



Susana Vargas*

How Is a Criminal Constructed in the Public Eye?

Juana Barraza, nicknamed “The Little-Old-Lady-Killer,” is also known as “The Lady of Silence,” her wrestling persona. When analyzing her case, my guiding questions were: Who counts as a victim in Mexico for the nation-state? And directly related to that, how is a criminal constructed in the public eye?

Today, Juana Barraza Samperio lives in the Santa Martha Acatitla prison on the outskirts of Mexico City, serving a 759-year sentence for murdering sixteen elderly women and committing twelve robberies. That is the second-longest sentence in Mexican history.¹ Police officials and the media have said that Barraza is the Little-Old-Lady-Killer, the serial killer they spent two years looking for, from late 2003 to early 2006. Even today, she is the only serial killer

officially identified as such before her capture and arrest in Mexico City. That search was the first time—and until now the only time in the country’s history—that a serial killer has been given a nickname before his/her capture, and, above all, one for which a sweeping political mobilization has happened, carried out by a significant group of police and criminologists including the assistant city attorney and the city attorney himself. Of course, Mexico has had other serial killers, like El Chalequero (also known as The Mexican Ripper),² the Cannibal Poet, or the Gay-Killer. But all of them were given the nicknames and categorized as serial killers after their capture. The police never searched for women murdered by the Cannibal Poet or homosexuals executed by the Gay-Killer.

The Little-Old-Lady-Killer (originally sought using the Spanish-language masculine form of the term) was nicknamed, profiled, tracked, and finally captured, found guilty,

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and sentenced. On January 26, 2006, Juana Barraza Samperio was arrested as the alleged Little-Old-Lady-Killer as she was escaping from a house where an elderly woman had been strangled with a stethoscope. The house's tenant had arrived home in mid-afternoon to find her landlady, Ana María Reyes Alfaro, lying on the floor, strangled to death. After having met another woman who was leaving the house and who immediately ran away, the tenant cried for help and began chasing Barraza. Two patrolling policemen heard her cries for help, saw a woman running away, and detained her after a short pursuit. The next day's newspapers shouted, "Little-Old-Lady-Killer Caught after Another Murder: It's a Woman!"; "Little-Old-Lady-Killer Trapped: She's a Lady Wrestler!"; and "48-year-old Woman Wrestler Arrested after Strangling a Woman. Little-Old-Lady-Killer Allegedly Caught."

When I ask who is designated a victim by the state and the nation, I try to follow Judith Butler's question from her book *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*²³ For Butler, the life that can be publicly mourned is the life considered worthy of mourning after its loss. She argues that a life considered worth mourning first must be recognized as a life, and that recognition depends on how that life is framed. In the case of the Little-Old-Lady-Killer (whether man or woman), I was interested in knowing why the murder of forty-nine elderly women so moved the nation in the context of the alarming figures of femicide. Elderly women's murders had been registered in Mexico City since 1998. The search for the serial Little-Old-Lady-Killer began in 2004. In the following year, when different witnesses mentioned a man dressed as a woman or a strong-looking woman, the police detained hundreds of trans sex workers throughout the city. Finally, in early 2006, they trapped by chance Juana Barraza, a woman wrestler called The Lady of Silence.

On the other hand, when I asked myself how the image of a criminal is constructed, I honed in on 1) official reports and statements by authorities such as the former

Mexico City district attorney, Bernardo Batiz, and the former assistant district attorney, Renato Sales Heredia; 2) the books about the Little-Old-Lady-Killer by scientific experts both in criminology and in neuropsychology, such as Martín Barrón and Feggy Ostrosky, from the National Autonomous University of Mexico School of Psychology; 3) an exhaustive analysis of Mexico's CaraMex criminal identification program (The Face-of-Mexico Computer-Assisted Facial Recognition Software); 4) the intersection of ideologies about Mexican-ness and its transformation in popular culture, that is, on how the image of The Lady of Silence circulated in soap operas and in the *Little-Old-Lady-Killer Cumbia* by singer Amandititita; and, finally, 5) in the cult of Saint Death, since an altar to this saint was found in Juana Barraza's home.

Due to space limitations, here I will only focus on the construction of a criminal, starting with the merger of the Little-Old-Lady-Killer serial murderer with The-Lady-of-Silence wrestler. Just one week before her arrest and resulting identification as the Little-Old-Lady-Killer, Juana Barraza Samperio was interviewed on national television, interviewed by tv Azteca at the Coliseum Arena in central Mexico City. Wearing a red sweater, she began by saying her name, "I am Mrs. Juana Barraza Samperio." When the interviewer asked whether she was a heel or a hero, she responded, "I'm all heel." Juana smiled, showing her love and dedication to wrestling. To "Where are you more of a heel, here or at home?" her answer was "Well, both places," as she timidly moved away from the microphone, still smiling. It was 2006 and news about the Little-Old-Lady-Killer was all over the country, with more than 300 sketches looming in government offices and public transport. What is more, Patricia Payán of the Mexico City Justice Department had already crafted a three-dimensional bust, using the same principles as the CaraMex Facial Recognition software. However, that Sunday, as Barraza spoke on national television as a wrestling enthusiast, nobody recognized her as the Little-Old-Lady-Killer. Quite to the contrary: she seemed to be a sweet, smiling, passionate wrestling supporter. What is more, none of the witnesses recognized her on national television!

One week later, Juana Barraza was surprised *in fraganti* and declared Mexico's first female serial killer. She would be wearing the same red sweater, but this time for authorities, the media, and police that was proof of her aggressiveness. The media praised the supposed likeness

of the bust to Barraza. That three-dimensional bust served mainly to assure the public that the police had a detailed understanding of the person they were looking for. Press coverage and the police repeatedly referred to the similarities between the bust and Barraza herself, especially the fact that “both the facial composite and Juana Barraza herself were wearing a red sweater,” but neither the police nor the media identified these similarities when she appeared on national television wearing a red sweater. When she was arrested and called the Little-Old-Lady-Killer, the sweater’s color was read as a “sign of aggressiveness.” In addition, a newspaper report pointed out that “Barraza’s heavy build, dyed hair, and height coincide completely with the three-dimensional sketch of the Little-Old-Lady-Killer.” The public’s perception of Barraza changed dramatically from that of the interview: from January 26 on, there was no doubt that she was the Little-Old-Lady-Killer, despite the prior detentions of at least two other suspects in the case: that of Araceli Vázquez García, arrested as a suspect in ten robberies to homes and of the murder of an elderly woman, and that of Jorge Mario Tablas Silva, arrested for killing two elderly women.

Vázquez García had pretended to be a nurse to access the homes of elderly women. The police had described this *modus operandi* as being that of the Little-Old-Lady-Killer, but neither the authorities nor the media identified her as such. Vázquez, who was sentenced to forty-two years in prison, is currently held in Santa Martha Acatitla. Why was Vázquez not called the Little-Old-Lady-Killer?

Similarly, five months after Vázquez’s arrest, on September 12, 2004, the police arrested Tablas, a man, who had also dressed as a nurse in women’s clothing and wig, and had strangled an elderly woman with some tights, which also coincided with the *modus operandi* attributed by the police to the Little-Old-Lady-Killer. He had even pretended to work for the Yes, You’re Worth It Program, aimed at assisting the city’s senior population. Tablas was found guilty and sentenced to sixty-one years in prison for his murders. Neither the media nor the police paid much attention to him. We could suppose that this was, since he was neither a transvestite nor homosexual, he didn’t fit into the profile of the serial killer the police were looking for. However, the idea that the killer was probably homosexual was only included in the profile after Tablas’s arrest. He had written on a newspaper that he had left at the scene of the crime and that the police used to find him, “I know I am John

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the Apostle, the ghost that my mother spoke to me about in a spiritualist session.” He also described his crimes as acts of a third person called The Evil One or The Devil. I am not classifying these statements as pathological, but why did the media and the police not think that Tablas could have been Little-Old-Lady-Killer, the “pathological” serial killer they were looking for?

Neither Vázquez nor Tablas stirred up the media storm that Barraza continues to. She offered the media and the authorities the perfect sensationalist story. Specifically, her participation in wrestling and her non-normative body were sexual transgressions against the codes of femininity established for women through the ideologies of Mexican-ness. This led criminologists, police, and journalists to justify reading her body as that of a pathological serial killer, the only one, the Little-Old-Lady-Killer. I’m not saying that Barraza is not responsible for these crimes, but I am saying that the evidence the police have criminalize her more for what she is than for what she did.

After Barraza’s arrest, what was truly noteworthy in the media was the fact that she had been a professional wrestler. The newspaper headlines focused on the photograph of her as the Lady of Silence; before she was identified as the Little-Old-Lady-Killer, in the public wrestling world, she was known as The Lady of Silence. As soon as the police found out, the Lady of Silence and Little-Old-Lady-Killer became one and the same. “The Little-Old-Lady-Killer assaulted her victims using the strength she had acquired in the wrestling ring.” “The Lady of Silence of the world of wrestling is the woman accused of killing elderly women.”

This merger of characters, the Little-Old-Lady-Killer (the serial killer disguised as a nurse) and that of The Lady of Silence (Barraza’s wrestling costume), has been used by criminologists, the media, and police as evidence that Barraza is Little-Old-Lady-Killer. Different media also used

it when they sought only to sensationalize the Little-Old-Lady-Killer case.

In the public's eye, The Lady of Silence wrestler became the serial Little-Old-Lady-Killer. In this way, The Lady of Silence is the one who is constructed as a criminal, instead of letting Juana Barraza be responsible for her actions. The discourses about criminality and the spectacle of wrestling are crossed in Mexican culture and establish the parameters of Mexican-ness, reinforcing—but also revealing—the limits of masculinity and femininity. For example, Feggy Ostrosky merged the figure of The Lady of Silence wrestler with the Little-Old-Lady-Killer serial murderer in an attempt to demonstrate Barraza's pathological personality. In 2008, she published the book *Mentes asesinas: la violencia en tu cerebro* (Killer Minds, the Violence in Your Brain),⁴ dedicating an entire chapter to this case. Ostrosky begins with the narration of what she imagines Barraza's movements and thoughts to have been on the morning of January 25, 2006, the day she was captured. In Ostrosky's version, Barraza looked at herself in the mirror and saw The Lady of Silence, while she was listening to the news about the Little-Old-Lady-Killer. Then Barraza went to Ana María Reyes Alfaro's house, where—again, in Ostrosky's version—they had a disagreement about what Barraza should be paid for her work as a domestic worker. For the psychologist, "inexplicably," Barraza's mind summoned up "all the images of previous suffering, her father's abandonment, the constant mistreatment by her alcoholic mother who sold her for three damned beers at the age of thirteen." This was so much that she could not control herself and she strangled Reyes with a stethoscope. The victim was defenseless in the face of Barraza's size. Ostrosky suggests that, after killing Reyes, the wrestler had to "catch her breath for that incomprehensible internal beast that came back from time to time."

As Foucault said in his 1977 Toronto lecture "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in 19th Century Legal Psychiatry,"⁵ in the early nineteenth century, with

the psychiatrization of criminals, it was understood that crime emerged from a state that could be called the zero level of madness. That is, criminality is inherent in an individual who was biologically predisposed to madness. For Ostrosky, the Little-Old-Lady-Killer is a "beast" that emerged from Barraza and that "inexplicably" strangled elderly women using the "strength and bulk of The Lady of Silence." In this narrative, Ostrosky is displacing the identity of the serial killer, the Little-Old-Lady-Killer, onto the identity of the wrestler, The Lady of Silence.

The media and the authorities continued with Ostrosky's same reasoning: Barraza dressed herself as a nurse to fool the old women so they would let her enter their homes and then she could kill them. Similarly, Barraza tricked society by seeking fame through wrestling, echoing the principle that serial killers want to "become someone." Although if that were the case, all Instagram influencers would be potential serial killers. Finally, and most importantly, Barraza fooled the police for more than three years, and it was her fault because she was so tall, strong, and robust that the police thought she was a man. Both for the police and for the media, Barraza only existed through her disguises, either as a nurse or as The Lady of Silence. Barraza became the Little-Old-Lady-Killer to kill and The Lady of Silence to wrestle. She could not exist any other way. ■■■

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Notes

- 1 In 2007, José Luis González González was sentenced to 1,955 years for generic fraud. [Editor's Note.]
- 2 The name "El Chalequero" comes from the Spanish expression "a chaleco" or "forcibly," referring to his forcing himself on women. [Translator's Note.]
- 3 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso Books, 2010).
- 4 Feggy Ostrosky, *Mentes asesinas: la violencia en tu cerebro* (State of Mexico: Editorial Quinto Sol, 2011).
- 5 Michel Foucault, "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in 19th Century Legal Psychiatry," Alain Baudot and Jane Coucheman, trans., *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, vol. 1, pp. 1-18, 1978.

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