other victims of trans-Eurasian enslavement, including the Ukrainian Víktor and the Uzbek-born Mariya. Second, the crime novel indulges in a constant play with chronology, which, in ecocritical terms, emphasizes the cyclicity of (human and natural) life experience (Kostkowska 2013, 9). Side-by-side with the novel's narrations set in the present day are chapters that depict defining moments in the various characters' lives: these include moments from 1959, the year in which the Russian *mafioso* Misha chooses a life of crime as his best means for survival, and chapters from 1965, 1966, and 1967, years in which Mariya worked in cotton fields of Tashkent in Uzbekistan and which describe in great detail how "Cada año, los canales aumentaban en número, crecía la superficie de tierra conquistada a la nada. Hasta la Golódnaya, la Estepa Hambrienta, había comenzado a producir algodón. El hombre dominaba la naturaleza" (Vallvey 2011, 59-60),<sup>18</sup> until one day, the earth rebelled and destroyed everything with a violent earthquake that razed the entire region (Vallvey 2011, 101).

A third narrative element that Vallvey deploys in *El hombre del corazón negro*, which contributes to the novel's ecocritical framework, is

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<sup>18</sup> "Each year, as the number of canals increased, so too grew the percentage of the earth's surface that was conquered just like that. Even Golódnaya, the Famished Steppe, had begun to produce cotton. Man was dominating the earth"

the blending of genre, a device that further reflects the kind of interconnectedness required for human and non-human interaction. The text includes epistolary, testimonial, and pastoral fragments as well as the direct incorporation of existent journalistic pieces, all of which are placed alongside the macro-narrative of the crime novel. They are visually set apart in a way that purposefully breaks the mimesis of the primary text, a strategy that also serves to remind the reader of the very real, contemporary backdrop that informs the text's fictional elaboration and that further calls upon the reader to remain aware and critical of the exploitation experienced by women and the environment in Spanish territories. One example is the direct inclusion of a column written by Vallvey herself, a regular contributor to the Spanish daily *La Razón*, and published in July of 2010 in that newspaper about the international trafficking of women for the slave trade (23-24). Another journalistic inclusion is a slightly modified version of an *El Mundo* article about the discovery of a dismembered body and the presence of the Colombian mafia in Spain. This second article is from 2010 and is titled "Descuartizan a un hombre y reparten sus restos en Madrid y Toledo" (Bécares). By weaving this true tale into her important storyline about Misha's crematorium cover-up (and the funerary industry's contribution to environmental contamination), Vallvey draws on her Spanish readers' passive knowledge of real-life happenings in their country and consequently appeals to their subconscious so that, as she does in her tome, they too may draw connections between the all-but-fictional realities of human trafficking and ecological degradation.

Finally, in her use of a fourth ecocritical narrative strategy, Vallvey further underscores the text's rupture with mimesis by providing recurrent references to academe, the scholarly interpretation of texts, and the professional crossover between those who work in the justice system and who also write crime fiction. These metafictional plays with the limits of texts undermine reader/author and reality/fiction binaries and reveal connections between the text and its environment (Kostkowska 2013, 9). Intriguingly, toward the end of the novel we learn that, basing his research on the immense pile of notes and documents related to the investigation of the Russian mafia at the core of Polina's enslavement, judge and co-detective Marcos Drabina Flox will finally write the novel that he has always wanted to write and which he will title, precisely, *El hombre del corazón negro* (Vallvey 2011: 423, 527). In another metafictional moment, Marcos delivers a public lecture on the topic of his Ph.D. dissertation and the narrator remarks upon the almost non-existent audience. This reference to academe is in harmony with the one similarly established when the

detective duo of Sigrid and Marcos consults with Fannina Fuganova, a university professor specializing in the study of the Russian mafia. In their meeting, she elucidates for the representatives of law and order, in the novel's most explicit nod to ecological writing, the tight relationship between the mafia, the black market, human trafficking, and the too often ecologically irresponsible Spanish construction industry:

Decía que las mafias están incrustadas en el tejido social y económico del mundo entero [...] En algunos países de Europa, uno de los cuales es sin duda España, con el apoyo de políticos y administraciones locales, han concedido licitaciones de obras públicas a sus empresas de blanqueo de dinero [...] Por no hablar de que son seguramente los mayores especuladores inmobiliarios de la costa. (Vallvey 2011, 415)<sup>19</sup>

Although these explicit references to academe enrich the reader's understanding of the severity of the situation, the subtler detail relating to the poor attendance at the academic lecture is equally powerful since it suggests that dealing with these societal issues solely within the Ivory Tower will not suffice to effect change. Taken together, Vallvey's blending of fiction with journalism and with academe and her rupture of generic barriers all call the attention of her readers to the impact that human activity has upon humanity itself as well as on its natural environment.

### **A Case of *Otherness* and Conclusion**

As we have seen, both on thematic and formal grounds, Vallvey's novel suggests a reading of the suffering of Polina and other enslaved women not as a separate or "Other" problem, but as one that binds us all through what we may term *otherness*, a state that also binds us all to our global environment. For Murphy, when a person, text, or movement considers entities such as human trafficking, government corruption, real-estate speculation, or environmental contamination, rather than thinking about those entities as Other, the person or text should consider them within the "concept of *otherness*, based on Another—not the Alien and

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<sup>19</sup> "As I was saying, mafias are embedded in the social and economic fabric of the entire globe. [...] In some countries in Europe, one of which is without a doubt Spain, with the support of politicians and local administrators, they have been able to bid through their money laundering businesses for public works projects [...] and I won't even mention the fact that they are without question the biggest real estate speculators on the coast."

not the Stranger, but the brother, the sister, and not just the human ones, but all the creatures with whom we share the planet,” a sharing that “[i]n this postmodern period of globalization [...] is becoming increasingly destructive, self-destructive, and excessively consumptive” (1998, 419). In his theorization of *otherness*, Murphy builds on Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinction between *Other* (*chuzhoi*: alien, strange) and *Another* (*drugoi*: other person) and argues that just as environmental ethics requires an answerability that extends beyond moral consideration for humans to also encompass other entities (1998, 419), ecocritical frameworks can extrapolate the concept of *otherness* in order to understand the interconnectedness of a variety of human and non-human platforms such as those present in *El hombre del corazón negro*.

The relational model that I have outlined above ultimately leads to the resolution of Vallvey’s novel. Polina’s last captor, the Russian *mafioso* Misha, is persuaded by his female servants not to incinerate a nosy neighbour who begins to piece together the true nature of his funeral business. As the neighbour has come to understand, the majority of the activity undertaken in his crematorium involves the “disappearance” of the cadavers of murder victims of his and other crime organizations, rather than the provision of last rites to ordinary deceased citizens through a process that, as one of his thugs constantly notes, has an enormous carbon footprint. Misha’s uncharacteristic compassion for the female neighbour eventually leads to his demise. While the detective pair Sigrid and Marcos are unable to charge Misha with human trafficking because of insufficient evidence, they do have enough evidence to arrest him on money laundering charges related to speculative real estate developments that have all but destroyed the natural ecosystems of Spain’s southern coasts. Therefore, even within a narrow reading of *El hombre del corazón negro* as a straightforward crime novel, humanitarian and ecological devastation are inextricably linked in the narrative’s investigative solution. The economic forces that once allowed Misha’s business to thrive on two fronts—the female sex trade and ecologically irresponsible real estate development—are ultimately unsustainable, and the novel’s *dénouement* suggests that for justice to be achieved in either realm, a shared awareness and response is key.

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