

## Ovarian Psychos: An Urban Cadence of Power and Precarity

Jennifer Ruth Hosek

Ovarian Psychos, USA, 2016, produced, directed, and written by Joanna Sokolowski and Kate Trumbull-LaValle, starring the Ovarian Psychos Cycle Brigade, 1h 12m.

Joanna Sokolowski and Kate Trumbull-LaValle's documentary *Ovarian Psychos* (2016) enters working-class Latina culture in East Los Angeles. Seventy-two minutes offer an intimate engagement with the Ovarian Psychos Bicycle Brigade, especially three protagonists, longtime member Xela, daughter Yoli, and newcomer Evie. Its low-angle close-ups and short-focus shots incite an effect of authenticity and uncensored biography. Its stories highlight struggles for social mobility and access to the urban landscape, voice and self-actualization, and womynist-of-color activism. Rap artist, social worker, and guiding Psycho Xela speaks powerfully about the group's birth and aims. The militancy of her views—expressed by other Psychos as well—may seem jarring and a bit outdated in its separatism.

The story's unfolding makes their unapologetic position more comprehensible. Archival and documentary clips depict communities out of which their positions have grown. Their foremothers' specific needs and desires were ignored by feminist activisms and the Chicano movement. For these self-defined young womxn of color, creating an independent way is the obvious response. Simultaneously fragile in and armored against their volatile environment, they both identify with and reject the gang persona that in their personal experience embodies power. They mimic this role with emblematic black, emblazoned bandanas over nose and mouth, defiant poses, and aggressive words that describe aggressive actions in response to violent male behavior. Yet, seeking to define the identity that they inhabit, they criticize headlines that label them a (chain) gang. In today's world, tensions between feminisms, womynisms, and Chicano power remain. And there is still little space for these womxn.

Spatial restrictions are a painful topic that has driven Xela to create the activist group and drives the film itself. Tears well up as these strong women relate their stories of confinement. Xela's tears express her suffering, a way of voicing emotions that she rejects as unproductive. They emerge in her childhood house, circumstances that Xela describes as growing up in a "postcolonized, traditional, Mexican home." In contrast, the young woman asserts the value of women in indigenous Mexican culture. The Ovarian Psychos practice indigenous rituals to celebrate their roots and strengthen their community actions, including inclusive bicycle rides for all genders. Xela's upbringing turns out to have been a torture against which her contemporary life is molded. She anxiously tries to raise her daughter differently and wishes aloud to nine-year-old Yoli that they could switch places so Xela herself could have the childhood Xela is providing for her daughter. Xela's lot was confinement in her room, while her brothers played outside the house. Deemed strong-willed by her interviewed mother, Xela may perhaps have in more traditional circumstances been restricted to her barrio or the extended matriarchal family. Here in migration, her space was a windowless room within the walls of the nuclear family house. The in-your-face, reverse masculinist slogan of the group—"Ovaries so big we don't need

fuckin' balls!"—resonates against Xela's father's sexual abuse and the seeming powerlessness and incredulity of her mother. Tears overcome Xela when she relives the past, and its memories drive her life.

The gendered restrictions of space influence all of the Psycos, for instance, Evie, who is the second breadwinner in her family of sister and mother. Her mother wants Evie to study for a lucrative profession to escape their working-poor lives. She also wishes Evie to spend every nonworking, nonschooling moment at home, stating that she cannot relax unless her daughters are in the house. Her experience of violence in war-torn El Salvador leads her to institute these spatial restraints today. To Evie, as for most members, Ovarian Psycos is a break forward that causes tension in her family. Her activities with the Psycos cannot be monetized into work, education, or marriage preparation and, furthermore, bear risks and bend gender norms. They are not validated by her mother, who has no time for issues like self-actualization and pushing boundaries of spatial and social access. Evie's excitement over the prospect of acceptance into the Psycos speaks more to her desire to belong than the difficulty of joining this group that actively recruits.

Evie muses that she joined for the camaraderie and found that she stayed because she "fell in love with cycling." This arresting voiceover commentary captures an oddly underdeveloped theme. Evie has the longest scene of an individual member cycling alone. She pedals to get around and is filmed crossing the multilane highway bridge that separates East Los Angeles from downtown: "When I first started riding a bike, people would stare. Is it because I'm a big girl, is it because I'm a girl, is it because they don't see any girls at all riding?" In this scene, in which the camera shoots her from several angles, a counter shot from Evie's point of view of a group of men in a car visually represents the male gaze she describes (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Unlike some of the bicycle riding scenes that the cameraperson filmed while on roller blades, (1) the shots of Evie give the impression of having been taken from a motorized vehicle. While understandable, considering what look to be difficult filming conditions on the bridge, this depiction of Evie from a perspective that parallels what would be the point of view of the men in the car risks reinscribing precisely the male stares. Representing women's bodies without objectifying them seems a perpetual challenge; even when female bodies are in motion and at work, they tend to translate readily from moving subjects into moving objects.

Evie's statement provokes. Throughout the film, members speak of riding as their way of increasing consciousness, confidence, community, health, access to the city, and closeness to mother earth. (2) Xela and others state that the Psycos are their attempt to do something in the face of widespread violence against womxn. The camera underscores this message through static shots of women under male supremacist constraints—in public parks as murder victims and in debutante quinceañera gowns—and traveling and moving shots of women at rides and bicycling on public streets. Yet, while the events are celebratory and draw participants, the group wonders what sustained difference they make, masculinist backlash notwithstanding. Furthermore, commitment is difficult in precarity. Spread too thin, Xela leaves the group to dedicate herself to her daughter. The Psycos' future is not assured, although its influence will be carried within each

of them. What one hopes will stick with Evie and be expressed in Sokolowski and Trumbull-LaValle's next film is precisely that underdeveloped theme of how the act of cycling itself alters its practitioners. In this work, unlike in so many bicycle documentaries, the beautiful machine is not fetishized. Instead, the film moves the other way: bicycling exquisitely facilitates community and change. One gets the sense other activities could do so just as well. From this beautiful film, I wanted to know more about the bicycle as facilitator of the body in motion in public and the gendered human as kinetic in the world.

Jennifer Ruth Hosek is an associate professor at Queen's University, Canada. She works primarily in transnational German studies, Cuban studies, gender studies, and film. Current larger projects include writings on urban movement and cinema, the documentary *Rodando en La Habana: Bicycle Stories* (2015, with Dir. Jaime Santos Menéndez <https://youtu.be/-l7xnqurDaw>), and the language-culture telecollaboration platform, [www.LinguaeLive.ca](http://www.LinguaeLive.ca).  
E-mail: [jhosek \(at\) queensu.ca](mailto:jhosek@queensu.ca)

#### Notes

1. Nora Lee Mandel, "Women Documentarians Reveal Injustice and Hope at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival," FF2 Media (25 July 2016), <http://ff2media.com/filmsfortwo/2016/07/25/hrw-film-festival-ovarian-psycos>
2. See also the Ovarian Psychos Bicycle Brigade website at <https://ovarianpsycos.com>