



# Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 15, Issue 02, 2026: 59-66

Article Received: 02-02-2026

Accepted: 03-03-2026

Available Online: 24-03-2026

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v15i2.2672>

## Love, confinement, and structural violence: An intersectional and decolonial reading of Guillermo Arriaga's *Salvar el fuego*

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical reading of *Salvar el fuego* (2020) by Guillermo Arriaga through the lenses of intersectional feminist theory, decolonial feminism, and structural violence. Winner of the Alfaguara Prize, the novel exposes the deep entanglement of gender, class, and race in contemporary Mexican society. Drawing on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Rita Segato, and Gloria Anzaldúa, the analysis examines how the narrative reveals institutionalized forms of racism, classism, and sexism that normalize femicide and domestic violence. The study also interrogates the ideology of *mestizaje*, demonstrating how national narratives of racial integration obscure persistent hierarchies of pigmentocracy and social exclusion. Furthermore, it explores constructions of masculinity within contexts of state abandonment and systemic oppression, highlighting how violence emerges as both learned behavior and structural condition. Through its polyphonic structure, the novel becomes a testimonial space where love and survival unfold within a necropolitical order. Ultimately, this article argues that *Salvar el fuego* articulates a decolonial critique of the Mexican nation-state by exposing how affect, confinement, and punishment are shaped by enduring colonial power structures.

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### 1. Introduction

In the contemporary literary landscape, Guillermo Arriaga's *Salvar el fuego* confronts—without euphemism—the complexities of Mexican society as a social field structured by the interlocking violences of gender, class, and race. Far from being reducible to an “improbable love story,” the novel performs what Kimberlé Crenshaw terms “intersectional social realities”: experiences that cannot be understood through a single axis of oppression but only through the simultaneous convergence of multiple systems of domination (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). The relationship between Marina, a white upper-class choreographer, and José Cuauhtémoc, a brown, impoverished man incarcerated for homicide, operates as a narrative laboratory in which hierarchies of desire, the racialization of bodies, and the uneven distribution of vulnerability become legible.

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In this sense, the novel resonates with Rita Segato's formulation of the "pedagogy of cruelty," insofar as it depicts violence not as an accident or deviation but as a technology of power that organizes social space and the bodies that inhabit it (Segato, 2016). The prison, the bourgeois home, the art world, and marginalized neighborhoods appear not as separate settings but as interconnected sites within a single structural logic. Marina and José's story does not unfold in an affective vacuum; it emerges within what Achille Mbembe would describe as a necropolitical horizon in which the state and elites determine who can live, who can love, and who is rendered disposable (Mbembe, 2019).

*Salvar el fuego* also participates in a critical tradition that interrogates the integrative myth of mestizaje. As Gloria Anzaldúa argues, the border—geographic, racial, symbolic—is a site of collision and creation, but also of exclusion and pain (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25). José Cuauhtémoc, whose name evokes Indigenous resistance, embodies that "internal border" of the mestizo nation: he is desired and feared, eroticized and criminalized. Marina, by contrast, represents a mestizo whiteness that understands itself as universal and neutral, yet remains sustained by a pigmentocratic order that silently structures access to security, art, and social recognition (Malmi, 2018, p. 45). From a gendered perspective, the novel also complicates the position of women within privileged classes. Although Marina possesses economic and cultural capital, her body and desire are regulated by a patriarchal order that defines what counts as a "good" wife, mother, and artist. As bell hooks cautions, patriarchy does not only oppress poor or racialized women; it also disciplines privileged women through norms of respectability and affective self-surveillance (hooks, 2000, p. 72). Marina's bond with José Cuauhtémoc, then, does not merely transgress class and racial boundaries; it destabilizes the bourgeois mandate of femininity that demands containment, obedience, and silence.

Accordingly, *Salvar el fuego* becomes a privileged text for an intersectional and decolonial reading: it does not merely represent structural violence but renders it legible by articulating, within a single narrative matrix, internalized racism, class domination, patriarchy, and the sacrificial logic of the state. Reading the novel through Crenshaw, Segato, Anzaldúa, Mbembe, and hooks clarifies that Marina and José Cuauhtémoc's story is not an exceptional tragedy; it is a symptom of a social organization that systematically produces vulnerable bodies, impossible loves, and lives deemed expendable. This article proposes that the triptych in the title—love, confinement, structural violence—should not be read as three adjacent themes but as three analytical angles on the same apparatus of power: (1) love as an affective practice that attempts to traverse stratified boundaries; (2) confinement as the material and symbolic management of bodies; and (3) structural violence as the rationality that makes punishment predictable when racial, classed, and gendered borders are crossed.

Guillermo Arriaga—Mexican novelist, screenwriter, and director—has long been recognized for exploring social tension and violence across his work. *Salvar el fuego* continues this trajectory through a polyphonic structure that registers the complexity of human relationships under conditions of inequality. Arriaga's trajectory (Mexico City, 1958) constitutes a singular case within contemporary Mexican literature and film: his narratives persistently return to structural violence, social inequality, and affective tension in contexts shaped by precariousness and state abandonment.

From his early screenwriting work—*Amores perros* (2000), *21 gramos* (2003), and *Babel* (2006)—Arriaga developed an aesthetic grounded in polyphony, temporal fragmentation, and an unflinching representation of urban and peripheral life. In an interview, he emphasizes an ethical orientation: to "give voice to those who do not have it, to those who live on the margins" (Ródenas, p. 338). That declaration anticipates the political sensitivity that reaches narrative maturity in *Salvar el fuego*.

Within Arriaga's literary production—*Escuadrón Guillotina* (1991), *Un dulce olor a muerte* (1994), and *El búfalo de la noche* (1999)—we can trace a genealogy of recurring concerns: violence as socialization, wounded masculinity, structural inequality, and the fragility of affective bonds. These concerns align with Segato's "pedagogy of cruelty," which frames violence as a quotidian language that teaches hierarchy and organizes social relations (Segato, 2016). Arriaga does not depict violence as an isolated phenomenon; he depicts a system that produces subjectivities and constrains destinies. *Salvar el fuego* marks an inflection point. Awarded the Premio Alfaguara, the novel not only confirms Arriaga's mastery of polyphonic narration; it deepens his critique of the power structures that sustain inequality in Mexico. In Crenshaw's terms, it dramatizes the simultaneous intersection of race, class, and gender in the production of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Marina and José Cuauhtémoc's

relationship is not merely plot; it functions as a narrative device that exposes what Anzaldúa would call an “internal border” between privilege and marginalization (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25).

Moreover, the novel appears in a historical moment in which public discussion of structural racism, feminicide, and the penitentiary crisis has become unavoidable. Malmi (2018) notes that *mestizaje* can “hide pigmentocracy under a rhetoric of national unity” (p. 45). Arriaga intervenes by constructing characters whose bodies and trajectories are shaped by a racial hierarchy that is not always officially acknowledged but remains socially operative. Finally, *Salvar el fuego* also signals an evolution toward a more explicit critique of masculinity. Whereas in earlier texts male violence often appeared as ambient inevitability, here masculinity is interrogated through a lens aligned with critical masculinity studies. José Cuauhtémoc embodies what hooks describes as “vulnerability denied by patriarchy”—a vulnerability that, when unexpressible, is translated into violence (hooks, 2000, p. 72). The novel thus does not merely narrate violence; it asks how violence is made.

## 2. Intersectionality as a critical tool

Intersectionality—formulated by Crenshaw (1989)—is not a descriptive inventory of identities but an analytic method for understanding how systems of domination converge to produce differentiated exposures to harm. In *Salvar el fuego*, intersectionality enables a reading of Marina and José Cuauhtémoc’s relationship not as a meeting of equivalent individuals but as a collision between structurally unequal positions. Marina embodies whiteness, upper-class privilege, and cultural capital linked to the art world. Her access to the prison—an institutional space saturated with state violence—is mediated by legitimacy: she enters protected, recognized, and institutionally validated. This privilege is not incidental but structural: her body circulates with low risk because institutions recognize her as valuable. José, Cuauhtémoc by contrast, inhabits a space in which violence is quotidian and his poor, racialized body is read as dangerous, disciplinable, or disposable.

This unequal distribution of risk is illuminated by Mbembe’s necro politics: José Cuauhtémoc exists in a space where the state administers life and death, and survival becomes a constant negotiation (Mbembe, 2019). The asymmetry intensifies in the dance workshop: Marina observes José’s body from a position of symbolic power. She aestheticizes it, interprets it, turns it into artistic material. The gaze of art is not automatically emancipatory; it can reproduce colonial optics, converting the “other” into a legible object. This is a key place to insert additional novel quotations (from the workshop scenes) that show how the gaze operates, what language is used to describe José Cuauhtémoc’s body, and how aestheticization intersects with racial desire.

The novel’s alternation between Marina’s domestic life and José Cuauhtémoc’s carceral life further reinforces structural inequality. Marina inhabits stability and protection; José Cuauhtémoc navigates an environment where violence functions as a social language and a survival mechanism. His life trajectory is not narrated as a sequence of isolated moral choices but as the outcome of poverty, familial violence, and lack of opportunity that funnel him toward criminalization. Intersectionality becomes indispensable here because it clarifies how class, racialization, and institutional violence combine to produce divergent destinies. The social reaction to Marina’s relationship with José Cuauhtémoc reveals another intersectional layer: the mandate of respectability that regulates bourgeois femininity. Marina faces symbolic sanctions—scandal, moral judgment, social pressure—while José Cuauhtémoc is reduced to racial and class stereotypes that frame him as threat. These consequences are not equivalent: for Marina the stakes are social; for José they are existential.

## 3. Class, race, and gender: Hierarchies of desire and violence

One of the novel’s most consequential moves is its insistence that desire is never a neutral domain. Desire is structured. It has a social grammar. Marina’s position allows her to name, interpret, and aestheticize without being structurally trapped by the environments she enters. The prison can appear to her as hostile and alien, yet she retains the certainty that she can exit. That certainty is not psychological; it is political. José Cuauhtémoc, by contrast, embodies the intersection of structural poverty, racialization, and institutional violence. His body is read through suspicion and disposability. The novel suggests that he is not merely punished for an act but produced as “punishable” through a long history of abandonment and social stigmatization.

The novel's political acuity emerges in how it stages the economy of looking: who has the authority to interpret, who becomes interpretable, who aestheticizes, who is aestheticized. Inserting more textual evidence here—descriptions of Marina's perceptions of José and the prison; José Cuauhtémoc's reflections on being seen—would further strengthen the close reading and deepen the argument that desire itself is entangled with racial and class power. Segato's (2016) "pedagogy of cruelty" helps clarify why violence permeates the novel across spaces. Violence is not confined to the penal institution; it circulates through domesticity, the art world, the media, and the street. It is a social pedagogy that teaches hierarchy and produces obedience. The novel's settings are therefore not separate backdrops but nodes in an integrated structure.

#### 4. The prison as an intersectional border: Coloniality, love, and necro politics

In *Salvar el fuego*, the prison is not simply a narrative setting but the structural core where love, confinement, and systemic violence converge. It functions as an intersectional border in the deepest sense: a space where class, race, gender, and colonial legacies intertwine to generate differential exclusion. The prison is not presented as an isolated consequence of a single criminal act but as the culmination of a longer process of historical marginalization.

When José Cuauhtémoc states, "No importa si robaste o mataste. Si eres pobre, ya estás condenado desde que naciste" (Arriaga, 2020, p. 148), he articulates a structural truth rather than an individual complaint. The sentence names the temporality of condemnation: punishment precedes crime. His life trajectory—poverty, domestic violence, educational precarity, institutional absence—had already placed him within a horizon of criminalization prior to the act that secures his imprisonment. Quijano's coloniality of power is useful here because it identifies how Latin American modernity is organized through racial classification that distributes labor, authority, and subjectivity. Racialization does not vanish with independence or with the discourse of mestizaje; it reconfigures. José Cuauhtémoc—whose name evokes an Indigenous genealogy—embodies the subject the mestizo nation claims to incorporate and simultaneously marginalizes. The prison, in this reading, becomes a contemporary device of coloniality: a site where racialized and impoverished bodies are managed and contained. Mignolo (2011) helps clarify the conceptual point: coloniality is the hidden, constitutive underside of modernity. The penal system presents itself as modern and neutral, yet its neutrality is performative. The distribution of punishment is shaped by historical associations of poverty with danger, and of racialized bodies with criminality. The law does not operate in a vacuum; it is embedded in a historical structure that makes some bodies more readily legible as threats. The prison thus exceeds the disciplinary model described by Foucault (1995). It does not simply normalize; it also administers disposability. Mbembe (2019) conceptualizes necro politics as the sovereign capacity to decide who may live and who must die—or live in conditions near social death. José is socially "killed" before the crime: his precarity marks him as disposable. Structural violence begins before sentencing; it begins with the systematic devaluation of his existence.

The intersection deepens when the novel introduces the love relationship between Marina and José Cuauhtémoc. Love crosses the carceral border but cannot annul it. Marina can enter as visitor and leave, protected by economic and symbolic capital; José Cuauhtémoc remains fixed to confinement. The border is asymmetrical. Here intersectionality is essential: José's condition cannot be understood through a single category. His vulnerability emerges from the convergence of poverty, racialization, and a masculinity shaped by structural violence. The novel's core political insight is that love does not escape structure; it exposes it. Marina's ability to traverse the prison underscores that confinement is not merely spatial but stratified. The border separates not only inside/outside but also valued/unvalued lives. This is why the novel's title logic—love, confinement, structural violence—cannot be separated: love attempts to traverse the border; confinement reasserts it; structural violence makes its reassertion predictable.

#### 5. The female body and patriarchal control: Privilege, enclosure, and gender mandates

If the prison is José Cuauhtémoc's visible confinement, Marina's body becomes the site of a less visible but equally structural enclosure. Although she occupies a privileged socioeconomic position—white, upper class, institutionally connected—her subjectivity is traversed by patriarchal dispositifs that

regulate desire, sexuality, and agency. In *Salvar el fuego*, marriage is not represented as affective refuge but as normative institution that organizes the female body according to social expectation. When Marina confesses, “Tengo todo lo que se supone que una mujer debe querer. Y sin embargo, estoy vacía” (Arriaga, 2020, p. 31), the novel stages emptiness not as private malaise but as the effect of an imposed script. Fulfillment is equated with normative compliance: marriage, motherhood, stability, and public respectability. Her “vacío” arises not from material lack but from the disjunction between prescribed desire and lived desire. Crenshaw’s intersectional framework clarifies that class privilege does not erase gender oppression; the two operate simultaneously. Marina does not share José Cuauhtémoc’s carceral vulnerability, but she experiences patriarchal coercion in symbolic and affective form. hooks (2000) emphasizes that patriarchy disciplines privileged women through norms of respectability and emotional self-control (p. 72). Marina’s relationship with José Cuauhtémoc is therefore not only erotic desire; it is an act of disobedience against the order that contains her. Through Lugones’s (2003) coloniality of gender, Marina’s transgression acquires an additional layer: colonial modernity organizes bodies via racial-sexual hierarchies that distribute legitimacy. Marina embodies institutional order and national respectability; José Cuauhtémoc is coded as danger and disorder. Their intimacy destabilizes symbolic coherence. This destabilization helps explain why the relationship is treated not as private matter but as public threat: it violates the gendered-racialized grammar of social order.

## 6. Love and punishment: Intersection as structural tragedy

In *Salvar el fuego*, love does not function as redemptive romance. It becomes the site where structural conflict intensifies. From the first encounters in the prison, the relationship is marked by material and symbolic asymmetry: Marina enters as facilitator and observer; José Cuauhtémoc remains under surveillance. That spatial inequality anticipates the structural inequality that shapes their bond. José Cuauhtémoc’s reflection—“No importa cuánto cambies, ellos ya decidieron quién eres” (Arriaga, 2020, p. 379)—does not merely refer to personal insecurity; it identifies the rigidity of social classification. The tragedy is structural: transformation does not alter perception when identity is pre-decided by institutional and social apparatuses. When their relationship moves beyond the prison, the intensification of scrutiny—media scandal, institutional repercussion—reveals that the bond is interpreted as symbolic threat. The punishment that activates is not only legal; it is restorative of hierarchy. Davis’s critique of the prison as racialized and classed containment (Davis, 2003) is instructive: José Cuauhtémoc’s body was already inscribed as dangerous. Love does not erase that inscription; it makes it more visible and thus more punishable. Intersectionality clarifies that consequences diverge: Marina’s sanctions are reputational; José’s are existential. The love that appears “transgressive” at the level of narrative becomes “unacceptable” at the level of structure because it destabilizes the classificatory order the novel exposes.

Read through decolonial feminism, *Salvar el fuego* dismantles the symbolic pillar of Mexican national identity: mestizaje as harmonious integration. José Cuauhtémoc embodies the central contradiction. His name evokes an Indigenous heroic genealogy celebrated in official memory, yet his actual body is treated as disposable by contemporary penal sovereignty. This contradiction reveals the persistence of colonial classification under postcolonial rhetoric.

Malmi’s (2018) analysis of mestizaje as a discourse that dilutes race while reproducing pigmentocratic inequality clarifies the novel’s intervention (p. 45). Mestizaje does not abolish racial hierarchy; it renders it harder to name. The novel re-names it by dramatizing how whiteness and cultural capital produce protection, while racialization and poverty produce exposure to violence and punishment. Anzaldúa’s (2012) border theory further clarifies José Cuauhtémoc’s figure as an “internal border”: simultaneously desired and feared, eroticized and criminalized (p. 25). Marina’s whiteness appears universal because it coincides with the norm. The relationship between them exposes that the mestizo nation’s purported integration remains stratified by a racial hierarchy that the myth seeks to deny.

## 7. Structural violence and necro politics

A key conceptual move in this article is to distinguish violence as event from violence as structural rationality. Structural violence refers to the social organization that makes harm predictable: it distributes precarity unevenly, produces conditions under which some lives are systematically more exposed to injury, and normalizes that exposure as “natural” or deserved.

Mbembe’s (2019) necro politics sharpens this argument. Necro political governance is not limited to spectacular killing. It includes the sovereign power to expose populations to conditions of life that approximate social death: abandonment, deprivation, institutional indifference, and permanent suspicion. In *Salvar el fuego*, the prison becomes precisely such a space. José’s life is “managed” but not protected. He remains alive, but within a regime that strips his life of equal political value. José Cuauhtémoc’s statement—“Si eres pobre, ya estás condenado desde que naciste” (Arriaga, 2020, p. 148)—names the anticipatory structure of necro political exposure: condemnation precedes action. Later, “ellos ya decidieron quién eres” (Arriaga, 2020, p. 379) reveals the representational dimension of necro politics: identity is fixed by institutions that decide value and disposability. Foucault’s (1995) account of the prison as disciplinary institution explains surveillance and normalization, but *Salvar el fuego* suggests something beyond discipline: a regime that transforms certain subjects into administratively expendable. Discipline aims to correct; necro politics can aim to contain, abandon, and render disposable. This is why the prison in the novel functions as a border: it separates not only inside/outside but also full membership/expendability. Love between Marina and José Cuauhtémoc becomes radically charged in this context because it asserts relationality in a space designed to administer social death. The tragedy that follows is not sentimental inevitability; it is structural restoration.

José Cuauhtémoc’s masculinity is not depicted as essential attribute but as historically produced identity forged under structural violence, precarity, and coloniality. When he declares, “Golpear fue lo único que aprendí a hacer para que me escucharan” (Arriaga, 2020, p. 344), the novel frames violence as learned language. Aggression becomes a strategy for recognition in contexts where vulnerability lacks legitimacy. hooks (2000) argues that patriarchy produces affective mutilation in men: they are taught to repress emotion and translate pain into domination (p. 72). José Cuauhtémoc’s trajectory corresponds to this dynamic. Violence circulates as pedagogy across generations, normalized as authority. Yet the novel also introduces fissures—moments of tenderness and care—that suggest masculinity is a site of contestation rather than a fixed destiny.

At the same time, the novel refuses simplistic redemption. The system that produces violent masculinity is also the system that punishes it. José Cuauhtémoc is demanded to be “strong” under conditions of abandonment, yet punished when strength takes coercive form. This double bind constitutes another form of confinement: masculinity becomes an enclosure that is socially imposed and then criminalized.

## 8. Narrative polyphony and symbolic agency: Form, power, redistribution of voice

The political force of *Salvar el fuego* is not limited to its themes; it is inscribed in its form. The novel’s polyphonic structure—alternating voices, shifting focalization, differentiated discursive registers—functions as a strategy for redistributing symbolic authority. In Bakhtinian terms, polyphony implies the coexistence of relatively autonomous consciousnesses not absorbed into a single authoritative voice. This matters politically because structural violence is also representational: it often reduces marginalized subjects to stereotype, statistic, or case file.

By granting José Cuauhtémoc narrative interiority, the novel refuses the dominant imaginary in which the prisoner appears only as object of juridical discourse. The incarcerated subject becomes a producer of discourse. This redistribution is not merely aesthetic; it interrupts the epistemic monopoly of institutions that decide who deserves to be heard. Giunta’s argument that art can function as symbolic insurgency is relevant here: the novel’s insurgency occurs formally, through voice (Giunta, 2019). Polyphony does not erase violence, but it destabilizes the regime of visibility that sustains violence. If necro politics administers social death, polyphony becomes a site of symbolic resistance: it asserts that a life rendered disposable remains narratable, intelligible, and complex.

## 9. Conclusion

*Salvar el fuego* cannot be read solely as a tragic romance or as a contemporary prison narrative. Its critical power lies in how it articulates love, confinement, and structural violence as interdependent dimensions of a single social order. Through an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) and decolonial lens (Anzaldúa, 2012; Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2003), the novel reveals that Marina and José' Cuauhtémoc's bond is not an anomalous romance but a crossing of historically sedimented borders sustained by coloniality, patriarchy, and class stratification.

Love in the novel does not function as private refuge. It becomes the space where hierarchy becomes most visible. To love across racialized and classed difference is to expose the fiction of mestizaje as completed integration. The punitive reaction that follows confirms that national unity often operates as rhetoric rather than material equality. The intersection of gender, race, and class does not merely shape differentiated experiences of oppression; it also determines whose love is survivable and whose becomes punishable. Confinement likewise exceeds prison walls. The prison materializes an intersectional border where the state manages precarious bodies; yet enclosure also operates through patriarchal regulation of female respectability and through the identity-fixation of racialized subjects. Marina's confession—"Tengo todo lo que se supone que una mujer debe querer. Y sin embargo, estoy vacía" (Arriaga, 2020, p. 31)—registers the affective costs of bourgeois femininity as normative script. José's diagnosis—"Si eres pobre, ya estás condenado desde que naciste" (Arriaga, 2020, p. 148)—and his later recognition that "ellos ya decidieron quién eres" (Arriaga, 2020, p. 379) reveal that the penal apparatus does not simply punish acts; it formalizes a prior social condemnation.

From a necro political perspective (Mbembe, 2019), the penal system appears as a dispositif that distributes protection unevenly and exposes certain lives to social death. Violence in the novel is not backdrop; it is organizing rationality. It allocates recognition, legitimacy, and punishment. The tragedy does not reside in sentimental impossibility but in the rigidity of a structure that interprets affective border-crossing as a threat to hierarchical equilibrium. Finally, the novel's polyphonic form reinforces this critique. By redistributing voice and granting symbolic agency to marginalized subjects, *Salvar el fuego* destabilizes the epistemic monopoly of the institutions that decide who matters and who can speak. Literature here does not merely represent structural violence; it intervenes in the regime of visibility that sustains it.

In sum, *Salvar el fuego* exposes the continuity between coloniality, patriarchy, and the penal state in the production of contemporary Mexican modernity. Its most enduring borders are not territorial but social: racial, gendered, and economic. Love traverses them; confinement restores them; structural violence preserves them. In that unresolved tension resides the political force of the novel: it shows that the "impossibility" of love is not emotional but structural, and that tragedy is not private but the everyday mechanism through which social hierarchy reasserts itself.

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