On Friday, February 3, 2017, I traveled to the prison in Santa Martha Acatitla, on the outskirts of Mexico City, to visit Juana Barraza, who is serving a sentence of 759 years for the homicides of sixteen elderly women and twelve robberies. Police officials and news media have declared Barraza to be La Mataviejitas, or the (female) killer of old ladies. To date, she is the only serial killer ever officially identified as such before capture to be arrested and tried in Mexico City. From late 2003 to early 2006, as police struggled to find out who had been killing a number of elderly women, they focused their efforts on identifying El Mataviejitas, or the male killer of old ladies. This search was the first (and thus far, the only) time in Mexican history that a serial killer was deemed worthy of being hunted down by a dedicated task force. The serial killer was nicknamed, profiled, and tracked—and eventually caught, convicted, and sentenced.

Eleven years before my visit to the prison, on January 26, 2006, Juana Barraza Samperio was arrested as the presumed La Mataviejitas as she was fleeing the scene at which a woman (aged eighty-two or eighty-nine, depending on the source) had been strangled with a stethoscope. A renter had come home in the middle of the afternoon to find his landlady, Ana María Reyes Alfaro, strangled and lying on the floor. Having just encountered another woman exiting the house who had immediately started running away, he cried out for help and started to chase her. Two police officers patrolling the area heard the tenant’s calls for help, saw a woman running, and, after a short pursuit, captured Barraza. Newspaper headlines the next day read “Cae Mataviejitas tras consumar otro de sus crímenes; es mujer” (Mataviejitas falls after committing another crime: It is a woman), “Atrapan a la mataviejitas: es mujer y es luchadora” (The [female] Mataviejitas is caught: is a woman and a wrestler), and “Luchadora de 48 años fue detenida luego de estrangular a una mujer. Cae presunta ‘mataviejitas’” (48-year-old wrestler was caught after strangling a woman. Alleged Mataviejitas falls).
Barraza was in fact also a professional *lucha libre* wrestler. *Lucha libre* is a sport-theater spectacle that has been enormously popular in Mexico since the 1930s. Under the stage name of La Dama del Silencio, Barraza fought as a *ruda*, meaning she employed no proper wrestling technique. As La Dama del Silencio, she wore a bright pink Power Ranger–like suit with silver details along the legs and shoulders and pink-and-silver knee boots. A pink-and-silver butterfly mask covered her face. A photograph of La Dama del Silencio that circulated in newspapers immediately after her identification as La Mataviejitas shows Barraza with what purports to be a World Women’s Wrestling Championship belt draped across her shoulder and waist, striking a pose with one hand on a hip, showing off her muscular arm, and the other hand in front of her torso (fig. I.2). Her tall stature (she is 1.75 meters, or five-foot-nine) and athletic phy-
Figure 1.2. Juana Barraza as La Dama del Silencio.
The image text is a continuation of the previous text, discussing a visit to Santa Martha Acatitla, a correctional facility, and the experiences of a researcher there. The text includes details about the visit, interactions with prisoners, and observations about the facility's environment and regulations. The content is consistent with the previous text provided.
out success, Nuñez helped me by acting as a go-between. In one letter I wrote to Barraza that Nuñez made sure she received, I explained the purpose of my intended visit—that I wanted to get to know her and to hear her point of view. It is commonly accepted, in criminological accounts and media reports alike, that serial killers want to be “somebody” and that they crave fame and notoriety. Defying this stereotype, though, Barraza had given no media interviews in her ten years of incarceration.

A government criminologist and a neuropsychologist had interviewed Barraza immediately after her arrest, but that was all. Neither I nor anyone else knew her perspective on the killings.

I was told that all my permits were in order and that I could go to an adjacent room to meet with Barraza. As I stood up from the couch and left the office to enter that room, I bumped into her as she was coming in. I was immediately struck by her height, especially in comparison to most Mexican women. I had to lift my face to see hers, and my head reached only her chest. I was struck as well by how healthy her skin looked, how bright and luminous it was. Her hair, dyed copper-blonde, was still very short, as it had been in the newspaper photographs that appeared the day she was captured. She was wearing electric-blue eye shadow, blue mascara, and red lipstick. As we bumped into each other, she smiled.

We were directed to the room in which we were to talk. It was small, its peachy-pink paint was chipped and fading, and a plastic bag wrapped around the door handle served as a doorknob. A white, round plastic table occupied most of the room, and we had to edge around it to sit across from each other. There was a gray file cabinet in one corner; in front of it was a small stool, which Sánchez sat on when she joined us for a brief moment. The room had just one small window, high in a corner, which offered no view.

Barraza spoke in a soft voice and smiled the whole time we talked, displaying a perfect set of small white teeth. I had read the description of her by Martin Barrón, one of the main police officers and criminologists responsible for determining Barraza’s guilt, who claimed that Barraza’s look was cold and calculating, like that of most serial killers. In Barrón’s book on the case, the character of Barraza’s gaze was further proof that she was indeed La Mataviejitas. Yet to me she did not seem cold and calculating in the least. On the contrary, what struck me was that she smiled even with her eyes.
It was noon, and Barraza, having just come from her scheduled prison activity, had the rest of the afternoon free. Given her alleged status as the serial killer of elderly women, it is astonishing that her “activity” on Friday afternoons involves walking elderly women through the prison courtyard. Barraza has been the “coordinator of the walking activity” since 2010, supervising around fifty elderly women. I was once again taken aback when, smiling and laughing, she began our conversation with a complaint about how the elderly women did not obey her: “You know what they say to me? ‘Who do you think you are? You are not the boss of me!’” Between laughs, Juana Barraza, or Juanita as she is called in prison (I addressed her as Juana), told me how the elderly women do not like walking and prefer to sit down. So Barraza gets mad. She cannot work like that!

This casual conversation was meant to break the ice between us, since the meeting had been set up as a preliminary, get-acquainted exchange. I was extremely nervous and stunned by the degree of contrast between everything I’d heard and read about La Mataviejitas and the woman who sat before me. Looking back, I see that this worked to my advantage, as it made me open to just hearing what Barraza had to say, rather than trying to impose my interests and views as a researcher. Since the beginning of this project in 2006, I have been clear that Barraza’s culpability is not my focus. Rather, I have been interested in what the circulation of representations and discourses involving a female wrestler and serial killer reveal about international constructions of the serial killer in terms of sex, gender, class, and nationality. In particular, I am concerned with what serial killing (often framed as “killing for the pleasure of killing”) represents in Mexican culture—a culture undergoing many social changes that is nonetheless still characterized by conservative, traditional, and moralistic official discourses. I am most deeply interested in what serial killing reveals about which people count as victims and how a criminal is constructed.

Since Barraza and I were having an informal conversation and not a structured interview, I did not ask many questions, but simply followed along as she talked. After her humorous account of her issues with her elderly charges, Barraza told me that, just the day before my visit, her daughter had turned twenty-seven. She had recently finished her undergraduate degree in graphic design. Barraza talked a lot about
her kids, and she made a point of letting me know that she was a good mother and had been blessed with wonderful children. I was struck by the importance Barraza seemed to place on convincing me of this. “I can be whatever they want, but not a bad mother,” Barraza said. “I have raised very good children.” She took evident pride in her daughter having finished university.

We talked for about two hours. When we concluded our conversation and Barraza stood up, I was touched by the fact that while Barraza took elderly women for walks, she herself could hardly walk. She told me she needed surgery but could not afford it. She has a severe spinal injury in her spine, suffered when she was thirty-five years old during a wrestling match. Barrón suggests that Barraza’s ruda status and lack of professional training, combined with the fact that her injury forced her to stop wrestling, were what made her seek out other sources of excitement. For many observers, this “need for excitement” led to her “need to kill.”

During our chat, I told Barraza that the purpose of my book was to question who counts as a victim and in turn who is considered a criminal in Mexico. She agreed to a formal interview with me, to take place at a later date. I asked why she agreed to be interviewed by me, given that she never grants interviews. She told me that until then she had been scared, though not for herself: “What else could I lose? They destroyed my life, they destroyed my [wrestling] career. I had nothing else to lose. I have been in prison for committing one crime. But I was afraid for my kids, because when you are threatened with the lives of your children, then you do not want to talk.” Again, I noticed that Barraza positioned her children, her family, as the most important thing in her life. Every time Barraza talked about her kids her eyes teared up. Of course, the sincerity of this can be questioned, but it is crucial to pay attention to the importance Barraza placed on motherhood.

On the way back, before Sánchez dropped me off at the subway, I asked her if Barraza’s sons and grandsons and great-grandsons visited her in prison. Sánchez told me that she had seen them there often. But never Barraza’s daughter.

Barraza has been declared the first female serial killer in Mexico. Her “muscular” wrestling body, her “calculating” looks, and her adoration of the banned Catholic saint La Santa Muerte have all been scrutinized in various types of police reports, in periodicals published in Mexico
and abroad, and by criminologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, novelists, musicians, and morbosos (the morbidly curious) of all kinds. The moment Barraza was declared La Mataviejitas, all of these experts, amateurs, and morbosos rushed to the feast of interpretation.

There were other serial killers in Mexico before El/La Mataviejitas, but again, for none of them was a task force organized and deployed. In all previous cases, it was only after their arrest that they came to be identified as serial killers. Despite the high levels of violence and crime in Mexico, serial killing is a very rare phenomenon. It seemed that after the two “Mexican Jack the Rippers,” Mexico had filled its quota of notorious serial killers. There was El Chalequero, an actual contemporary of Jack the Ripper, who between 1880 and 1888 killed a number of female sex workers. Of course, he was labeled a serial killer only in retrospect. Decades later, there was Gregorio (Goyo) Cárdenas, also known as the “Mexican Jack the Ripper,” who in 1942 murdered four women—his girlfriend and three sex workers—and buried them in the garden of his house. With these two Mexican Rippers, the country’s fascination with this type of criminal appeared to be satisfied. Consequently, I found it worth analyzing why in 2003, for the first time in Mexican history, police announced the possible existence of a serial killer still at large—one who would eventually be alleged responsible for the killing of forty-nine elderly women in Mexico City.

Three aspects of this story deserve closer scrutiny. The first is the type of violence commonly associated with serial murder: “killing for the pleasure of killing” was officially declared to be an “unknown phenomenon” in Mexico. This seems incongruous considering, for example, the cruelty of Mexican drug cartels, such as Los Zetas or the narcosatánicos, and the alarming number of feminicides of young brown and marginalized women in Ciudad Juárez and Estado de México. Most of the killings of these young women have been sexual crimes; the women have been tortured, raped, then murdered and dismembered and left in empty lots. The feminicides in Ciudad Juárez happened roughly at the same time that El/La Mataviejitas was allegedly killing elderly women, in the late 1990s. Renato Sales Heredia, deputy prosecutor with the Inquiries Office of the Mexico City Department of Justice said at the time that serial killing is “a terrifying and new phenomenon. . . . [W]hat happens to us today did not happen to us before; it happened in movies, in the United
States.” Heredia made this statement while stories of the brutality of Los Zetas—who would torture their victims for hours, decapitate them, or mutilate them—were circulating widely. At the same time, feminist activists were fighting to bring national and international attention to the brutality of the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez. Similarly, the narcosatánicos were known to perform satanic rituals that involved sacrificing humans, dismembering their bodies, pulling out their eyes, and making necklaces out of their bones. Yet “killing for the pleasure of killing” was still considered an unknown phenomenon in Mexico until the revelation of El Mataviejitas’s existence shocked the nation in 2003. Why are serial killers more “terrifying” than leaders of drug cartels? What beliefs and assumptions about serial killers make them more fearsome than narcosatánicos? Which cultural clashes are revealed in the contrast between the respective discursive construction of serial killers and narcosatánicos?

The second aspect of the Mataviejitas case that interests me is the extent to which the killing of forty-nine elderly women shocked the nation against the backdrop of the alarming number of feminicides of young mestizo women. Specifically, the search for El/La Mataviejitas started in 2003; between 1993 and 2004, 382 female deaths were registered in Ciudad Juárez. In the same period, “4,379 female deaths” were registered in Estado de México. While the killing of forty-nine elderly women sparked a coordinated search for a serial killer, the killing of young brown women did not result in any kind of national crisis or even formal investigation. Two questions arise here: Who registers as a victim? And who then becomes a criminal? Or, in other words, following Judith Butler’s work, which bodies are considered grievable and which lives are judged disposable?

When I refer to a shock for the nation, I am questioning the construction of serial killing as a “terrifying” modern category of murder that is commonly narrated as bringing a nation into crisis, although it might well be an age-old problem. In Mexico specifically, I am interested in analyzing which understandings about El/La Mataviejitas and the killing of elderly women brought the nation to a state of shock and crisis. What perceptions and understandings triggered the search for this specific type of murderer? Even if this case happened more than a dozen years ago, and despite the mounting wave of violence that has affected Mexico
in the past decade, it continues to be relevant in 2019 for several important reasons. Juana Barraza is serving the longest sentence of any murderer in Mexican history. Despite the increasing number of feminicides all over the country, there has not been a comparable outcry from the media and government to capture those responsible. Examining how a criminal is constructed in this particular case sheds light on the violence currently being experienced in Mexico. My hope is that understanding how notions of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) and discourses in criminality have defined who is a criminal and who counts as a victim will help to illuminate the recent violence. I aim specifically to contribute to the already existing feminist scholarship that seeks to understand why feminicides not only continue but have increased with total impunity. How do the ideologies of mexicanidad determine who is an ideal woman and who is not? And how is this linked to which women are deemed grievable by the nation and which are not?

Finally, it became evident to me that the shift in the presumed gender and sexual identity of the killer had to be analyzed more closely in relation to discourses of international criminology and Mexican popular culture. Over the course of the investigation into El/La Mataviejitas, police officials, criminologists, and the media went from casting “him” as “brilliant” to diagnosing “him/her” as “sexually perverted” to finally identifying “her” as “pathological.” In accordance with international practices involving serial killing, when it was officially announced in 2003 that elderly women were being targeted, police started looking for a man. Only after witness accounts described El Mataviejitas as wearing a wig and makeup did the police change their focus. Still searching for a man, they came to believe that the serial killer was a *travesti*—a gender-sex identity used for subjects who, having been assigned the male sex at birth, have chosen to identify themselves within a range of versions of femininity. In Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, travestis are commonly associated with lower-class circumstances, social vulnerability, and sex work.

On October 24, 2005, under political pressure and driven by ignorance, homophobia, transphobia, and international assumptions about serial killers, Mexico City police arrested between thirty-eight and forty-nine (depending on the source) travesti sex workers—“most of them homosexual”—as suspects in the case. After their fingerprints
were found not to match those taken from the crime scenes, and their photographs did not resemble the sketches generated from witnesses’ accounts, all were released. Even as police concluded that none of the captured travestis was El/La Mataviejitas, chief prosecutor Bernardo Bátiz assured the public that the killer “might not be a travesti but we are certain it is a transgendered person.”

The story of El/La Mataviejitas unfolded amid the turmoil of the highly contested Mexican presidential election of 2006. The response to the serial homicides of older women became the center of a battle for political power between the left-leaning party that held power in Mexico City, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and the conservative party in control of the federal government, the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN). Each had a particular interest in promoting or denying the existence of El/La Mataviejitas.

On one hand, the federal government insisted that violent crime in Mexico City had increased dramatically since Andrés Manuel López Obrador had become mayor of the city and that the serial homicides of older women were symptomatic of this plague. López Obrador was mayor of Mexico City from 2000 to July 2005, when he resigned to become the PRD candidate in the 2006 presidential election. In 2001, he had created a program of public aid entitled Sí Vale, which offered citizens over seventy the equivalent of seventy dollars a month and free public transportation and health care. By contrast, at the same time that this program was being implemented, PAN was shifting away from support for a welfare state toward neoliberal economic policies. The PRD social security program exacerbated the already extant tensions between Mexico City’s government and the federal government. In 2006, however, when PAN candidate Felipe Calderón became president, a pension for elderly citizens over sixty-five was put into effect throughout the whole country, providing an equivalent of forty-three dollars a month and free public transportation and health care. In essence, the more conservative PAN co-opted the public program for senior citizens that López Obrador had initiated. In the 2018 election, López Obrador, campaigning for the presidency for the third time, won with an overwhelming majority.

According to news reports in 2005, homicides of older women in Mexico City had been increasing since 1998. By 2003, there were around seventeen registered cases of elderly women murdered under
similar circumstances: asphyxiated with various objects such as tights, cables, stethoscopes, and even the belts of their dressing gowns. Police began to trace patterns in these homicides that suggested the possibility that a serial killer—who came to be nicknamed El Mataviejitas (The Old Lady Killer, with the article “el” indicating a male subject)—was responsible. In each case, the victim was a woman around seventy or older, middle or lower middle class, who lived alone near a park or garden. On November 5, 2003, the police publicly announced that they were on the hunt for a serial killer. They also described a modus operandi: “The serial killer dresses as a nurse from the government program Sí Vale.” This modus operandi was politically significant, in that it involved someone pretending to be a nurse from Mexico City’s contested social security program. The serial killer had apparently killed only elderly women who were registered in this program. Countering such claims, López Obrador denied the existence of a serial killer and blamed the Mataviejitas phenomenon on a conspiracy by the PAN-led federal government against his administration’s social policies.

The pressure exerted by the federal government on Mexico City to find El Mataviejitas increased at the end of 2005 as a consequence of three events. First, the presidential race became a battle between López Obrador (who was ahead of his opponent, according to multiple newspaper and TV polls) and Calderón, whose party engaged in US-style fear mongering against López Obrador and his supporters. Second, news sources were reporting a spike in the number of unresolved murders of elderly women, with the total rising to forty-nine cases. In response, the Mexico City Department of Justice created a special task force called Parques y Jardines (Parks and Gardens), which produced more than sixty-four sketches of the possible serial killer; created seventy thousand information pamphlets and posters, placed in government offices and on the public transportation system; and organized surveillance by federal police (dressed as civilians) (figs. 1.3 and 1.4). Patrols were established close to parks and gardens where police believed El Mataviejitas selected his victims. French police came to Mexico City to give a special course on serial killing. Never in Mexican history had such a task force been deployed; no other victims had ever commanded such a response. The inexplicable killings of elderly women had put the nation into a state of shock.
Figures 1.3 and 1.4. Information pamphlets distributed by police in areas of the sort where El Mataviejitas was believed to strike.
The third factor influencing the search for El Mataviejitas was that Bátiz’s position as chief of the Mexico City Justice Department was to end with the inauguration of a new administration after the 2006 election. Bátiz had made it a priority to find El Mataviejitas before the end of his term.20

On the afternoon of January 25, 2006, Juana Barraza Samperio was caught virtually red-handed and arrested. As noted earlier, she was fleeing the scene where Ana María Reyes Alfaro had been strangled with a stethoscope. Barraza was declared to be the one and only La Mataviejitas—despite the fact that two years before, in March 2004, Araceli Vázquez was arrested and convicted of the killing of one elderly woman, and in September 2004, Mario Tablas was arrested and convicted of the killings of two elderly women. Neither Vázquez nor Tablas was identified as La/El Mataviejitas. In contrast, Barraza, as La Dama del Silencio, gave the media the perfect sensationalizable story.

On March 31, 2008, Barraza was convicted of sixteen homicides and twelve robberies of elderly women. Despite the fact that at least thirty-three cases are still unresolved, the media and police claimed vindication of their earlier conclusion that Barraza was the sole Mataviejitas. If she lives to one hundred years old, she could be released by 2057, as Mexican law establishes a maximum of fifty years for a sentence of life imprisonment.

On the same day that Juana Barraza was arrested, another possible serial killer was also caught: Raúl Osiel Marroquín Reyes, who dismembered four gay men in Mexico City and stuffed their corpses into suitcases. Before the detention of El Sádico (The Sadist) or El Matagays (The Killer of Gays), as Marroquín was subsequently called by the media, “no one knew of multiple homicides of homosexuals.”21 After his arrest, there was no mention of him as a serial killer.

A reporter from the newspaper La Jornada noted the “coincidence” that the capture of El Sádico by federal police was reported on the same day as the capture, by “pure luck,” of La Mataviejitas by Mexico City police. There was every sign that the feds were in “open competition” with the local police for popular attention—according to La Jornada, they were “putting on their own show so that the stage was not occupied solely by city officials.”22 However, the news about El Sádico did not cause the same media uproar as did the identification of Barraza as La Mataviejitas.
If Goyo Cárdenas, the second “Mexican Jack the Ripper,” provided the most sensational criminal case of the twentieth century, the arrest of a woman wrestler serial killer became that of the twenty-first century. In the years following her arrest, Barraza has been the subject of intense interest by researchers and the media alike. Criminologist Martin Barrón, for example, has studied her extensively, and neurologist Feggy Ostrosky has performed electroencephalograms (EEGs) on her to prove that her serial killing impulse was innate. Underground pop singer Amandititita composed a \textit{cumbia} song entitled “La Mataviejitas” (2008). Author Víctor Ronquillo wrote a novel, \textit{Ruda de corazón: el blues de La Mataviejitas} (Rude at heart: The blues of the old lady killer) (2006). The soap opera–style TV show \textit{Mujeres asesinas} (Women killers) dedicated an episode to Barraza as La Mataviejitas, and the documentary series \textit{Instinto asesino} (Killer instinct), on the Spanish-language version of the Discovery Channel, likewise dedicated an episode to her case (both 2010). Barraza was also featured in the US series \textit{Deadly Women} on the Investigation Discovery channel (2015).

Considering the existence of stories such as those of El Matagays and the narcosatánicos, what was it about Barraza specifically that caused such a media uproar? What compelled experts in multiple fields to study her? What made her story so sensational? I argue that much of the fascination with Barraza lies in the fact that her body, gender, sexuality, and class each transgressed normative ideals for Mexican women, as well as international stereotypes of serial killers. And I explore what Barraza’s body, gender, sexuality, and class tell us about notions of serial killing both at the international level and in relation to understandings of mexicanidad that determine which bodies are disposable and which bodies bring the nation to a state of shock and outrage.

Theory, Methodology, and Sources

The term “mexicanidad” has been commonly used to refer to the pervasive ideology of Mexican national identity that is based on an idealized myth of masculinity, embodied in the figures of the \textit{mestizo} and the \textit{macho}. The figure of the macho is understood as the active male figure who compensates for inferiority through the assertion of his virility. The mestizo—the Mexican born of the mix between Spanish colonizers
and indigenous women—is idealized and at the same time infantilized. Octavio Paz argued that the idealized representation of the mestizo became entangled with that of the macho in the Mexican imaginary. In contrast, through narratives of mexicanidad, Mexican womanhood has been constructed based on two mythical figures of maternity: La Chingada/La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe. Narratives of the La Chingada/La Malinche figure are bound up with colonization. For Paz, La Chingada is, both metaphorically and literally, the raped mother who gave birth to the Mexican mestizos and mestizas. For Roger Bartra, La Chingada is based on the dark legend of La Malinche, the indigenous woman who betrayed the nation when she sided with the colonizer Hernán Cortés. La Chingada later becomes the mythical figure of La Llorona (The Weeping Woman), the long-suffering Mexican mother, constantly lamenting the loss of her sons. On the other hand, La Virgen de Guadalupe represents the ideal for women, the self-abnegating, self-sacrificing mother, a role that is sacred. The myths of mexicanidad were constructed in close relation to how the idea of the nation was established after Mexico achieved independence in 1810.

From the postrevolutionary era onward, US investment and growing industrial, commercial and cultural presence fueled cultural anxiety in Mexico. North American influence was perceived as an imposition, an invasion and a threat to good Mexican customs and morality giving rise to a new sort of nationalism, faith. New nationalist cultural movements bloomed such as Mexican muralism, the narrative of the Revolution, nationalist music, and the rediscovery of indigenous handicrafts. According to cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis, “each movement and each creator is not specifically nationalist . . . but the whole is perceived and experienced as a nationalism as furious as it is persuasive, with the energy of a compulsive idea: every representation of something Mexican is, without doubt, the exaltation of the Mexican.” Monsiváis argues that in popular culture, especially between 1930 and 1950, nationalisms translated as “local adorations and praises to machismo.” In brief, during Mexico’s postrevolutionary era and in the decades that followed, the weight of U.S. culture and industry in Mexico prompted a response in which Mexican nationalism and narrations of mexicanidad translated as machismo. A national discourse was created that “aimed to rescue a true mexicanidad (Mexicanness) by emphasizing the 19th century well-to-do
families, which were fundamentally the values of Catholicism and machismo.” Matthew Gutmann has observed that “[b]eginning especially in the 1940s, the male accent itself came to prominence as a national(ist) symbol. For better or worse, Mexico came to mean machismo and machismo to mean Mexico.” There is an important tension here—while Mexico can be defined as a particularly macho country (for example, in relation to violence against women), the terms “macho” and “machismo” do not fully define contemporary Mexico or Mexican culture and society as a whole. While for instance, much of the feminist activist work around feminicides points to a patriarchal and macho culture that allows the killing of women with total impunity and essentializes the macho as a cis-gender man, I want to move away from an understanding of machismo and macho as essentialized in biology, and of masculinity as inherently toxic. I am interested more in a definition of macho and machismo as a position of power that can be inhabited by both men and women and of masculinity as not necessarily toxic.

Understandings of macho and the notion of machismo are porous and permeable, ambiguous and contradictory. Where national post-revolutionary discourses propagated the figure of the ideal Mexican as that of a mestizo/macho, mostly through a heteronormative framework, anthropological research has found that many a Mexican man affirms his manhood through sexual relations with another man, only to prove to himself and others he is not gay or homosexual but rather what is called a macho probado or macho calado (literally, “proven” or “tested” macho).

The idea of a unified Mexican culture with a mestizo identity that first flowered in the postrevolutionary intellectual environment, crystallized in the murals of Diego Rivera, the prints of José Guadalupe Posada, and folk songs such as “Como México no hay dos” (Like Mexico, there are not two). Discourses of mexicanidad featuring the heterosexual mestizo macho as the ideal Mexican were widely disseminated onscreen during the golden age of Mexican movies in the 1950s. They were further propagated by Samuel Ramos (1952), Octavio Paz (1970), and Santiago Ramírez (1977) in their studies of mexicanidad, and more recently in telenovelas (soap operas) and nota roja (literally, “red note”—newspapers and other media devoted to the chronicling of real-life violence and crime).
It is important to recognize, however, that the notion of mexicanidad is not a fixed set of norms and discourses. While throughout this book I focus on the constant tensions between the hegemonic depictions of mexicanidad propagated through police and criminal justice narrations and popular culture, I also aim to show how the notion of mexicanidad is malleable and has been continually challenged and remodeled by shifting social practices and cultural transformations.

Similarly, although traditional discourses of mexicanidad propagate virginity for women until marriage and heterosexuality, one must of course not imagine that all Mexican women want to be virgins until marriage and abstain from having sexual relations with other women or other men. It does mean, however, that most Mexicans—men and women alike—must negotiate their genders, desires, sexual practices, and national identities through historically determined cultural categories, through discourses of mexicanidad that traditionally promote female premarital virginity and heterosexuality as virtuous. Although I concentrate on how women are portrayed, on one hand, in media and popular discourses on mexicanidad and, on the other hand, in official criminal-justice discourses, I do not suggest that their various portrayals of the self-abnegating woman are embodied in women’s everyday lives without any resistance. My intention, rather, is to analyze how mexicanidad as a hegemonic discourse dictates what is normative femininity and masculinity, and how these notions circulate through popular culture and criminology.

Crucially, feminist criminology informs my methodology. Drawing from the work of Lisa Duggan and Judith Walkowitz, who “refuse the separation of the social life (reality) from representation (myth or stereotype),” I explore cultural representations of serial killers from US films and literature to the nota roja, as well as accounts of female criminals and wrestlers in popular cultural forms such as music videos and pulp fiction. I also understand cultural representations and beliefs concerning Mexican femininity and masculinity as well as representations of serial killer stereotypes as influencing and shaping, as well as interwoven with, media and official accounts.

This book draws, as well, from feminist and cultural theorists who mobilize Michel Foucault’s thinking about discourse and discursive analysis to show how cultural beliefs shape, influence, and normalize
behavior, attitudes, and knowledges about gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity. These cultural beliefs have an interdependent relationship with criminal justice systems, police, and the media. Like Duggan and Walkowitz, I employ an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on history, feminist criminology, political science, and cultural theory.

I seek, in particular, to illuminate how international discourses of criminality intersected with narratives offered both by the Mexican police and media and within Mexican culture to regulate and perform the parameters of mexicanidad. And how in turn these discourses have defined who counts as a victim and how a criminal is constructed. I use the notion of pigmentocracy to talk about a system of skin color and its relationship with social class to unpack how ideologies surrounding masculinity and femininity are used to determine who is an ideal Mexican. In asking how Mexican masculinity and femininity work in relation to class and skin color, the limits of these gendered and sexed identifications are revealed—and can thus be redefined.

After Mexican independence in 1810, and especially during the “nation-building period” (roughly 1820 to 1825), Mexican elites were deeply concerned with racial mixture, or mestizaje. They sought to perpetuate a whiter, more “European” race of people rather than a racially mixed citizenry. The then new science of criminology provided an “objective” language to justify the extension of colonialist values—most pertinently, racism. Mexican criminologists classified lower-class offenders into types of criminals in a manner that dissolved the “boundary between the criminal and the working-class poor.” This can be seen as an extension of colonial-era prejudices given that those in Mexico’s lower classes were predominantly indigenous and mestizo.

Five hundred years after colonization, the process of mestizaje continues, and therefore, speaking about mestizo/a as a fixed identity in which a specific skin color or certain features are recognizable obscures the persistent racism and classism in Mexico. What used to be repúblicas indias, or indigenous communities, continue to transform and re-form into mestizo communities. The idea of mestizaje as promoted by the hegemonic culture has served to deny, in a systematic way, the existence of a Mesoamerican Mexico. Mestizos and mestizas can be part of the new nation established after the violent process of the Spanish conquest, since this official discourse wanted to assimilate and ultimately disap-
pear indios/as, indigenous people. In this way, the categories of indígena (indigenous) and mestizo/a are problematic.

My reworking of the notion of pigmentocracy as an interlocking skin-color/class system draws on feminist scholar Gayle Rubin’s notion of a gender/sex “system,” in which sex and gender—although they are not the same thing—may be seen as “a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be.” In a pigmentocratic system, skin tones are perceived based on social and cultural prejudices and linked to particular socioeconomic levels. In this system, class and skin color, though they do not entirely correlate, work as self-reproducing and interdependent power apparatuses and dispositifs. “Dispositif” here follows Michel Foucault’s usage: a “heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions.” I am interested in how class, in combination with the perception of skin tonalities, works as an apparatus from which power is articulated and organized. In the case of Mexico, it is impossible to speak of social class without simultaneously speaking of skin color. The case of Juana Barraza exemplifies this, as, through the use of scientific language in criminological and popular discourses, her social status and skin color, although not explicitly mentioned, played a determinant role in defining her alleged “inner criminality.”

Much of the data for this book was gathered from media reports, publicly available official police documents, and diverse popular cultural sources. I was also given original material used in the search for El/La Mataviejitas by Mexico City police chief Victor Hugo Moneda, including sketches and a photocopy of a manual for the apprehension of serial killers prepared for Mexican police by their French counterparts. After many unsuccessful visits to the headquarters of the municipal Justice Department in search of the original sketches and posters, I was finally directed to the office of Comandante Moneda, chief of operations of the “800-strong police corps responsible for the capture of La Mataviejitas.”

Finally, much of my research is based on news reports in mass-circulation periodicals representing a variety of perspectives, from the
leftist newspaper *La Jornada* to more “traditional” ones like *El Universal* and the avowedly centrist *Reforma*. I also looked at newspapers with more niche audiences, such as *Crónica*, as well as nota roja periodicals like *La Prensa* and *El Gráfico*. I also made use of the Department of Justice's press releases, which were formerly available on its website (such documents are removed after five years). All English translations of Spanish-language news reports, police accounts, and criminological texts are mine.

My research into newspaper and police accounts of El/La Mataviejitas is informed by Stuart Hall’s analysis of the “ideological interdependence between the media and the judiciary,” in which the media, in Lisa Duggan’s words, “narrativize” material from police authorities. Many news reports, for instance, simply recount assertions made in police press conferences. While some officials in the Department of Justice have accused the media of “sensationalizing” the El Mataviejitas story, I take media and police narrations as intersecting and complementing each other. Both the media and police talked about a male serial killer, and both fixated on Barraza’s gender identity once she was arrested.

**Chapter Overview**

The first chapter, “Framing the Serial Killer: El Mataviejitas,” focuses on the difficulty the police, press, and public had in conceptualizing a Mexican serial killer and how this difficulty affected the search for El/La Mataviejitas. I begin with a discussion of women’s appropriate social roles as defined by the ideology of mexicanidad, and the ways in which these beliefs about those roles influenced police and media perceptions of elderly women and their classification as victims. I link this discussion to Mexican cultural beliefs concerning serial killing in general, focusing in particular on the idea it is the product of anomie and can happen only in societies that lack moral values. I then explore how, from official discourses to popular culture, Mexicans conceive of their society as strongly grounded in traditional family values, and how this belief structured the search for a serial killer. Finally, I analyze constructions of “infamous” serial killers in relation to the conceptualization of El/La Mataviejitas.

In chapter 2, “The Look of the Serial Killer: El/La Mataviejitas,” I shift from criminal stereotyping to the specific visual material police and
criminologists used in their quest to identify El Mataviejitas, most especially (1) the sketches police used to identify the male Mataviejitas before the killer's gender was called into question, (2) a three-dimensional sketch, modeled after witnesses' accounts of El/La Mataviejitas, that was photographed and circulated in media reports, and (3) the photographs of Barraza taken by a police criminologist after her arrest.

The analysis of these images is juxtaposed with readings of the captions and other short texts that accompanied them. I focus specifically on the tensions surrounding the sexed, gendered, classed, and skin color–based features of the official sketches used by the police, the media's narrations of El/La Mataviejitas, and the understandings of official criminological discourses as to what a criminal “looks” like. Most of the images I refer to were published in newspapers between 2003 and 2006 and distributed throughout Mexico City.

Chapter 3, “Performing Mexicanidad I: Criminality and Lucha Libre,” focuses on the intersections between discourses of Mexican criminology and those of lucha libre. I analyze the merging of personas—one hand, the serial killer disguised as a nurse and, on the other, La Dama del Silencio, the wrestler persona adopted by Barraza—used in criminological, police, and media narrations, as supposed evidence that Barraza was indeed the serial killer. These discourses, I argue, have served to criminalize La Dama del Silencio, the wrestler, more so than Juana Barraza, the woman. I explore the ways in which criminality narratives and the spectacle of lucha libre intersect within Mexican culture to enforce and regulate the parameters of mexicanidad.

The last chapter, “Performing Mexicanidad II: Criminality and La Santa Muerte,” analyzes the notion of mexicanidad in terms of its underlying religious beliefs and their relation to official discourses on criminality. The construction of what constitutes a morally “good” Mexican versus an “evil” one was used in official discourses to pathologize Barraza’s religious beliefs as those of a lower-class Mexican who was “evil” by nature. Her religious and cultural beliefs, along with her socioeconomic class, were exploited in media coverage to link her to criminality and “prove” that she was La Mataviejitas. Most importantly, these understandings of what constitutes a criminal have made evident which bodies are grievable and which bodies matter as causes of national concern.
I conclude by trying to answer the questions that prompted this research. I address who counts as a victim and how a criminal is constructed in Mexico in relation to official criminality discourses and their intersections with notions of mexicanidad. I explore the tensions between pivotal figures in the construction of mexicanidad—La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona—and how they contrast with the actual lives of Malitzin, Juana Barraza, and the victims of feminicide. This discussion challenges how the figure of the macho and the notion of machismo play out in the everyday lives of Mexican men and women.