Chapter 3


Rosario Castellanos’s novels *Balún Canán* [*The Nine Guardians*] (1957) and *Oficio de tinieblas* [*The Book of Lamentations*] (1962) present a fictionalized version of the experiences of indigenous people in Chiapas.1 *Balún Canán* represents the experiences of a young girl during the Cristero War (1926–1929) and the period of agrarian reform under president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). *Oficio* refers to the Cuscat rebellion or Caste War (1867–1870) and explores the implications of Cárdenas-era agrarian reform because it is set in the 1930s. Both novels present crucifixions. In *Balún Canán*, indigenous characters kill a mestizo teacher and an indigenous man with a close relationship to ladino male landowners.2 In *Oficio*, indigenous characters, including a Catholic sexton, crucify and kill a mestizo boy. This chapter argues that both novels represent characters with features related either to their minds, such as reason or intelligence, or to their bodies, such as a particular physical feature or alcoholism. They are denied the opportunity to express what Lacanian feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, in her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, calls “embodied subjectivity,” which surpasses the division between mind and body. This chapter posits that this inability to express embodied subjectivity is rooted in the *latifundio* landownership system. The *latifundio* strongly affects women and indigenous
people in a more intense way than it affects *ladino* men. This system mirrors *indigenismo*, a political and aesthetic movement that attempts to incorporate indigenous people into the nation, in part by implicitly encouraging women to give birth to a mestizo future. The chapter also notes that characters’ bodies are instrumental in resisting the ideals of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*, which eliminate indigenous cultural specificity. In these novels, indigenous characters collectively participate in religious rituals that culminate in drunkenness, physical proximity, or likeness to dirt, and in crucifixions. The novels describe female characters in similar ways, which, I believe, means that they evoke one another so that I read them in a constellation of adoptive relationships. The indigenous community also crucifies a young mestizo boy, a mestizo teacher, and an indigenous man who is allied with the landowners; these crucifixions challenge cross-racial relationships, and hence, *mestizaje*.

*Balún Canán* reflects Castellanos’s childhood in Comitán, Chiapas, a town whose Maya name is Balún Canán [Nine Stars]. This novel, divided into three parts, is told first by a young female narrator protagonist, who describes her family, her relationship with her indigenous nanny, and her brother Mario, who, unlike the narrator protagonist, is allowed to learn to read and write. Other parts of the novel deal with conflict over agrarian reform. The narrator protagonist’s father, César, is forced to give up part of his land in the redistribution program and pay his illegitimate nephew Ernesto to teach indigenous children. The second part of the novel, told by a third person narrator, focuses on the indigenous community, its disgust with the useless teacher, Ernesto, and their revolt against the young girl’s father César. The young narrator returns to recount the final part of the novel, in which her brother dies and her family attempts to reconcile itself with its new situation.

*Oficio de tinieblas* represents an indigenous uprising in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, where indigenous people rebel against upper-class *ladiano*sin nearby Ciudad Real, present-day San Cristóbal de las Casas. It is widely recognized that the novel conflates its representation of the nineteenth-century Caste Wars or Cuscat Rebellion, with a representation of land reform carried out in Mexico under president Cárdenas.³ A woman, Catalina Díaz Pujiljá, reinvents