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Chicana Lesbians and Ovarian Pscos: “The squad you been warned about”

Catherine Leen

Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Chicana Lesbians provides a fruitful theoretical framework to examine the documentary *Ovarian Pscos*, directed by Joanna Sokolowski and Kate Trumbull-LaValle, about a radical Latina women’s cycling collective founded in Los Angeles in 2010. Many of the group’s members are lesbians, and all of them are feminists with radical politics who organise cycling-related events to protest against the gentrification of East Los Angeles, racism and violence against women. The film interweaves interviews with the collective’s members with footage of their moonlit group bike rides. In one such interview, founding member Xela de la X explains that the group provides a safe space, a community and even an alternative family for its members, while their cycles are both a form of activism and a celebration of active Latina bodies. This article will situate the film’s celebration of the group’s activism in a brief overview of the history of cycling in order to highlight why cycling is a particularly apt symbol for the intersectional feminism espoused by the *Ovarian Pscos*. It will also examine the connections between the film and the exploration of issues such as family, motherhood, violence, and racial politics in *Chicana Lesbians*.

KEYWORDS

Activism; cycling;
documentary film;
Ovarian Pscos; violence

The 2016 documentary *Ovarian Pscos*, directed by Joanna Sokolowski and Kate Trumbull-LaValle (2016), follows the activism of a radical Latina women’s cycling collective established in Los Angeles in 2010. The group, which was formed by Xela de la X, seeks to highlight and counter violence against women in Los Angeles through various non-violent means, such as workshops and organised cycles at night, known as lunar cycles. Xela de la X, who is a lesbian, reflects on her identity as a woman and mother throughout the film. Although not all of the other members of the group are queer, they are all activist feminists who seek to improve the lives of Latinas through their work. While many of the group’s members are Chicanas, they are not all of Mexican heritage, and so I will use Chicana to refer to Mexican-American women in this article, while Latina is used to describe women of Latin American heritage who are not Mexican, or as a term to describe both groups. The tagline of an image on the group’s

CONTACT Catherine Leen  Catherine.m.leen@mu.ie  Room 33, Arts Building, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co Kildare, W23 F2H6, Ireland.

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website reads: “The squad you been warned about,” thus establishing a clear link between the Ovarian Psycos and the watershed book *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, which is reflected in the thematic and formal aspects of the film. In this article, I will examine in more detail the affinities between the way the film is structured and the book’s inclusive and diverse approach, while also considering how both cultural texts examine topics such as rebellion, motherhood, violence and healing.

Wheels on fire: Cycling as activism

Before I turn to a discussion of how the film is related to *Chicana Lesbians*, I will pause to consider why cycling was a particularly apt sport to be chosen by the group as the physical expression of their activism. When women first began to travel by bicycle in the late 19th century, there was much debate in the media and in the literature of the day about the challenges that female cyclists posed to established societal and gender norms. Conservatives were vocal in their opposition to the threat that the bicycle seemed to pose to traditional female roles and heteronormative codes of behaviour. Bicycles allowed women who had previously stayed close to home to quickly and easily travel miles from the domestic sphere, a development that troubled many, as Jenna E. Fleming notes: “Female independence was discouraged as popular culture portrayed women as sensitive, vulnerable, and submissive to authority. Conversely, bicycling involved young women spending a substantial amount of time outside of their homes, unsupervised by family members or other acceptable chaperones” (Fleming, 2015, p. 14).

Perhaps surprisingly, Frances Willard, the president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, was an avid cyclist who extolled the virtues of cycling in her autobiography. Her assertion that one of the benefits of cycling was that it forced the rider to “keep clear heads and steady hands” (Willard, 1991, p. 19) was clearly in line with her advocacy for temperance. She also believed that cycling was a genteel activity that could help to strengthen the bonds between married couples who enjoyed cycling together, and she hoped that her own example of learning to ride a bicycle, which she documented in detail in her book, would lead other middle-class women to take up cycling (Mackintosh & Norcliff, 2007, p. 172). Willard’s enthusiasm for cycling notwithstanding, the increased freedom that it granted to women was perceived by many as a road to perdition. In her study of the impact of the bicycle on American life, Margaret Guroff recalls the concerns of Charlotte Smith, the founder of the Women’s Rescue League, about female cyclists. While lobbying Congress on behalf of so-called “fallen women,” Smith declared that: “Immodest bicycling by

young women is to be deplored. Bicycling by young women has helped to swell the ranks of reckless girls, who finally drift into the standing army of outcast women” (Guroff, 2016, p. 43). To confirm her thesis, Smith cited her tours of brothels and interviews with prostitutes as evidence that the bicycle played a direct role in these women’s banishment from mainstream society. Another aspect of female cycling that was widely debated was the casting off of restrictive clothing, such as corsets and voluminous skirts, by women cyclists. An 1895 sermon by a reverend in Indiana who declared that female cyclists “were riding to the devil in bloomers” (Hallenbeck, 2015, p. 42) reflects the fervent opposition to women bicyclists donning any kind of trousers.

Clearly, cycling by women was widely opposed on moral grounds, which included the move to wearing clothing that was considered to be provocative and unladylike, but there were also concerns about the damage that cycling could do to women’s health. Perhaps the most extraordinary malady attributed to cycling was “bicycle face.” In her history of female cyclists, Sarah Hallenbeck cites an article in an 1895 article in the *Washington Herald* that describes the condition as: “a wild and haunted look of the eyes” together with “strained lines” on the face due to “a general focus of the features indicative of extreme attention directed to a spot about two yards ahead of the front wheel” (Hallenbeck, 2015, p. 60). Guroff, meanwhile, quotes a German philosopher’s dire warning that “the condition drained ‘every vestige of intelligence’ from the sufferer’s appearance and rendered children unrecognisable to their own mothers” (Guroff, 2016, p. 47).

Concern about the propriety of cycling attire for women and the dreaded bicycle face were countered by feminists who hailed cycling as a means to bring about female emancipation. In 1896, Susan B. Anthony asserted that the bicycle “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world” (Cited in Guroff, 2016, p. 50). In an article in the feminist magazine, *Ms*, Sarah Nipper succinctly captures the ways in which cycling heralded a new era for women: [...] one of the oft-unknown benefits of the bike is the unintentional influence it had on women’s rights. By sparking controversy, the bike inadvertently helped emancipate women towards the end of the 19th century (Nipper, 2014, n.p.) The Ovarian Psycos continue this tradition of women using cycling to resist oppressive norms. The women in the collective use bicycles to reclaim space in their communities, by gaining mobility but also by staking their claim to spaces that have been rendered no-go areas to women because of sustained, gendered violence. At the same time, they build upon the distinctly Chicax lowrider culture, which features bicycles as well as cars, and call into question its traditional misogyny and domination by men (Tatum, 2011, p. 136). The group’s focus on nature and natural cycles also makes

cycling a particularly apt means of expressing their closeness to nature. Bicycles provide the group's members with a practical, low-cost means of transportation, but they also represent an important alternative to Los Angeles' car culture, which has resulted in gridlock and pollution. The Ovarian Psychos' rebellious spirit most obviously builds upon the work done by the contributors to *Chicana Lesbians*. This is, in turn, inextricably linked to the multifaceted and diverse nature of both the book and the film, as we shall see in the next section.

Rebellious spirit, revolutionary form

Chicana Lesbians is a book that defies easy categorisation. It combines theory, personal essay, interview, short story, poetry and visual art. Its innovative and revolutionary form is acknowledged by María C. González, who writes that: "A new form is expressed in the collected essays, poems, journal entries, short stories, and in entries that mix those genres" (González, 1993, p. 420). The essays in the book by Ana Castillo and Emma Pérez, as well as the introduction by Carla Trujillo, provide the most obvious thematic connections between the book and the film, and I will focus on three key topics raised in them—family, motherhood and language. Creative expression and visual imagery also play a key role in the book, however, and we will return to these aspects of both works towards the conclusion of this article.

Ovarian Psychos, like *Chicana Lesbians*, is a multifaceted work that is part call to feminist activism through cycling, part testimonial, and part creative celebration through poetry and visual images. The film provides a sensitive but unflinching insight into the lives of Xela de la X, the group's founder, and other Latinas from backgrounds marginalised by race, class and sexuality without falling into the trap of portraying them as victims. As Xela explains, the group provides a safe space, a community and even an alternative family for its members. It is important to note that the group continues to battle stereotyped expectations of Latinas and Latinos; in numerous interviews, the group has been forced to explain that their collective is not a gang, as gangs have often been described as alternative families for marginalised Latinas and Latinos. They organise numerous bike rides, including Clitoral Mass, which is aimed at "womxn of colour, trans-womxn, womxn identified, two-spirited, and gender non-conforming folx" (Betancourt, 2016, n.p.) Xela does not discuss her sexual identity directly in the film, but in interviews she has clarified that she is queer "If you associate as a Psycho, you probably have ventured in some kind of way. You're on the spectrum of queer—I'm super queer!" (Betancourt, 2016, n.p.) The group's activism centres on their cycles, which take place at night when there is a full moon, and other events. Through

interviews, we learn about the obstacles that the group's members endure in their daily lives and how their activism helps them to overcome such obstacles. The interviews are interspersed with accounts of their activities and news reports about violence towards women in Los Angeles.

Chicana Lesbians sought to claim a space by documenting and reflecting upon Chicana lesbian culture, as Trujillo observes in the introduction: "I wanted to see more about the intricacies and specifics of lesbianism and our culture, our family, mixed-race relationships and more" (Trujillo, 1991, p. 9). Trujillo underlines the revolutionary nature of the text by calling it a "shock wave," and she alludes to the difficulties that Chicana lesbians face by highlighting the fact that the fourth part of the book is dedicated to "a critical examination of the various points of struggle in a lesbian existence" (Trujillo 1991, p. 9–10). *Ovarian Pycos* does not reflect explicitly on Chicana lesbians. Instead, the film focuses on the idea of crafting spaces for Latinas, who are marginalised both within their communities and in mainstream U.S. society. Xela explains that the group's activism is about fighting oppression and creating an alternative family for women:

We're just that safe space for each other. To bring comfort, to bring a sense of family. There's strength in numbers, right? So, when you're riding by yourself, yeah, it feels good but when you're riding with a group of women, it feels like, damn, like I'm supported, I got backup. You feel like you could win the war. You feel like nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop you. It was women not being scared of riding our bicycles or just claiming space in very dangerous zones (*Ovarian Pycos*, 2016, n.p.).

As Jennifer Ruth Hosek observes, spatial restrictions in Xela's own life have been a primary motivation for her activism and efforts to help other Latina women achieve self-realisation (Hosek, 2017, p. 121). Early in the film, Xela returns to her childhood home, which initially seems to be a typical East Los Angeles home, decorated with images of La Virgen de Guadalupe and Christ. The fervour of religious devotion in the home is further suggested by the presence of an altar and an ornate silver and wooden plaque engraved with the Ten Commandments. During an interview with Xela's mother María Luisa Ramírez, we learn that Xela's father sexually abused her when she was a young girl. This sexual abuse within Latinx families is unpacked by Ana Castillo in her essay "La Macha: Towards a Beautiful Whole Self," in which she persuasively argues that incest in Chicano families is partly the result of women's "reduction to being man's property in the economic system in which we live" (Castillo, 1991, p. 34). She adds that the religious icons that purportedly serve as models for young women are wholly inadequate in the contemporary United States, where rape is a constant occurrence:

What kind of convoluted message do we give young Catholic women when we teach them to be obedient and submissive and yet to protect their virtue even on

the pain of death? Furthermore, female Saints are upheld as models because of their ability to forgive their attacker, an act which, it stands to reason, permits the continuance of such violations (Castillo, 1991, p. 33).

The cross-cutting between an interview with Xela's mother and the many religious images in their home takes on a darkly ironic meaning when one considers the chasm between this performance of cultural spirituality and the dark secret harboured by the family. Xela's brother Marcelo reveals that the abuse of his sister, the only girl in the family, began when his father transferred the beatings his wife endured at his hands to Xela. Emma Pérez's observation in her essay "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes From a Chicana Survivor" that "this memory of molestation, a memory or origin, haunts the young girl even through womanhood" (Pérez, 1991, p. 173) comes to mind when Xela later reveals how the trauma she suffered as a child made her question her fitness to be a mother: "I had a lot of issues about mothering. Will I be able to check my rage and not project, oh I didn't have this therefore I'm not going to give it to you either. Do I even know how to love? Will I be loving enough?" (*Ovarian Psycos*, 2016, n.p.). Through her activism and openness to her own daughter's opinions and sensitivity to her needs, she manages to reverse the pattern of abuse to which she has been subjected, however.

Her determination to distance herself from the secret sexual abuse that her childhood home concealed is evident in the décor of her current home, which could not be more different to that of her parents, and which confronts the issues of violence towards women in an uncompromising manner. Yoli, Xela's daughter, is first introduced just after the establishing sequences of the film. After she enters the family's home, the camera zooms in on a black-and-white photograph of a naked woman with a baby between her legs and her arms tied above her head, while her mouth is bound by a gag. The title of the image is "Good Wife," and her breasts are obscured by a sign that reads "property of husband." This photograph sits on a shelf beside another photograph of Xela de la X as a young girl. The apartment also features a canvas with two female dolls hanging on either side of a sign that reads "morgue." Above the dolls and the sign is the title of the work, "A Woman is Not a Piñata," written in a crimson-coloured paint that evokes blood. The dolls are dressed in pink with large black crosses emblazoned on their chests, a clear reference to the Catholic Church's reluctance to address violence towards women in favour of maintaining a patriarchal order and control. In *Chicana Lesbians*, Pérez notes that many Chicana women are so fearful of men and so unable to confront extreme patriarchal male violence that they are complicit in maintaining the silence around incest: "[...] a male-centralist society with male-identified women cannot even hear her language, her pain. They just know

they cannot defy the father” (Pérez, 1991, p. 172). Xela’s story is illustrative of these cycles of repression and violence, as her mother can barely articulate the family’s dark history, saying elliptically: “There’s things that happened in the house...I didn’t know how to help her...I always thought that raising boys is more easy than to raise a girl” (*Ovarian Psychos*, 2016, n.p.). Xela, as Pérez’s insights point out, clearly continues to come to terms with the abuse she has suffered.

Understandably emotional in many of the interviews about her past, Xela breaks down when she compares her daughter’s childhood to her own and acknowledges that she was in danger of not giving her daughter the attention she deserved because she was so focussed on her work with the Ovarian Psychos, a dilemma that Yoli had already mentioned as frustrating. Xela explains that she is conflicted about being a mother and an activist:

I’ve told her many times that I wish we could trade places; I wish that I could be raised how she’s being raised. Specially now because I feel like, I don’t know, kind of robbed, I feel robbed. I was noticing that I could be potentially robbing her too, you know, by being so busy with this or that. I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to rob her (*Ovarian Psychos*, 2016, n.p.).

Xela breaks with the conventions of mothers as gatekeepers of hidebound traditions, a tendency revealed by Trujillo in her introduction to the edited collection where she asserts that while these traditions are patriarchal, it is the mothers who enforce conformity on their daughters: “Though our fathers had much to do with imposing sexual conformity, it was usually our mothers who actually whispered the warnings, raised the eyebrows, or covertly transmitted to us the “taboo nature” of same-sex relationships” (Trujillo, 1991, p. 10).

While lesbian relationships are not the focus of the film, we see the mothers of the group’s members constantly imposing their repressive standards on their daughters. Their influence is particularly decisive because fathers seem to be absent from many of the families depicted in the film. Evie, the daughter of a single Salvadoran mother, constantly faces criticism for her activism, which her mother sees as a waste of time and recklessly dangerous. Ultimately, Xela steps back from the group to devote more time to her daughter, but not before providing them with a structure and blueprint to follow.

Warrior words, artistic activism

One of the most striking and distinctive elements of the Ovarian Psychos’ activism is their use of bold, female-centered sexual language. Andi Koch, an original Ovarian Psycho member, is interviewed at her home, where she

makes dolls from yarn and feathers. She explains that when she was considering what body parts to give them, the breasts were not as important as the ovaries, citing the group's slogan, "Ovarian Psycos, ovaries so big, we don't need no fucking balls" (*Ovarian Psycos*, 2016, n.p.). The group also appropriates language related to sexuality that is used to threaten and demean women. In one of their meetings, a member recalls how Latinas were discouraged from cycling as there was concern that this would lead them "to pop their cherry." She suggests reclaiming this term and using the title "'Pop Your Cherry Ride' to name an event for women who have never participated in a group cycle before." The group also re-invents the language about family, calling each other "sisters" throughout the documentary and crafting formal initiation rites that radically re-imagine the family as a collective of women who work together to protect each other from violence and oppression. In a scene where a new member joins the group, she recites a text that captures the group's ethos and mission: "As an Ovarian Psycho, I give my word, palabra, to live my life with my feet firmly planted on my pedals. With mad heart for my sisters, my hood, and my people. And with my spirit always rebellious" (*Ovarian Psycos*, 2016, n.p.).

This uncompromising use of language is not without its detractors, however, including the mothers in the film. Maryann, a member of the group since 2012, comments disgustedly on an article in the *Los Angeles Times* about them with a headline calling them a "chain gang," saying: "Why are we a gang? Is it cos we're brown women, women of colour, from you know, East L.A., you know, from the hood?" (*Ovarian Psycos*, 2016, n.p.). This lazy pun is synonymous with violence and criminality, and, as Maryann points out, it is based on the assumption that Latinas from East Los Angeles who are part of a group can only be characterised as a gang, despite that fact that their work focuses on countering violence towards women. The suspicion of the women's activities is also mirrored in the attitudes of some of the Ovarian Psycos' family members. When Maryann visits her mother Delia Aguirre at the hair salon where she works, Delia takes issue not with the language used in the article to stereotype the group as a gang but with the group's use of language, which she considers unnecessary and unfeminine: "The language that they use, I don't think they need to do that, to make their point across. You guys should be more, you know, more feminine, not all moms are going to agree with the way you guys talk."

This comment is strongly reminiscent of how both Trujillo and Pérez assert the importance of speaking out. Trujillo acknowledges that some of the issues dealt with in the book are "difficult" but that they must be exposed and unpacked (xii). Pérez, meanwhile, observes that when "women of colour break the silence, our words are rejected" and that women must

reclaim their space and language (161). Xela is keenly aware of the need to talk about uncomfortable and traumatic issues, such as the incest she has survived, and she makes a clear distinction between her own outspokenness and her mother's wish to ignore the truth about her father:

I felt like my mom should have known that something was going on with me. At first, I would try as much as a kid can try, right, but I didn't have the words to say [...] and so my mom would say that I was being silly, that that's my dad, and that he's my dad, and how can you not love your dad? And so, it was very confusing. But when I got old enough to actually say the shit that was going on, she still didn't believe it (*Ovarian Psychos*, 2016, n.p.).

Xela's confrontational and sexual use of language, which is reflected in the group's use of language, is not simply provocative but rather a powerful statement against the silencing of female sexuality in all its forms. Xela transforms her pain and the tradition of silence into the artistic expression of her rap and spoken word poetry. She is first introduced as she records a rap that mentions the Adelitas, the female soldiers of the Mexican Revolution, and concludes with the line "we are the women, the women you've been warned about," a clear homage to *Chicana Lesbians*. Xela's poetry, like the poems in *Chicana Lesbians*, such as Carmen Abrego's "the truth of the matter," uncovers secrets hidden in order to protect a patriarchal order. Xela also attempts to forge a new language that is unapologetically sexual and pro-female, a tendency also evident in poems in *Chicana Lesbians*, including Cathy Arellanos' "Lesbiana" and Gina Montoya's "Baby Dykes".

The Ovarian Psychos also use visuals to celebrate women's bodies and the power of women in a manner akin to that of the art in *Chicana Lesbians*. Karne T. Delgadillo's *Desert Sun* and Ana Berreto's *untitled* are nude images that celebrate women's bodies.

The importance of the Ovarian Psychos' use of visual emblems is signalled from the establishing sequence of the film, which features an extreme closeup of the face of a young woman cyclist who wears the group's signature bandana as a mask tied around her mouth. Their signature bandanas worn around their faces, bandit-style, are reminiscent not only of the Zapatistas but of the scarves that became a symbol of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, notably the only group to successfully organise against the dictatorship during the so-called dirty war. The image of the fallopian tubes that adorns the bandanas celebrates women's bodies and reproductive power. The cycles themselves are both a form of activism and a celebration of active Latina bodies. Their connection with the moon is suggestive of reproductive cycles, the importance of the Sun and Moon to a pre-Columbian culture with many powerful goddesses, and to the breaking of cycles of violence and oppression in society.

The need for this female-centred poetic and visual creativity becomes clear when we appreciate the constant anti-lesbian and anti-woman attacks that Latinas have suffered both when *Chicana Lesbians* was produced and when *Ovarian Psycos* was made. The most famous visual from the book is the cover image by artist Ester Hernández, *La Ofrenda II* (1990), which appeared on the first edition. It features an image of a feminine hand seemingly offering a red rose to a young woman with short hair and a large tattoo of the Virgen de Guadalupe on her back. As Alma López reminds us, Hernández was unable to grant permission to reprint the image on future editions of the book because of “homophobic attacks she endured from our community” (López, 2011, p. 276). The sadly enduring nature of such attacks on women is underlined by the news reports that are interwoven into the story of the group’s activism in *Ovarian Psycos*. Maylei Blackwell, author of the book *¡Chicana Power!* pays tribute to the group for continuing the activism that women of colour have led for many years, but she also notes that their work is necessary because of a continuing tradition of violence against women both in the home and on the streets. She singles out their use of female-centred sexual imagery as a powerful response to the repression and violence directed at women’s bodies:

They’re co-opting cultural signs and signals and reworking them to be a form of empowerment. I love the in-your-face fallopian tubes on the mask, they’re so powerful. What women are shamed over, what they are often the victims of violence over, they claim it as their own and put it up front (*Ovarian Psycos*, 2016, n.p.).

The need for a new language and for images that celebrate women is further underlined by the language used by posters to the group’s Facebook page, who objectify the women, either by sexualising or body shaming them, and who often use phallic language in an attempt to intimidate them. Just as Hernández was attacked for depicting a strong modern young woman in a loving exchange with another woman, so too the *Ovarian Psycos* must constantly battle attempts to marginalise and oppress them in contemporary Los Angeles.

To conclude, the film *Ovarian Psycos* continues the proud tradition of Chicana activism celebrated in *Chicana Lesbians* through its exploration of issues that Chicanas and other Latinas must still struggle against in the United States, including repressive family expectations and structures, and violence against women. The creative work documented in the book and in the language and visuals of the film are testament to the continuing inventiveness and ingenuity of Chicana and Latina women and provide a powerful model of activism and hope for new generations. Both works move beyond the spatial restrictions that can lead to oppression and violence against women to create new spaces of solidarity and sisterhood for women who refuse to conform and who continue the work

of the activists who have gone before them. While both the book and the film do not shy away from the difficulties that this can create for women, they are proof that, as Trujillo emphasises, the discussion of these uncomfortable topics remains a key part of women's "self-definition and discovery" (Trujillo, 1991, p. 12). As we have seen, the Ovarian Pscos directly reference *Chicana Lesbians*. The film explores similar themes, as well as taking a multifaceted hybrid form that blends activism with creativity. Since the film was made, the group's work has focussed more on gentrification so that its identity has changed, but the tag line "the squad you been warned about" still features prominently on its Web page, clearly demonstrating the continuing relevance of the book to young Latina women.

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Notes on contributor

Catherine Leen is Associate Professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies at Maynooth University, Ireland. A Fulbright scholar, she has published widely on Chicana and Latin American cinema.

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