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Female Solidarity in the Films of María Novaro: Aquí Sólo Encontramos Amigas

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“Aquí sólo encontramos amigos” reads a beach sign in María Novaro’s *Sin dejar huella* (2000). This indicates a significant and recurring theme in Novaro’s feature-length films—solidarity, in this case female solidarity. In her films, Novaro articulates a female support system into which younger women are initiated and where women find the assistance they otherwise lack from missing male partners and society at large. In formal terms, Novaro intentionally places characters together on screen to represent this solidarity. Meanwhile her films tell of these female characters’ interlacing lives and their reliance on each other as a means of social, physical, emotional, and even financial support. Novaro’s films are a celebration of the strength of female bonds to create a network capable of filling the spaces of absent male counterparts and the gaps in institutionalized assistance due to the economic crisis of the seventies and eighties in Mexico. They are also a testimony to the strength of these bonds in the face of male menace, whether in the form of the police, the border patrol, or drug traffickers.

In this article I discuss this female network in the following feature-length films by María Novaro: *Lola* (1989), *Danzón* (1991), *El jardín del Edén* (1994), and *Sin dejar huella* (2000). In the process of discussing the formal techniques of these films, I call upon Stefan Sharff’s theories of shot composition and cinematic syntax. Furthermore, I place Novaro’s films within the historic and socio-economic context of Mexico in the seventies, eighties, and nineties and within the greater context of Mexican2 and Latin American film, using texts by Isabel Arredondo, Joanne Hershfield, David R. Maciel, Elissa J. Rashkin, and David William Foster. While Hershfield, Maciel, and Rashkin focus on these contexts as they pertain to Novaro’s films, Arrendondo’s interview explores

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1 Novaro has also directed the following short films: *Una isla rodeada de agua* (1984), *Azul celeste* (1988), and *Otoño* (1992) and was assistant to the director in Alberto Cortés’s *El amor a la vuelta de la esquina* (1984). She just released her latest project, the feature-length film *Las buenas yerbas* [The Good Herbs] (2010). This film was presented at the 2010 Guadalajara Film Festival and won eight awards, including best script for Novaro, best actress for Úrsula Pruneda, and a recommendation for the Golden Globes.

2 For a brief history of women filmmakers in Mexico, see Diane Sippl’s “El cine de las mexicanas: *Lola* in the Limelight” (1994). Likewise, Patricia Torres San Martín offers a brief history of Latin American women filmmakers in “Mujeres detrás de cámara: una historia de conquistas y victorias en el cine latinoamericano” (2008).
the personal experience of making films in Mexico. Furthermore, in this article I examine and compare crucial scenes from each film that demonstrate the centrality in Novaro’s work of female solidarity—a necessary alliance of women supporting each other in the face of absent male companions and governmental institutions that have failed to assist them.

María Novaro—internationally acclaimed for her second feature-length film Danzón—began working in film in the 1980s. Furthermore, “ha sido reconocida como una de las pioneras del cine de mujeres en la segunda oleada del Nuevo cine Mexicano” (Robles 219). Novaro is part of the first generational group of women film directors in Mexico which includes other directors such as Busi Cortés, Dana Rotberg, and Marisa Sistach, among others. Before this time period there were few exceptions to the rule of male domination in the realm of film directing and those exceptions generally developed their craft and worked alone. Whereas Mexican women were revered as screen sirens especially during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (1940s and 1950s), women were generally barred from practicing the powerful role of film director as well as assistant to the director, which essentially eliminated any chance of them becoming directors. One of the exceptions is Mimi Derba, who directed La tigresa in 1917, one of the first films directed by a Latin American woman director. Although some consider Derba’s film to be the first directed by a Latin American woman director, another film directed by a Chilean woman was released four months earlier—Gabriela Von Bussenius, directed La agonía de Arauco in April of 1917 while Derba’s film was released in August of the same year. Another intriguing exception in Mexico are the Elhers sisters, Adriana and Dolores, who directed a series of documentaries on life in Mexico City. Their case represents one of the first instances of governmental financing of Mexican cinema which became characteristic of Mexican film later in the 20th Century. The Elhers sisters’ era contrasts sharply with the number of women directing films in the nineties in Mexico: “Women accounted for nearly one-third of feature film directors” (McClennen 69). The numbers today are higher but, interestingly, a number of female directors from Mexico have moved to the United States to pursue film degrees as well as financing for their projects.

Novaro’s generation is the first to focus on a realistic cinematic portrayal of women’s lives; they directly refute previously represented stereotypes of Mexican women in film (women were narrowly defined as either saintly mother or fallen woman/prostitute). Foster discusses such films as

una producción cultural que cuenta la historia (o las historias) de la vida de mujeres.
En otras palabras, no son aquellas historias contadas siempre por una voz masculinista, tales como la historia de la destrucción de la humanidad debido al


4Their films include La industria del petróleo (1920), Paseo en tranvia en la Ciudad de México (1920), El agua potable en la Ciudad de México (1920), Las pirámides de Teotihuacán (1921), Museo de Arqueología (1921), Servicio postal en la Ciudad de México (1921), and Real España vs. Real Madrid (1921).

5One example is Patricia Riggen, director of La misma luna (2007), who attended Columbia University’s film program.

6For a succinct discussion of this dichotomy, see Joanne Hershfield’s “The Timeless Paradox: Woman and Whore (1940-1950)” in Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman (1996).
comportamiento de Eva y su salvación gracias a la intervención de la Virgen María.

In line with this description, Novaro’s films focus solely on women’s lives from a female voice and the time period in Mexican history when women are working outside the home as single mothers supporting their families, and, at the same time, trying to realize their potential as individuals. Rashkin, in her discussion of Novaro’s films, explains that women-centered stories, to the extent that they displace a masculinist national narrative, raise doubts about conventional versions of mexicanidad. Filmmakers of Novaro’s generation have intensified these doubts by enacting a literal displacement—their shifting of focus to underrepresented geographical, cultural, and/or psychological terrain and their rewriting of conventional genres and what Novaro calls “clichés.” (168)

Rashkin then addresses the debate surrounding Novaro’s Danzón and whether it can be considered a feminist film. According to Rashkin, Novaro herself rejected the term, preferring “feminine” rather than “feminist” and many critics argued that the film was not feminist. Rashkin calls into question the narrow definitions given to the term “feminist film” by critics referring to Novaro’s films: “whatever their conclusions, the binarism of these statements reveals how narrowly ‘feminism’ was construed by critics, for whom the term seemed to connote a pejorative, cartoonish ‘man-hater’ rather than the valorization of women and rejection of oppression” (180-81). Whatever their label, Novaro’s films highlight the fact that there are no official institutions in place to support the female protagonists and so they must create their own networks of support, which they do quite successfully at times. These networks come in the form of solidarity among the female characters—they support each other socially, physically, emotionally, and financially. Furthermore, they defend each other in the face of outside challenges.

The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines solidarity as “a union of interests, purposes, or sympathies among members of a group; fellowship of responsibilities and interests” (1654). “The French origin of the word is frequently referred to during the period of its introduction into English usage” and references for this introduction date to the mid-19th Century (Oxford English Dictionary 972). More specifically, its second appearance in the English language is in “1848 People’s Press II. 161/2 Solidarity is a word of French origin, the naturalization of which, in this country, is desirable” (Oxford 972). Interestingly, this conversion of the French solidarité to the English solidarity coincides with the 1848 February Revolution in France when a similar concept, fraternité (fraternity), was officially adopted as the third element of the motto “liberté, égalité, fraternité.” In Spanish, solidaridad is defined as “adhesión circunstancial a la causa o a la empresa de otros” (Real Academia Española). French culture permeated Mexico in the 19th Century and a strong sense of solidarity (found throughout Latin America) may have been consolidated during this time period. As I will argue, this sense of fraternity or solidarity, a “union of sympathies,” and a “fellowship of responsibilities” is ever present in Novaro’s feature-length films. The unique aspect in Novaro’s work is the female nature of this solidarity—her films portray a union of women with like sympathies and shared responsibilities. This focus on Mexican women attempting to better their quality of life through mutual alliances stands out against a backdrop of seventies and eighties Mexico that was still very much oriented toward the success of men. In a more concrete sense, as a woman at the helm of these films, Novaro also created more leading roles for female actresses as well as other film production positions for Mexican women—fighting what Foster calls a masculine and masculinist industry (Foster 207). As will become evident in the scene analyses of Novaro’s
films, the director pays close attention to the technical aspect of her films and how this affects the themes she is trying to represent on screen. In *Palabra de mujer*, Isabel Arredondo explains that when Novaro was studying at the CUEC (Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos) she initially focused on camera work and editing:

> En sus primeros ejercicios escolares, Novaro eligió trabajar como fotógrafa o camarógrafa, cuidando de los planos y los encuadres, porque le interesaba investigar cómo la posición de la cámara afecta al punto de vista. Posteriormente, se centró en la edición porque le interesaba reflexionar sobre los detalles del material filmado. Ambas preocupaciones continuarán a lo largo de su carrera profesional. (118)

Arredondo maintains that this attention to the composition of her shots is evident in all of Novaro’s films and she intentionally places her characters in the shot, as she says, to influence point of view. Furthermore, Novaro considers camera position to be an important technique in conveying the meaning of her films.

In *Lola* (1989), male support is absent but so is substantial female support; thus, this film will be the exception to the thesis of female solidarity in Novaro’s films and is, in fact, a call for an alternative support structure, which Novaro will develop in her following three feature-length films. In this first feature-length film, Novaro offers a very bleak outlook on the lives of Lola (Leticia Huijara) and her daughter Ana (Alejandra Cerrillo); Lola does not earn enough money to fully support her daughter and Ana’s father moves to Los Angeles with his band. At one point in the film Lola leaves Ana with her grandmother but cannot stay away long and the film ends with Lola and Ana together at the beach watching clouds and walking hand in hand. These last shots represent an ambiguously positive ending to a film about the difficulties of a working-class single mother trying to provide for her daughter. Although Lola stumbles many times along the way—leaving her daughter alone too long in the night and shoplifting with her at the grocery store—she ultimately decides that it is important for her to be with her daughter and continue trying. What is lacking in this film, which we find in Novaro’s next three, is the group of women or at least the one friend who serve(s) as a support network. Ana, the central female character in Lola’s life, is five years old and needs all the support her mother can give her; she cannot be expected to support her mother, even emotionally. Lola has a few friends but their situations are just as dismal and they are not in a position to support her. Lola’s mother, Ana’s grandmother, does take Ana in while Lola is gone but this is a grudging support from one who disagrees with Lola’s choices for her daughter and would rather have Ana to herself. The missing solidarity in Novaro’s first feature-length film is just as symbolic as the palpable solidarity in her following three films.

Much of the perceived need for solidarity in Novaro’s films stems from the devaluation of the peso and the real-life economic crisis Mexico was experiencing in the late seventies, eighties, and early nineties during several PRI presidencies—spanning the sexenios of both Luis Echeverría (1970-76) and José López Portillo (1976-82) and reaching into the periods of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88) and Carlos de Salinas y Gortari (1988-94). The importance of the sexenio of a president is evident when discussing Mexican films because governmental policy has traditionally had a significant effect on national cinema, mainly in terms of financing projects. When Novaro produced

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9 *Lola* received many national and international awards for best first film including the Silver Ariel for Best First Work, Screenplay, and Supporting Actor (Mexico) as well as awards at the Berlin International Film Festival, the Havana Film Festival, and the Premios ACE.

10 The peso was devalued in 1982 and again in 1994. During the decades of the seventies and eighties there were periods of rapid growth and rapid decline, which resulted in the economic crises of these decades, the devaluation of the Mexican peso, and later the development of the Nuevo Peso (New Peso) in 1993, before the devaluation the following year.
Lola, Salinas y Gortari’s government provided what would be “the last vestige of outright state support for movie production [with] the seed money provided by the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica administered by IMCINE (Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía)” (Maciel, 215). According to Miriam Haddu, “IMCINE’s part-financing program aimed to encourage independent filmmaking in Mexico, a far cry from the State-dominated tendencies of the past” (Contemporary Mexican Cinema 3). This program included providing partial funding for film projects with the stipulation that the director would seek private funding as well (2-3). While this system partially removed Mexican directors from state support and, thus, censorship, it placed them squarely within the private sector and put them at the mercy of commercial whims.

Although Lola came toward the end of the economic crisis of the seventies and eighties, the effects of the profound economic, political, and social crisis of twentieth-century Mexico upon members and sectors of society—particularly women—is one central theme in contemporary cinema, and many of the recent female characters are portrayed in a struggle against this crisis. (Maciel and Hershfield, 256)

To begin with, Lola is set against the backdrop of this political and socio-economic crisis in Mexico and Novaro portrays her protagonist, Lola, as a woman who is struggling to survive under the burden of this state crisis. The protagonist works as a street vendor but has to hide her wares and flee the police each time they arrive. This is an example of an institution that has not only abandoned women like Lola, but became a menace to them and their survival. Furthermore, the buildings shown in this film reflect the devastating effects of Mexico City’s 1985, 8.1 magnitude earthquake and the slowness to reconstruct poorer areas of the city. As Elissa J. Rashkin indicates, “In Lola, the effects of the earthquake are omnipresent in the form of crumbling buildings that mimic the crumbling emotional state of the protagonist” (190). In effect, we watch Lola’s personal crisis occur against the backdrop of the effects of the national crisis and the action of this film literally takes place among the ruins of fallen buildings.

Along with this struggle to survive in Mexico City, Lola mirrors a changing social definition of the family unit. Maciel and Hershfield state: “No longer is the image projected of fixed gender roles, conventional heterosexual couples, or traditional family structures. In fact, the disintegration of the family and its values is strikingly visible in recent films” (256). Although Maciel and Hershfield assert that the films in question demonstrate the “disintegration of the family and its values” (256) I would clarify that this is only true of what they rightly term the “traditional family structures.” In a sense, films such as Lola are precursors to the idea of alternative family structures that have their own sets of values. While Lola does not provide its characters with a completely satisfying family unit, not even an alternatively structured one, it more importantly points out the need for such an alternative “family.” This call for an alternative to the traditional family unit is essential to Novaro’s message in Lola, the female solidarity of her subsequent films provides the support that was lost with the end of this traditional family structure through new networks of female solidarity.

In Lola, Novaro purposefully separates the characters on screen to demonstrate the disenfranchisement they suffer. The opening scene shows Lola’s daughter Ana dancing and singing to a rock song and then switches to Lola; both are filmed with a spotlight on them and their surroundings in darkness. This continues as the camera moves through the apartment and focuses on different objects, including a row of Ana’s toys—the viewer sees what is in the spotlight and the rest is shaded. First of all, from the outset each character is shown separately rather than together on screen and the darkness surrounding their figures is ominous. Although in subsequent scenes, Lola and Ana are filmed together on screen in many occasions, these opening shots introduce a sense of loneliness. There is another scene where Lola’s friend Duende (Roberto Sosa) is waiting for her in the street and in a close-up shot the camera focuses on his face—we see the jagged scar that crosses his left cheek—while he melancholically looks down. The next shot shows that he has been scratching Lola’s name into a corrugated, metal door. Again, he is alone in the shot and this time the sound of the scraping metal—coming first from outside the shot and then from within the action—infuses the scene with uneasiness just as the shadows outside the spotlight create a sense of
loneliness in the first scene. Finally, in a travel scene toward the end of *Lola*, there is a series of shots of Lola and her friends going to the beach. Whereas Novaro films Ana and Aurelia together in the frame in the car on their trip in *Sin dejar huella*, she films each character separately in *Lola*—we see them listening to music, driving, sleeping, or drinking beer but each shot is separate and each character is seen separately from the rest. Although they are in the same car their loneliness is still palpable. Moreover, from the camera and viewer’s perspective, it is as if we are seeing each character from another character’s position in the car but there is not interaction among the characters in the scene, just individual shots of the four passengers.

Discussing Novaro's first and second feature-length films, Maciel and Hershfield state:

> *Lola, Los Pasos de Ana* [Marisa Sistach], and *Danzón* document, narrativize, and represent the distinctive unconscious and social realities of women’s experiences. Meaningful change does not usually occur in the wider arena of social or political relations for women, especially for lower-class women who typically lack access to political and social power, but in the narrower and more personal realm of everyday life. Thus, these films emphasize the spaces in which women’s lives take place (bathrooms, kitchens, places of work, children’s rooms and playgrounds). (259)

Although women were part of the working force in Mexico at the time of the release of Novaro’s second feature-length film *Danzón* (1991), it is accurate to say that their social and, to a certain extent, political power lay within the confines of places such as the bathroom and women’s break room at work. However, this film is, according to Foster, a very feminist text: “la protagonista huye de las normas y las reinventa” (210). *Danzón* tells the story of Julia Solórzano (Maria Rojo), a telephone operator who goes to Veracruz in search of her dance partner, Carmelo (Daniel Rergis). Although Julia only knows Carmelo from the dance floor, she becomes obsessed with the idea of finding him. Julia leaves her daughter in Mexico City in the care of her friends from work and goes to Veracruz, where she slowly forgets her distress at Carmelo’s absence and has a fling with a younger man—something she had advised against at the beginning of the film because it went against social conventions—and, in so doing, experiences a sexual awakening and self-empowerment. She then returns to Mexico City and the dance hall where she met Carmelo, discovering he has returned. Julia is a new woman at the end of the film, who looks her dance partner straight in the eyes in the final sequence of *Danzón*, something she would have been mortified to do at the beginning. Julia’s trip to Veracruz and her subsequent self-discovery is the main story in this film but the secondary narrative is of utmost importance to the current discussion: Julia’s friends support her decision to go in search of Carmelo, they take her daughter under their wings while she is gone, and rejoice in her newly-developed independence when she returns. The secondary storyline in *Danzón* is essentially about the network of friends who help Julia in the absence of male support. As Maciel and Hershfield declare:

> Unlike earlier Mexican cinematic representations of women, femininity in this film is not defined in opposition to masculinity. In fact, men do not figure at all in *Danzón* except in conventional feminized roles. And women are not the passive objects of the man’s gaze. Each of the women who we encounter—from Julia’s teenage daughter to the prostitute, Rojo, to Suzi—is portrayed as a person whose self-reliance is not dependent on the whims of men, as in classical narratives, but on her own strengths and on the support of other women. (259)

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11. In 1991, *Danzón* “became the first Mexican film in fourteen years to be invited to the Directors’ Section of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival” (Rashkin 167).

12. Suzi is a transvestite who, born as a male, refers to herself as a woman. She is one of the many friends worked into the fabric of solidarity in *Danzón*.
Essentially, absence defines the role of men in Novaro's films; when faced with this absence, Novaro's protagonists rely on female solidarity. As Rashkin explains, in Danzón, "Julia's fate rests on the generous assistance and complicity of those who surround her" (177).

In Danzón, Novaro begins to imagine alternatives to the lack of solidarity the female characters experienced in her first film. The most important scenes for the current discussion couch the main action—these are the scenes before and after Julia travels to Veracruz in search of Carmelo. Julia works as a telephone operator and her daughter begins work there too; Julia introduces her daughter to her coworkers in the break room where they are talking and one woman is selling jewelry. As they leave, one of the coworkers welcomes the young girl to the group, in essence letting her know that she is now one of them. This support remains throughout the film, as these women take her under their wing while Julia is in Veracruz. Later, Julia and her coworker friends are in the bathroom brushing their hair and putting on makeup and Julia announces her decision to go look for Carmelo. At first the women scoff at the idea and worry about the possibility of Julia losing her job. As she converses about the situation with her friends, her voice begins to rise while she fiercely brushes her hair and worries about Carmelo being alone and possibly sick. Prior to this, Julia is in the shot with her two friends in front of the mirror and her best friend starts to realize Julia's earnestness and stops what she is doing to anxiously watch her friend's image in the mirror. Right before Julia's frenzied outburst she backs up and the camera slowly follows her, separating her from the other two women. Julia is alone in this shot—except for an unknown woman washing her hands in the sink behind her—as she explains her worries about Carmelo. Then one of her friends enters the shot from the left; Julia is no longer alone either on the screen or in her design to find her dance partner. The woman, her best friend, says to her "Sabes qué flaca, vete" [You know what sweetie, just go] and hugs her as she reaches mid-screen. The shot fades as Julia and her friend hug and the scene ends with Julia's friend physically supporting her in a hug and emotionally supporting her decision to go to Veracruz. Novaro understands the importance of shot composition to create a certain affect; in this case, Novaro emphasizes Julia's separation from the other women in the bathroom and then shows the women together hugging in a gesture of solidarity. Similarily, the last scene to show the women together is in a private space—Julia's living room. This is after Julia has returned from Veracruz and the scene opens with a four-way separation shot where we see each character separately on screen as Julia presents her gifts. This scene ends with Julia, her daughter, and her two friends from work standing at a table with their backs to the camera; the women stand side by side as the music starts and her best friend laughs and asks Julia about her trip: "¡Cuéntame! ¡Cuéntame!" [Tell me! Tell me!]. We as viewers are privy to a moment of solidarity between these four women as they reunite and will presumably discuss Julia's trip.

Novaro sets her third feature-length film, El jardín del Edén (1994), against the raw setting of the United States/Mexico border, as opposed to Mexico City or Veracruz in Lola and Danzón, respectively. As in her previous films, she explores this setting through extensive footage of the city or region in question and references to its culture. This is a common aspect of Novaro's films; she infuses each film with the popular culture of the region (Mexico City in Lola; the capital and Veracruz in Danzón; Tijuana and the surrounding area of the California/Mexico border in El jardín del Edén; and Juárez, Mexico's eastern coast, and Yucatán in Sin dejar huella). In El jardín del Edén, Jane, Liz, and Serena's lives intertwine in a multi-layered story about these women's experiences living on the border. Jane (Renée Coleman) is a free-spirited American whose idealistic views of Mexico lead her to Tijuana, her own "garden of Eden." Meanwhile, Liz (Rosario Sagrav) arrives

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13 El jardín del Edén won an award at the Havana Film Festival and was nominated for two at the Ariel Awards in Mexico. Novaro herself has recognized the ambiguous reception of this film, most extensively in her interview with Isabel Arredondo in Palabra de mujer. Novaro acknowledges that there were several difficulties with the filming of the project including interference with filming on the border and less personal control over the product (Arredondo).
with her children in Tijuana to curate an exposition on Chicano identity. The third main character, Serena (Garbiela Roel), is a portrait photographer who is recently widowed and struggles to support her children while she herself is suffering from her husband’s absence. Behind each woman’s story on screen is the ever-present absence of a man, husband, lover, brother, or father. In the face of this absence, Novaro depicts how these women create their own network of mainly emotional support. While this network is not as clear-cut as in Danzón and Sin dejar huella, it is still present in the way these women talk to each other about their lives and receive comfort, advice, and a “friendly ear”. These conversations generally take place in a shared common lawn outside their houses and in their livings rooms or cars.

Much of what has been written about El jardín del Edén concerns the setting of the film on the U.S./Mexico border. Critics have not focused on female solidarity in this film, opting instead to focus their discussions on female characters and their separate searches for identity. For example, Miriam Haddu in “‘Welcome to Tijuana...’” refers to the exploration of a notion of feminine space, found so often in Novaro’s works, alongside the personal and geographical journey in search of oneself, rhythmically culminating at the shores of the sea. In El jardín del Edén, Novaro brings together three different women from very different backgrounds in order to explore a constructed female experience taken from the perspective of the borderland. (105) Haddu does not return to this notion of a specifically feminine space in the remainder of her article, yet it is essential to understanding the female dynamic of this film. It is in these “feminine spaces”—such as the patio outside their houses, their living rooms, and their cars—that the female characters bond and support each other. As Foster explains, Novaro’s protagonists are not heroines or revolutionaries but they achieve small victories “por conseguir, dentro de este contexto masculinista de México, un espacio para desarrollar un proyecto que no cabía dentro de esta dinámica” (214). Thus, Novaro’s protagonists find spaces within which they carry out their life projects—raising children alone, working, bonding, discovering themselves—and, as Foster clarifies, these are victories compared to the challenges these women confront.

Although female solidarity is not the main theme of Novaro’s El jardín del Edén, it is still central to the development of the primary female characters. Novaro develops this solidarity against the backdrop of absent male partners—husbands, fathers, and brothers. In this film, Novaro interweaves reminders of these men into the scenes of the protagonists. For example, a portrait of her late husband hangs over Serena’s dining room table. When one of her children takes the picture down and hides it, she admonishes them all before realizing it was her youngest daughter, most likely saddened by the image. Another example is Liz’s ex-husband to whom she refers only briefly when talking to Serena. Finally there is the example of Jane’s brother who, although physically present, is emotionally absent and unavailable to his sister. He repeatedly ignores her phone calls and when she visits he hardly participates in the conversation. Furthermore, he is lackadaisical when Serena’s son disappears with Jane and Felipe.

In El jardín del Edén, the moments when the female characters congregate on screen are memorable. Two of these scenes take place on a clearing in front of Serena and Elizabeth’s houses; once, when Serena and Elizabeth sit in lawn chairs and discuss their lives and a second time, when

14Although the focus of his study is not on solidarity, Óscar Robles does mention the term in reference to Novaro’s films: “La comunidad de personajes de El jardín del Edén establece relaciones de hermandad y solidaridad, como los personajes de Danzón” (185). Robles includes the male and female characters in his later comment on El jardín del Edén: “Con la interacción solidaria de sujetos angloajones, chicanos, mexicanos e indígenas de diversos estratos sociales, edades y sexos, se plantea otra nación social” (186).
the women play a game of baseball with their children. In both instances, the viewer is reminded of absent men, whether from the women’s conversation or from the baseball game played mostly by women—wearing caps, swearing, and generally acting the part of baseball players. The first scene in front of the houses is a conversation between Serena and Elizabeth, both sitting in lawn chairs facing each other. During the conversation, the camera focuses on the woman talking but the editing never separates them during their talk. When one woman speaks, the camera focuses on her but the other woman is in the side and corner of the shot, and vice versa. Serena and Elizabeth never interrupt each other while they listen to their respective stories about absent partners. The same is true of the shots, they never interrupt each other; in other words, Novaro edits the scene in such a way that each shot includes the other woman’s image and neither shot takes precedence over the other. Each of these women has found a supportive and attentive friend in the other, which is manifested in their conversation as well as the editing of the scene.

The first baseball game in El jardín del Edén takes place along the border on the Mexican side. Sergio, Serena’s son, hits a home run and the border patrol guards on the U.S. side cheer and give each other a high-five. Ironically, the home run hit cannot clear the fence because the border fence is too high and later, this same institution—the border patrol—will be a menace to Serena’s son who is detained after crossing without papers. This baseball scene, where we see Serena in the stands worrying about her son, contrasts starkly with the second baseball game, toward the end of the film. Serena has just picked her son up after he was returned to Mexico from the United States. The next scene is Serena and Elizabeth with their children and the woman who runs the second-hand store Juana (Ana Ofelia Murguia) playing baseball in front of their houses. The scene opens with two separate close-up shots of Serena and Elizabeth, their “game faces” on. In the background we hear them all cheering for their teammates and the music playing is upbeat and cheerful. These women have carved out a safe space for themselves and their children in which to enjoy themselves and each other.

Sin dejar huella (2000), Novaro’s fourth feature-length film, tells the story of two very different women who, despite their differences, end up helping each other in their particular journeys, either away from or toward someone or some ideal. Ana (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón), whom we see first on screen, is running away from a sheriff who, besides being sexually attracted to her, wants to expose her as an illegal dealer in indigenous antiquities. This sheriff, Mendizábel (Jesús Ochoa), represents the corruption of an institution that should be there to protect women such as Ana and Aurelia but, in fact, threatens them. In her flight from the sheriff, Ana meets Aurelia (Tiaré Scanda) at a restaurant bus stop and hitchs a ride with her. Aurelia is running away from her boyfriend, from whom she has stolen drug money in order to start a new life in Cancún. Aurelia’s threat comes in the form of drug traffickers chasing her for the money she has taken—this is yet another mainly male group that is a menace to the female characters in Novaro’s films. While Sin dejar huella focuses on these women’s differences—Ana’s Peninsular Spanish accent and Aurelia’s northern Mexican accent, Ana’s education and Aurelia’s lack thereof—the moments when they support each other are significant. First of all, Aurelia lets Ana ride with her to southern Mexico and along the way they create a bond that strengthens when they plot together to escape a car that is chasing them, each character believing it is following her. At one point, the women stop at a beach on the East Coast of Mexico where the camera focuses in on a sign that reads “Aquí sólo encontramos amigos” and Aurelia asks Ana if she is her friend. When Ana answers affirmatively, they run into the waves hand in hand. They continue their journey south, at one point stopping to

15Sin dejar huella won the Silver Ariel awards for Best Cinematography and Best Special Effects at the Ariel Awards in Mexico as well as awards at the Guadalajara Mexican Film Festival and the Latin America Cinema Award at the Sundance Festival.

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trap the car following them. Their plan backfires when the car races into the ditch they had made, unintentionally killing the two passengers.¹⁶ At the end of this film Ana returns after having left with Aurelia’s money and arrives with a band, thus helping Aurelia to surprise her son with the music she had promised him when he arrived in Cancún.

A road film, *Sin dejar huella* follows the protagonists from northern Mexico to the Eastern coast and on to Yucatán. As I posited earlier, Novaro focuses on the different regions of Mexico and their respective cultures. According to David R. Maciel, this tendency to decentralize Mexican cinema is ubiquitous in the films of Novaro’s generation of the 1990s:

> Cinema, like so much of recent Mexico, has been highly centralized, reflecting a dominant perspective of only its capital, Mexico City. Other states and regions have been minimized even in the arts. A distinct thematic characteristic, especially in the films of certain directors of the generation of the 1990s, is to emphasize regional themes and settings in Mexico. (114)

This emphasis on the different regions of Mexico in *Sin dejar huella* also serves to highlight the cultural and socio-economic differences between Ana and Aurelia. In fact, this is the source of much of the antagonism between the characters but I would argue that this is one of the premises of this film—despite their differences, these two women are eventually able to support each other when none of the absent or threatening men in their lives can do so. In the end of this film, when Aurelia meets her young son at the airport—he is just joining his mother—Ana arrives with a band to welcome him, a promise Aurelia was unable to keep. Interestingly, Ana seems to step in and “save the day” with the band; she even takes charge of the stroller with Aurelia’s youngest child as they all walk away. This is yet another example of the female characters in Novaro’s films filling the spaces of absent men and creating their own support network.

In *Sin dejar huella*, Ana and Aurelia progress from a state of individualism to solidarity—with a few lapses in between—as they travel from northern to southern Mexico. Both are escaping their pasts and men that are chasing them. At first they use and antagonize each other. For example, Aurelia makes fun of Ana’s accent: “En inglés también le haces así” (both the “c” of “haces” and the “s” of “así” pronounced with the Peninsular ceceo—akin to the English “th”). Likewise, Ana criticizes Aurelia for drinking a beer before driving. However, when the car that is chasing them tries to run them off the road, Ana moves to the backseat to hold Aurelia’s baby. This scene is key to understanding the solidarity developing between the two characters; Ana feels a shared responsibility with Aurelia’s baby, as will be even more evident in the last scene of this film. In addition, unlike in the car scene in *Lola*, the shots within the car in *Sin dejar huella* show Ana and Aurelia together on screen interacting, whether they are both in the front seat or one is in the back seat with the baby. When they take a side road that leads to the beach, they get out of the car and the camera pans across the area, showing a sign that reads “Aquí sólo encontramos amigos.” In a subsequent shot, Aurelia asks “Ana, ¿eres mi amiga?” as she grabs her hand and leads her to the water. We then see them together on screen splashing in the water and conversing about their lives; in these shots the camera continually shows both characters within the same frame. Later, when the two women arrive to Yucatán, Ana goes to buy baby formula when Aurelia can no longer breast feed from the fright of believing she has killed her boyfriend in the trap they had set for the car chasing them. Similarly, when Aurelia realizes that Ana has no money, she buys her food and drinks. Nevertheless, toward the end of the film, Ana leaves and takes Aurelia’s bag of money she had from selling her

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¹⁶ Many have commented that this film is similar to Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991) except that the women survive and the men who are menacing them go over the cliff. Novaro herself has bristled at the comparison to the Hollywood film.
boyfriend’s drugs; this was the money she was planning to use to “make a new life” for herself and her children in Cancún.

The last scene of Sin dejar huella is the definitive answer to whether the solidarity between Aurelia and Ana is intact. As Aurelia awaits her oldest son at the airport, the viewer knows that she has promised him a Mariachi band when he arrives. The viewer also knows that Aurelia has no money to rent a band and has been working in a bar/restaurant and living in apartments not very dissimilar to where she lived in Ciudad Juárez. As Aurelia and her son leave the airport, her son exclaims “Ay, Ma, te acordaste. ¡Qué bueno que no trajiste mariachis.” As we hear the band, we see Aurelia smile at her son and look up; her expression changes to surprise and pleasant recognition as she sees Ana behind the band. Ana has hired the band and come to bring Aurelia’s money back to her. Ana walks up to Aurelia and pats the oldest son on the head and caresses the baby’s cheek; she then takes the stroller handles from Aurelia and pushes it out of the shot. The next shot is a wide shot of the outside of the airport waiting area, where Ana and Aurelia begin to update each other and their lives. In this scene, all the characters are in the shot together and facing each other. Aurelia is holding her older son’s hand and Ana has the baby’s stroller in front of her. As in the rest of the film up to this point, Aurelia’s trust of Ana with her children and Ana’s comfort with Aurelia’s children is a key factor in the solidarity between these two women—along their mutual journey to southern Mexico they develop a camaraderie that allows them both to trust and rely upon each other for help.

Novaro’s four feature-length films are set against the backdrop of socio-economic turmoil in Mexico. Each film focuses on a different geographic region of Mexico but what is consistent is Novaro’s concentration on the female protagonists living in these circumstances and trying to find ways to simply survive or better their own and their children’s lives. There is a notable absence of male support in her films. In fact, in many instances, men and larger groups and institutions—police, border patrol, and drug traffickers—are a menace to the female characters in Novaro’s films. In Lola, the need for female support systems is presented but these systems are not developed until Novaro’s next three feature-length films. In these films, the director explores the support networks that the protagonists develop to help each other socially, physically, emotionally, and even financially. Novaro’s camera techniques further develop the theme of solidarity; most importantly, placing characters together on screen to create a sense of cohesion. The solidarity among the female characters allows them to fill the gaps left by absent men as well as institutions that are a menace to them or that abandoned them during the financial crises of the seventies, eighties, and nineties in Mexico.

Works Cited


Female Solidarity in the Films of María Novaro


