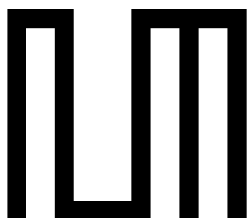


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**ENSAYOS / *Essays***





## CARIBBEAN CRUISING: SEX, DEATH, AND MEMORIES OF (CONGO) DARKNESS

*Rick Mitchell*

The trick, for the modern capitalist magic to function, is to deface the commodity of labor, allowing its [...] use-value component to surge forth, flashlike, only to disappear once again as [...] exchange-value. Hence fetishism is not a consequence but the magical precondition for the commodity, and hence for mature capitalism, to function. We should not be overly surprised, therefore, at the spectacular “return” of the archaic within modernity.

—Michael Taussig, “The Beach (A Fantasy)”

I can deny my dependence, denying sexuality, filth, death, and insisting that the world submit to my action. But this negation is fictitious.

—Georges Bataille, “Transgression”

...the first dead are our first masters, those who unlock the door for us that opens onto the other side, if only we are willing to bear it. Writing, in its noblest function, is the attempt to unerase, to unearth, to find the primitive picture again, ours, the one that frightens us.

—Hélène Cixous, “The School of the Dead”

I’m sitting in one of those new Starbucks which seem to be springing up everywhere nowadays, putting all the old coffee shops—less uptight about carving initials on tables, posting home-made flyers for poetry readings, lost cats—out of business. There are now five Starbucks within a two-mile radius of my home and they’re always reliable, always the same, which seems to be a big part of their global appeal. As I sit near the window with my Cafe Americano—which isn’t large, or extra-large, but “*venti*”—looking out at yet another ugly San Fernando Valley parking lot while trying to write something about the Caribbean cruise ships I once worked on, my thoughts float back to a port I used to visit, Samaná; to its two, open-air, thatch-roofed, side-by-side bars that sat just up the hill from Samaná’s lone pier, a modern cement structure built by the cruise

line which owned the only cruise ship that stopped at this rural outpost in the Dominican Republic, one of two countries, along with Haiti, that shares the island of Hispaniola.

### Samaná

A donkey in the street, loose chickens;  
cast iron cruise ship billowing smoke;  
tourists talk English in tennis shoes  
negotiate green hats of freshly woven palm,  
miniature sailboats of goatskin, horns.  
“Isn’t that somethin’?”

Gliding across pristine waters, past lush, tropical mountains, the ship sailed into Samaná every Wednesday. Waiting at the pier along with a couple of taxi drivers and their beat up cars would be groups of young kids in ragged clothes not shy about encircling a crew member and tugging on his clothing while asking for a dollar, an apple, anything. And a line of old blue school busses always stood just off the pier awaiting shipboard passengers. Hating to drive alone during the long three-hour trip from Puerto Plata, the bus drivers, always practical, filled many of their seats with young women who would make the weekly trip with hopes of earning some money from the crew—mostly Latino and West Indian males at the time—or at least having some fun. I also think back to my narrow cabin with the bare light bulb over the bed; lazy Aruban dogs, ribs pushing through their skin, wandering to nowhere in particular over hot, oil-stained piers; Old San Juan and its dilapidated, second-story sailors’ tavern where the menu included fish and chips, cocktails, and waitresses in bikinis and spiked heels who were available for visits to one of the hourly rooms at the back of the bar.

Along with St. Thomas, Old San Juan is now the busiest cruise ship port in the Caribbean, the world’s most popular region for cruise ships, and success has taken its toll on the old landmarks. During a recent visit to Old San Juan, for example, my first trip to the Caribbean in eighteen years, I found a sprawling new casino and hotel where the sailors’ tavern once stood. All of the old sailor haunts seemed to have been bulldozed over, homogenized to make way for the new in this oldest of American cities. I had visited this port as a crew member about seventy times but Old San Juan’s cobblestoned streets, along with the freshly painted buildings, seemed less real than ever before.

He wears red lipstick, white make-up  
on his goatee, white patent leather shoes,  
a white polyester suit with wide lapels, a

white cardboard top hat that says *Mágico*.  
“Looky, looky,” says the dark skinned Dominicano.  
“Me Sammy Davis, Jr.”  
And he inhales white thread  
into his right nostril.

During a six-year span in the eighties I worked onboard several different cruise ships, primarily in the Caribbean. One of the ships sailed from Old San Juan every Tuesday with approximately a thousand passengers on a weekly tour that featured six ports in seven days. Along with the Greek officers, European and American casino staff, gift-shop clerks, cruise staff, musicians, and performers, I was part of the “upper crew.” The so-called “lower crew,” the bulk of the cruise-ship’s work force, hailed from places such as Jamaica, Honduras, Nicaragua. Of a much darker hue than the upper crew, the lower crew resided deep down in the ship’s bowels, where it wasn’t unusual for ten crew members who worked various shifts to share a small, windowless cabin. Unlike members of the upper crew, the lower crew member—who often worked fourteen hours, every day, for eleven months straight—was permitted to surface only while on the job and in company uniform. Today, with a fair wage difficult to come by in many parts of the world, over forty nations are often represented within a cruise ship’s crew. Not tethered to any particular place nor subject to American jurisdiction and able to sail—with a low-wage, multinational crew—at a moment’s notice through unregulated international waters while evading taxes, laws, and a minimum wage, the slippery cruise ship has become the space par excellence of unfettered globalization.<sup>1</sup>

“Looky, looky, looky, looky,” he says  
from behind mirrored shades,  
“Me Sammy Davis, Jr.  
Me Sammy Davis, Jr.”

---

<sup>1</sup> The American- and European-owned cruise ships that ply the Caribbean fly under flags of convenience. That is, they’re registered in countries such as Liberia or Panama, places that don’t collect much in the way of taxes or, more importantly, enforce labor laws. Lacking external regulations and having access to cheap, non-union labor, the cruise ship is not unlike an antebellum plantation. Tellingly, an observation by Fredrick Douglass from the mid-nineteenth century seems applicable to the twenty-first century cruise ship, and perhaps to other globalized work spaces that are answerable to no one but the multinational corporation: the “plantation is a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, regulations and customs. The laws and institutions of the state, apparently touch it nowhere. The troubles arising here, are not settled by the civil power of the state” (49). For further insight into globalization and cruise ships, see Wood’s “Caribbean Cruise Tourism: Globalization at Sea.”

as he performs tricks with thimbles  
sponge balls, cards to attract dollars U.S.  
from disinterested sightseers.

But for now the concept of globalization is too abstract, impenetrable. So I'd like to turn to the imagistic "fan of memory" which, as Walter Benjamin suggests, "never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies [the fan's operator], for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside" (*Reflections* 6). The fold of truth, which can arise as a striking imagistic memory from everyday life, compels the writer to unfurl the fan further, and further, in order to mine the image's significance, its relation to the next image, and the next one. One particular image has compelled me to keep thinking about Caribbean cruising.

The image: a big white cruise ship sailing towards San Juan at about 17 knots. I'm sitting on the bed, sheets and blanket tightly tucked under the mattress, in my comparatively large cabin, upper-deck, starboard side, forward, the two portholes wide open, welcoming in the Caribbean breeze. Suddenly, urgent knocking, banging at my door.

"Mitchell...Mitchell."

Larouche, the person who makes my bed and delivers clean towels every morning, rushes into my cabin, horror filling his face. "Mitchell, Mitchell," he blurts out in a thick Haitian accent while looking me straight in the eye. "My baby, she's very sick, Mitchell. My baby, she's sick. I...I need to fly back home tomorrow, soon as we get into port. I...I need you to help me, Mitchell. Please...please, Mitchell, please."

Nearly two decades later, trying to make some sense of the desperation that filled my always-amiable steward's face as we sailed through a calm sea whose barbaric history includes Columbus' "Discovery," colonialism, and various imperialist naval operations, I recall another, not-unrelated horror, the one that Conrad's Kurtz finally names as the truth of his past quickly unfolds just before he dies. Kurtz's final words, we are told, invoke the horror of imperialist plunder in Africa generated in no small part by slavery. The same sort of slavery responsible for the voyage of my Haitian cabin steward's ancestors from the dark Congo to the sun-filled Caribbean where, in the 1980s, Larouche, working fourteen-hour shifts, seven days a week for three hundred dollars U.S. a month as a shipboard servant with virtually no rights, doesn't seem all that far removed from Conrad's abject, faceless slaves in *Heart of Darkness*.

A \$2 “mahogany” ashtray shatters  
on hot cement; a small brown dog, legs tied,  
lies in a burlap bag on the pier,  
its head and eyes anxiously following flies  
and I wait to accompany passengers  
on the overcrowded white wooden boat  
to the offshore beach.

Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid suggests that touristic servitude is a role for which Caribbean people of African descent have been especially well prepared. In *A Small Place*, Kincaid unfurls personal memories of Caribbean tourism and history in order to draw connections between Antiguans’ obsession with their emancipation from slavery, as if it had just happened yesterday, and the country’s hugely popular Hotel Training School, which “teaches Antiguans how to be good servants, how to be a good nobody, which is what a servant is” (55) and, Kincaid implies, what a slave was.

Onboard the ship—that strange, deterritorialized space which, though seemingly serene, like the Caribbean Sea’s surface, cannot escape the historical conflicts that are as real as the fossilized slave bones littering the Atlantic—tourists resist unfurling the significance of potentially unsettling images, since to do otherwise might spoil their fun. Directly addressing the North American who is bent on having a good time in the Caribbean no matter what, Kincaid utilizes irony and a second-person narrative to force the tourist/reader to acknowledge his complicity in Caribbean oppression:

you needn’t let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into a full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday. They [people who were once slaves and are now servants] are not responsible for what you have. (10)

Without successful repression of “that slightly funny feeling,” the tourist’s carefree holiday, that carnivalesque reprieve from the drudgery of work and the banality of everyday life, becomes an impossibility.

“¿Manzana, tiene una manzana?” a boy smiles,  
and I hand him one of the apples I had swiped  
from the cruise ship dining room.  
Several other children swarm over,  
thin hands outreached:  
“one dollar, man, one dollar”;  
“manzana, manzana”;  
“one dollar, joe, one dollar.”  
A little girl with an all-white eye  
tugs on my shirt but doesn’t speak.

It is difficult, however, to ignore feeling unease when abject poverty is relentlessly visible. This may help to explain why the cruise ship, plying a seemingly people-less sea during most of a tour's duration, has become an ideal vacation domicile/vehicle for visits to postcolonial ports. In spite of their conflict-free images on travel brochures and in the touristic imagination, these ports still maintain elements of "[t]he originality of the colonial context" of which Frantz Fanon writes in the early 60s, where the "economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities" (40). Although it may be difficult to mask irreconcilable tourist-host contradictions, especially as economic conditions worsen, the intensifying commodification of experience within late capitalism, as seen in the region's development of all-inclusive, tightly controlled and vigilantly patrolled resorts and shopping areas, has helped to shield the tourist from discomfort while abetting the expansion of Caribbean tourism. Several cruise lines, seeing the profit potential in masking worsening human realities ashore, have even created their own "Caribbean" ports. One cruise line, for example, has developed a private "island" in Haiti—actually, a swath of beach-front property protected by a ten-foot wall and armed guards, and manned by carefully screened and trained locals—so that cruise ship passengers can experience "the best of the Caribbean" while avoiding the sight of a populace tainted by starvation (Wood 361-362). "Close the shutter," Kurtz ordered Marlow over a hundred years ago as he steamed down the Congo. "I can't bear to look at this" (Conrad 85).

I arrive at the bar late today.  
Young Dominicans in New York Islander,  
Cowboys, Royal Caribbean Cruise Line t-shirts  
sit on crude goatskin chairs  
at round makeshift tables  
with bottles of rum, coke, *cerveza*,  
winking, smiling, waiting.

The outright purchase and simulation of Caribbean islands seems to be the trend of the future, as several cruise lines now regularly visit islands which they own and regulate. In addition to taking away much-needed income from the cash-strapped ports that are dropped from the itinerary to make room for the visits to corporate-owned, simulated beach areas (white sand is often imported to these hyperreal sites so that the beach can meet tourist expectations), such islands dramatically increase profit potential because the cruise line owns everything that's sold there. And tourists, desiring clean, trouble-free experiences that are different, but not *too* different, seem to like the idea of the private island, an extreme example of the Disneyfication of Caribbean tourism, and of a globalization process

that stresses homogeneity while encouraging market-driven forces that are often at odds with locally-rooted cultures and economies. Robert E. Wood, examining the cleansing and simulation of public space practiced by Caribbean cruise lines, quotes from Michael Sorkin, who sees the “theme park”—which is more or less what we get with the mega-mall, the contemporary cruise ship, and the private island—as emblematic of globalization:

This is the meaning of the theme park, the place that embodies it all, the ageographia, the surveillance and control, the simulations without end. The theme park presents a happy regulated vision of pleasure—all those artfully hoodwinking forms—as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work. (qtd. in Wood 358)

A young girl, can't be more than 16 or so,  
grabs my left forearm, locks her eyes with mine,  
and carefully forms three words in English:  
“I love you,” she squeaks, while weaving  
her dark, tiny fingers through mine.  
I smile, guzzle some more beer.

Another example of an attempt to cleanse the sting of social conflict from a particular place can be found in the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs which had entrusted Kurtz with the writing of an immensely important report (another type of comforting simulation) that could help to clear the way for even greater profits in the ivory trade. Ultimately, however, Kurtz is unable to embrace his life-long work on the treatise. He betrays his devotion to the Ideal through his scribbled note on the report's last page, “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad 66), as well as through his deathbed countenance and final words which unleash, for Marlow, a flurry of images that suggest the truth of who's responsible for what. As Kurtz begins to enter that charged liminal space, the threshold of death, Marlow perceives by candle-light, in the “impenetrable darkness” of the dying man's face, an unforgettable alteration:

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. (Conrad 86)

In the brief space between this image and the patient's last breath, Kurtz utters the words that will continue to haunt Marlow.

Under the thatched roof, as the girl places  
both of my hands on her gyrating hips,  
a man with stunted, deformed legs,  
a Mets cap turned backwards on his head,

dances on his hands for money  
to rusty merengue instruments.

Over a year after the trip down the Congo Marlow's final memory of Kurtz's face—which, as death quickly approached, was suddenly unmasked, "as though a veil had been rent"—continues to spark powerful flashes of recognition of the colonialist's horrific history. Back in Belgium, Marlow hopes that visiting Kurtz's Intended to deliver some of her lover's papers will help him to give up the memory of Kurtz "to the past[...]to surrender personally," Marlow says, "all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of common fate" (90). Yet as he stands in front of the Intended's "high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery" (90), memories of Kurtz, of murky Africa, drumming, imperialist plunder, of "the heart of a conquering darkness [...] of triumph for the wilderness" (90), suddenly and without warning envelop Marlow. He rings the bell next to the thick mahogany door of the Intended's Brussels home and Kurtz, long-ago buried in a mud hole alongside the Congo River, seems to stare back at him from the door's "glassy panel—stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry," Marlow confesses, "The horror! The horror!" (91).

As I sway to the merengue band  
she pulls out a tattered green card  
signed and dated by a doctor.  
"Estoy limpia... ¿Quieres hacer chicky-chicky?"  
She pulls me towards her and I don't resist.

Unlike the film images shot in a Hollywood studio, an individual's storehouse of images cannot be easily controlled, ordered, discarded. According to Benjamin, when imagistic memories leap into view they often appear as moments "severed from all earlier associations" (*Reflections* 26), time "outside history" (*Illuminations* 184). The odd, out-of-context, non-linear array of images, which create something like the *v-effekt* of Brecht's epic theater, can "make strange" our perceptions of the everyday, of history, forcing us to rethink the past, the present, and perhaps our own roles in historical conflict.

Marlow himself acknowledges the strange way in which powerful memories of the past can subvert chronological time. Upon seeing for the first time the Intended, Marlow realizes that

she was one of those creatures that are not the play-things of Time. For her he had died only yesterday. And, by Jove!, the impression was so powerful that for me too he seemed to have died only yesterday—nay, this very minute. I saw her and him in the same instant of



time—his death and her sorrow in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together—I heard them together. She had said, with a deep catch of the breath, 'I have survived'; while my strained ears seemed to hear distinctly, mingled with her tone of despairing regret, the summing up whisper of his eternal condemnation. (91)

Marlow's irrepressible memory of Kurtz's last words always seems to be connected to something else: Africa, slavery, the city of Brussels, and—most importantly—to people, such as the Intended, whose life behind her thick, ornate door in one of the city's finer neighborhoods is the flip-side of Kurtz's exploration in the name of a higher Ideal.

According to Marlow, the Intended's survival, and that of all women—who are incapable of withstanding the "truth"—remains dependent on "illusions," which is why Marlow lies to the Intended about Kurtz's final words. While Marlow's memory, both involuntary and voluntary, mixed with the present, the distant, seems to collapse both time and space while creating what Benjamin refers to as "experience," where "certain contents of the individual past [...] combine with material of the collective past" (*Illuminations* 159), as well as with the unavoidable present, Marlow is willing to share much of his experience only with other white, European men like himself. As Marianna Torgovnick suggests, the original teller of Kurtz's tale believes that women and natives remain unable to understand the implications of imperialism in the Congo: "For Marlow, women (like primitives) exist outside the circle of rational thought and do not struggle, as he does, for comprehension; moreover, they must actively be prevented from doing so" (154). The "truth," it seems, "can be experienced only in the masculine sphere" (Smith 178), where European women are defined as passive subjects in need of masculine protection, while the faceless natives (particularly females) are seen as elements of wild nature that can only benefit from the firm, paternal hand of the colonialist.

Hand in hand, we near the row of unpainted  
cinderblock rooms behind the smaller bar  
and a football-player passenger  
whom I had told about this place the night before  
suddenly taps me on the shoulder.  
"I had 2 qts. of beer," he brags, grinning,  
as he passes a joint to a friend,  
"a bottle of rum, and two different girls  
for fifteen dollars U.S."

For Benjamin, "Thinking [historically] involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a

shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (*Illuminations* 262-263). In order to harness the radical potential of the monad, an historically-charged, dialectical image of both past and present, collective and individual, the historian must grasp the past within the context of "the now," "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own threatens to disappear irretrievably" (*Illuminations* 255).

At the beach an old man from the cruise ship  
was found floating face down in the ocean.  
I pounded his hard white chest  
during the quiet boat ride back.  
"Doesn't seem to be much hope," said  
the passenger/physician. "Besides,  
we're only required to try to revive him  
for thirty minutes but you're representing the ship  
so it's your call, but he doesn't have a chance."  
"You know better than me," I said.

The moment of death can provide—for the observer—an especially opportune time to seize hold of "an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (*Illuminations* 255). In his essay "The Storyteller" Benjamin discusses the dying man during that arresting moment before the final breath: "suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority," Benjamin believes, "is at the very source of the story" (*Illuminations* 94).

Kurtz's authoritative final expression and words—"The horror! The horror!"—continue to disturb Marlow because those unforgettable moments implicate not only the speaker, but also the West, its (masculine) history and, importantly, Marlow himself. In another, somewhat more modern moment aboard a ship, which could be, perhaps, part of Marlow's time, of today, of the days of the middle passage, my cabin steward, the veil of cheerful servitude momentarily lifted to reveal another (yet related) sort of horror, stands pleading with me for help. Confronted with the threshold not of his own death experience, but with that of his young daughter (whom he may never see again for a variety of reasons, including his distant job in a globalized economy that offers distressingly low pay and no medical insurance), Larouche—through his fear-stricken words and countenance—seems to implicate not only cruise ships and the unfettered free market of gross exploitation, but also the person from whom he requests the money that could pay for the trip back home. Perhaps the horrific fear expressed in Larouche's face continues to nag me

because it pushes to the fore the always present yet (for the tourist) rarely discernible unease generated by the irreconcilable tensions at the center of a relationship between people like myself, an upper crew member and, simultaneously, a tourist, and those who serve. While most tourists ignore or at least attempt to conceal the inherent conflict between the vacationer and the native who serves, Fanon, a Martinican, believes that such tensions remain ultimately unmistakable because of the relentlessly visible racial, economic, and cultural differences that seem to naturalize (for tourists) the roles of servers (poor people of color) and served (usually white and at least middle class).

“I talked the guy down,” gushes  
the football player’s friend  
as he holds up for my inspection  
a 3-foot-tall painted wood carving  
of an old man with a dog.  
“from 65 dollars to 13 bucks.”

As suggested earlier, however, the Disneyfied commodification of experience, through the creation of tightly controlled environments, such as private island destinations, Universal Citywalk, shopping malls, and shopper-friendly mega-cruise ships which are often referred to as floating malls, helps to make conflict acceptable by creating the illusion that it no longer exists. This market-driven homogeneity, so central to the globalization process, is also a primary component of consumption, which works most effectively when process, labor and dirt, the negative, remain carefully concealed so as not to disturb the holiday of the market. As Fredric Jameson points out, people inhabiting a “society of abundance” find it increasingly difficult to see beyond the harmonious surface of commodification. (And what better place to examine abundance than on a cruise ship, with its endless meals, snacks, midnight buffets, shopping, and non-stop gambling.) Citizens of the society of abundance have

lost the experience of the negative in all its forms [...] (and) it is the negative alone which is ultimately fructifying from a cultural as well as an individual point of view [...] (since) a genuinely human existence can only be achieved through the process of negation. (Jameson 108)

Larouche’s urgent, terror-filled pleading remains troubling because it offers a glimpse of genuine (and troubling) human existence within the dehumanized touristic host in spite of the suffocating, all-pervasive commodification which shapes the way that we experience touristic relationships.

The old man in the bathing suit  
laid back in the white wooden boat  
eyes closed, saliva sliding down

the side of his weathered face;  
no friends or family to hold his hand;  
his death moved no one, not even me.

While sitting in Starbucks contemplating ways to make Caribbean tourism palatable for intellectual consumption, my vision lands upon that ubiquitous green and white Starbucks emblem in the coffee shop's window, on my cardboard cup, on every other cup, recycled napkins, bags of coffee beans, caps, shirts, all of which are for sale in a shop named after Ahab's first mate, Starbuck, who—though not an authority on the Caribbean—had deep knowledge of another warm-water sea, the South Pacific. And Starbuck understood the ocean's use value, how it could actually benefit humankind, from his years aboard whaling vessels seeking oil that would light the world. Although the retail-chain Starbucks' primary product is coffee and not whale oil, the sea may be just as important to this coffee emporium as it was to the crew of a whaling ship since the sea remains the primary avenue of transportation for Starbucks' coffee beans, as well as for so many other things. But today the use value of the sea seems to have disappeared.<sup>2</sup> Rather than viewing the sea as having a practical purpose, we now perceive it only as something to contemplate, to consume, as part of a holiday tour package.

In the mid-nineteenth century Marx perceptively observed that as capitalism advances, exchange value eclipses use value by foregrounding what things are worth monetarily while effacing any signs of the negative, such as the exploited labor which makes the things. With the magical disappearance of use value, the gleaming, impenetrable surface of the commodity—wiped clean of conflict and tension—dominates, indeed dictates, everyday experience. Increasingly, Caribbean islands seem—from the tourist's point of view—to be homogeneous non-places filled with whatever dream the tourist wishes to assert while avoiding thinking of related unpleasanties, such as the plight of the exploited crew members who serve them, "good nobodies" often paid little more than seventy cents an hour in a workplace environment rivaling Third-World sweatshops.

Cruise ships, like Starbucks, seem to offer tremendous promise though, like the commodity form itself of which they're an ideal example. Actually, Starbucks and cruise ships may have more in common than one would think. A poster hanging in Starbucks coffeehouses throughout North America features images of

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<sup>2</sup> As Michael Taussig points out, "The conduct of life today is completely and utterly dependent on the sea and the ships it bears, yet nothing is more invisible" (251).

Starbucks coffee-bean labels, or perhaps they're simulations of labels. (I've never seen these labels on bags of Starbucks coffee.) The various pictures of labels on the poster proclaim the beans' origins—Guatemala, Antigua, Kenya, Panama, Ethiopia—and they include images of the exotic: elephants, jaguars, tigers, indigenous art. Emphasizing the consumer's ability to go global without traveling any farther than the neighborhood Starbucks, the poster proudly proclaims: "Coffees gathered from a world of travels. So you can enjoy here or at home." Is this a perk of the new globalized economy? A throwback to good old colonialism, of the type that Conrad himself participated in as a ship's captain? Perhaps we've been globalized all along, at least since Columbus discovered that the world wasn't flat. In emphasizing that the consumer can enjoy coffee from around the world at home or at Starbucks, all of which are reassuringly the same, Starbucks, like the cruise ship industry and other forces of globalization, sells the exotic yet familiar, homogeneous yet different (but not *too* different) within a carefully constructed environment that seems to be all surface.

Examining cultural artifacts from Paris of the mid-nineteenth century, a period during which the illusory magic of commodification was becoming a central aspect of everyday life, Benjamin—in his ongoing excavation of modernity—quotes from a poem by Baudelaire which suggests the individual's new relationship to the world:

And from on high I contemplate the globe in its roundness;  
No longer do I look there for the shelter of a hut.

—Baudelaire, "Le Gout du neant" (qtd. in *Illuminations* 185)

The speaker remains disinterested in considering the globe's practical aspects, ways in which the earth can meet the real material needs of society. The world has become a pleasantly round sphere to be contemplated in itself, without any connection to the people who inhabit it.

The onset of modern capitalism, followed half a century or so later by motorized cruise liners, offers the promise of abundance, thereby numbing the shocks created by gross inequality, unjust labor practices, the necessity of finding shelter in a hut. And this abundance continues to hinder us from responding, in ways that are human, to the desperation of others in which we are all complicit. Although it has become increasingly difficult to perceive use value's intermittent, flash-like appearances—which, as Michael Taussig observes, are instrumental in animating the commodity fetish<sup>3</sup>—the

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<sup>3</sup> See the headnote from Taussig on page 7.

foregrounding of use value can abet social struggle by helping to display the human realities of commodification. The negative, so central to commodification yet elusive to the tourist within everyday touristic experience, within the Caribbean cruise, the cruise through the Congo, can become momentarily visible when historically-charged memories unfurl themselves, although our failure to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (*Illuminations* 255) and act on it negates the flash’s sudden negation of commodification and thus allows the commodity’s trickery to continue.

As I lay back on a well-worn mattress,  
elbows propping me up,  
she spits out a mouthful of white cum  
which becomes suspended  
in the plastic basin of water  
on the dirt floored, two dollar  
cinderblock shack with no windows  
and a curtain door.

The North American tourist seeking a pleasurable vacation in the Caribbean finds solace in the globalized, commodified homogeneity of his destination, and in the difference that he *feels* (but refuses to know) in the magical, mesmerizing flashes of use value that are concealed by exchange value as rapidly as they appear. At all costs, of course, the Caribbean tourist must repress the negative. Ideally, the negative never rears its ugly, unsettling face during one’s holiday in the sun. But if in spite of one’s best efforts the face of the negative just won’t go away, then one must try to create the illusion, as Marlow does for the Intended, that the face is something other than what it is. Grasping the flash of recognition is too disturbing, although there’s nothing wrong with contemplating the native hut, as long as the hut remains untarnished by the necessity of local inhabitants.

Sammy Davis Jr. swallows pins  
and concludes his act  
by exhaling the white thread  
from his left nostril.

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## ANTICIPATING THE ENGLISH REFORMATION IN POPULAR CULTURE: SIMON FISH'S *A SUPPLICATION FOR THE BEGGARS*<sup>1</sup>

Sarbani Chaudhury

The split in Christendom across Europe in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century made administration and people alike, acutely aware of the existence of multiple religious, ideological and social alternatives. Issues related to religion and governance came in for widespread re-examination within national contexts as well. England, which officially adopted Protestantism only in 1534, was particularly aware of the political aspect of the Reformation because of the 'King's Great Matter'—marriage and succession. While lay and ecclesiastical authorities were concerned with Henry's divorce proceedings, preaching prelates and burgeoning religious sects introduced the commons to the socio-economic potential of religious reconstruction. The conscious choice of the term 'commonwealth' over the more familiar 'kingdom' by several early reformers shows a growing awareness of the state as "an artifice that had been created by a collective agency, rather than a natural hierarchy embodied in the person of the monarch" (Norbrook 49). Within a decade, Henry VIII would himself acknowledge the crucial role of plebeian agency in nation building by arranging for wide-scale dissemination of his new creed of political absolutism through commissioned propaganda.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An early draft of this paper was presented at the international conference "Identity And Cultural Exchange 600-1600: Contact, Travel And Trade" organised by the Department of English, University of Birmingham and the Canterbury Centre for Medieval and Tudor Studies, University of Kent at Canterbury, 5-7 April 2002. I am indebted to Prof. Andrew Butcher, Prof. Maureen Bell and Prof. Robert Swanson for their helpful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Morison was the most prolific writer of such works - *A Lamentation in whiche Is Shewed what Ruyne and Destruction Cometh of Seditious Rebellyon* (London, 1536); *A Remedy for Sedition wherein Are Conteyned Many Thynges, Concernynge the True and Loyall Obeysance, that Commôs Owe unto their Prince and Soveraygne Lorde the Kyng* (London, 1536); *An Exhortation to Styrr* all Englyshemen

Its dual objective was the discrediting of papal supremacy, and the projection of new religious institutions and practices geared towards the sectional interests of the new monarchy as naturally endorsed, inevitable and universally applicable. However, both commissioned and non-commissioned 'counsel literature' (as this kind of writing is called), deployed the manipulative powers of ideological persuasion rather than crude coercion to convince the ruler and the ruled of their complementary role in structuring a new national identity.

Literature, says Hans Robert Jauss, "not only preserves actual experiences, but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behaviour for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths to future experience" (Jauss 41). Simon Fish's pre-reformation tract, *A Supplication for the Beggars* (c.1528/29), seems to corroborate these authenticating and futuristic claims on behalf of literature by anticipating the major aspects of post-Reformation religious counsel—its simultaneous iconoclasm and mythmaking vis-à-vis the Catholic and the Anglican Church and the paradoxical belief in a 'common wealth' engineered by absolute monarchy (Fish 31-39). Supplementing documentary evidence in a notoriously 'imaginative' manner, the tract exemplifies the overwhelming social preoccupation of religious polemics, the irreducible plurality of approaches converging on the same goal, and the continuity of response to certain aspects of religion and society among the English people outside the official periphery without which Henry VIII could not have effected his reform.

Seymour Baker House considers Fish's tract a pioneering effort on three counts—it is one of the earliest unofficial anti-clerical propaganda of the Tudor times appealing to the king for redress; it displays an as yet rudimentary, crude but nevertheless historiographical aptitude in interrogating clerical oppression; and its stylistic features identify it as an attempt to reach beyond the traditional reading elite to a much wider, popular audience (House 195-96). It is also unique in its emphasis on the persuasive power of statistics despite the spurious data provided and in its extremely conscious, almost Machiavellian attempts at manipulating reader-response: firstly by mispresenting religio-political contingencies and secondly through the spectacular manner of circulating the tract.

New subjects require new models of expression. The lowly style and target audience, the seemingly spontaneous overflow of

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*to the Defence of theyr Countreye* (London, 1539); *An Inuective ayenste the Great and Detestable Vice, Treason* (London, 1539).

redundant metaphors and the unrestrained vituperative excesses should not mislead us into regarding Fish's *Supplication* as an amateurish, haphazard production. Fish's intentional bigotry obscures from view the generic complexity of his work which assimilates the features of medieval complaints and satires and simultaneously straddles the bridge across two major prose forms of the early Renaissance: counsel literature and popular moralistic pamphlets. The one-point programme of clergy-baiting and the strident note of outrage that indiscriminately attribute almost all cardinal sins to the churchmen are reminiscent of the generalising tendency of medieval complaints, which frequently targeted the ecclesiasts as the major professional group deviating from its prescribed functions.<sup>3</sup> The citation of Bishop Langton's involvement in the conspiracy against King John and the persecution of Richard Hunne by Allen and Horsey however, inject concrete particularities of the satire into the impersonal and conceptual framework of the complaint (Fish 33, 35, 37-38). The delightfully perverse reconstruction of the topical scenario in colloquial prose on the other hand, partakes of the emerging, if yet disreputable form of the popular pamphlets that were to flood the market during Elizabeth's reign. Robert Copland's distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor or Nashe's amplification of the lewdness of "Lady London" where no sooner "a wench [...] creeps out of the shell but she is of the *religion*" are prefigured in the charge of rampant licentiousness levelled at the clerics by Fish.<sup>4</sup> Like the Elizabethan pamphleteers who exploit every pretext for expanding upon titillating details in the name of upholding sexual morality, Fish is not averse to incorporating such sensational reportage in his 'religious' exhortation. About one and a half pages out of eight are given over to graphic enumeration of the lustful activities of the churchmen who not only boast of their "incontinency" but drive women to prostitution with the lure of lucre: "Who is she that will set her hands to work to get three pence a day, and may have at least twenty pence a day to sleep an hour with a friar, a monk, or a priest?" (Fish 34-35)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See John D. Peter, *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) 4-13, for the distinctive characteristics of the two genres.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Copland, "The Highway to the Spital-House," (1535-36) 1-25; Thomas Nashe, "Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Devil" 23-88, especially 67, emphasis added; Fish 34-35. Copland also provides a sumptuous list of "Lechers, fornicators [...] harlots, bawds [...] bolsterers [...] enticers and ravishers" in his work (19).

<sup>5</sup> That the 'labour of flesh' remained a more profitable option than any other kind of work for centuries to come is testified by George Bernard Shaw in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893). Shaw, of course, indicts the capitalist society for this state of affairs.

But it is in anticipating post-Reformation counsel literature that Fish voices the anxieties of an emerging nation state and almost 'fore-casts' the specific political and jurisdictional aspirations of the Henrician regime. The highly dramatic 'premier' of the *Supplication* docketed the calculated media-consciousness that permeates the text, either in the formulation of the content or in the adopted rhetorical strategies—it was virtually air-dropped on 2 February 1529 during the Candlemas Day procession at Westminster in the presence of Henry VIII (Fox, *Thomas More* 180). According to Fox, Fish takes full advantage of the opportune convergence of "three separate interests into a single, mutually convenient focus"—lay anti-clericalism; the heretics' attempts to overthrow the repressive authority of the church, and Henry's growing impatience with a protracted divorce (Fox, *Thomas More* 172). More anti-clerical than heretical, the tract's vehemence against priests perhaps owed more to its author's proto-Protestantism than to popular resentment against monastic orders.<sup>6</sup> If the conflicting assumptions of the Reformation historians are any indication, the relationship between the clergy and the populace in the first quarter of the sixteenth century was extremely complex and contrary.<sup>7</sup> The thousand odd parishes in the diocese of Lincoln, for example, reported only twenty-five cases of priests lapsing from celibacy between 1514 and 1521 thus belying Fish's accusation of sexual depravity but there were increasing complaints of absenteeism and plurality especially during the period 1518-1519 (Haigh, *English Reformations* 42; Thompson xvii-ciii; Jessop xiv-xlv). Responding to pressures within and without, even the Church showed a willingness and capacity to reform by insisting upon effective ministry through more regular and stringent visitations (Swanson 865). However, as Swanson argues, both lay complaints and ecclesiastical reprimands

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<sup>6</sup> The only heretical utterance in the pamphlet is the denial of purgatory but all the major Protestant positions are incorporated: the insistence on a vernacular Bible, especially the New Testament, objection to papal supremacy and the related power to excommunicate, grant pardon, exact tithes, mortuaries or any other fine. The existing provision of praemunire and the 1279 statute of mortmain, the traditionally endorsed means of checking clerical encroachment, are cited as authentic proofs of the limited sphere of papal jurisdiction (Fish 31, 35-37).

<sup>7</sup> Citing the paucity of official complaints against the priests, Haigh argues that anti-clericalism was less a prelude to Protestantism in England than its consequence. Dickens, debating this claim is nevertheless forced to concede that "Anti-clericalism has become an unduly capacious word." Christopher Haigh, "Anticlericalism and the English Reformation" and *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors*; A. G. Dickens, "The Shape of Anticlericalism and the English Reformation" 379-410, esp. 379. For a more balanced assessment of the Catholic and Protestant influences at work in England on the eve of the Reformation, see Edwards 143-50.

submit to a shared notion of the prescribed function of the clergy in identifying the transgressors, and in this sense, are pro- rather than anti-clerical (Swanson 861, 868). Fish subscribes to the prevalent perception of the 'ideal' cleric in denouncing those who overstep its defining limits. But he is the first to demand full-scale abolition instead of piecemeal replacement by highlighting the paradoxical power equation between the priest and the people: the clergy are the hirelings of their patrons and dependent on the parishioners for their livelihood yet their ecclesiastical functions give them absolute dominion over their employers. They have the "goodliest" and the largest "territories," tithes from all material products and wages, fees for every legal and religious occasion (Fish 31). These recurrent images of the parasite lording over the temporal and material possessions of the host denote a modern sensibility pragmatic enough to supplement moral exhortation with worldly leverage.

Philip Edwards, noting that there was "not enough of a change in public opinion" to warrant the Reformation in the 1530s, concludes that it needed "a major move at the top to make the English change their religious habits" and that this came through the king's "Great Matter" (Edwards 150). Despairing of being granted an annulment of marriage by Pope Clement VII who was virtually the prisoner of Queen Catherine's nephew since 1527, Henry had started exploring more drastic options by 1529.<sup>8</sup> Efforts were underway to institute Wolsey as the next pope, but there was also a "think-tank" of Protestant-minded clergy at the court from 1529 devising "new concepts that Henry could use" (Edwards 110, 155-56). Their collective output *Collectanea*, completed in September 1530, provided the theoretical framework for the break with Rome including royal supremacy and imperial authority. Fish's tract, preceding the compilation of *Collectanea* by at least a year, deploys the bait of absolute monarchy even before either Henry or his government had formed any concrete opinion in the matter. The Preamble to the *Act in Restraint of Appeals* (March 1533) cites, rather fancifully, "divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles" to officially claim for the first time "the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown" for England (cited in Edwards 158). Fish too, summons precedence as pretext to urge a revolutionary assertion of royal and national autonomy. Henry VIII is reminded overtly of his contrast with "the kings of ancient Britons"

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<sup>8</sup> Fish's warning must have seemed ominously pertinent to Henry (who was acquainted with the tract), especially after the legatine court, convened in June 1529 under Cardinal Campeggio, failed to grant the king's divorce on the English soil and referred the matter to Rome (Edwards 151-52).

who had “ever stood free;” of the inability of his subjects to “help their prince” because of heavy ecclesiastical taxes and the ensuing recalcitrance of his subjects to make further payments on royal demand (Fish 32-33). For a king who had drained the exchequer in pursuit of elusive military glory, especially a French conquest, there is not only the citation of a French-papal nexus against the “righteous” King John, but also the covert mention of the difficulty of imposing war-taxes on an already overtaxed people and of the wealth ready for the taking once papal supremacy is abolished (Fish 32-33).

Fish’s ‘religious’ polemic astutely comprehends the primacy of temporal and jurisdictional aspects in the tussle between the Church and the state. Influenced particularly by Tyndale’s *The Obedience of a Christian Man* and *How Christian Rulers Ought to Govern*, he plays off the authority of the church against the monarch to recruit Henry for his programme. The vanity of the disgruntled ruler is goaded into commitment by alternate flattery and taunts. Henry, the “sovereign lord” is powerless to check social abuse for, as Fish asks the king, “are they [i.e. the clergy] not stronger in your *own* parliament house than yourself?” (Fish 35, emphasis added). The material attractions of wealth and dominion combine with the psychological fear of being proved impotent to elicit an active response from the king. Although no one could brazenly admit that a schism was required to facilitate Henry’s divorce, the situation allowed, at least temporarily, a mutually beneficial compact between royal self-interest and ideological championship of the Protestant cause. Unlike later religious and secular counsellors who evinced a deeper commitment to the notion of the shared responsibility of the king and the subject in nation-building, Fish foregrounds legislative and fiscal benefits accruing to the monarch through the creation of a ‘commonwealth’.<sup>9</sup> Understandably, this promoter of the ‘commonwealth’ is less interested in domestic improvement than in the territorial and political sovereignty of England which is in turn related to the paying power of the subjects. Fish’s fawning concern over foreign invasion simultaneously mocks Henry’s inability to draw enough revenue from his

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Crowley, for example, reminds the king that all are “brothers of one father & membres of one body.” Similarly, Thomas Lever’s admonition to the lowly subjects, “Medle not with other men’s duties, for if ye do surely ye shal fynd no remedy,” follows closely on the heels of his warning to the king and the parliament: “If you suffre theeues, murtherers, and wolves, to take their plesures amongst Gods lambes [...] God wyll not long suffer you to be ye hed-shepherds, and gouernors and feders of his lambes.” Robert Crowley, “An Informacion and Peticion Agaynst the Oppressours of the Pore Commons of this Realme” (1548) 159; Thomas Lever, “The Sermon before King Edward VI, Mid-Lent Sunday” (16 March 1550) 86.

people and directs his attention to the contrasting success of the clergy in this matter: "Is it any marvel that the taxes, fifteens, and subsidies that Your Grace *most tenderly, of great compassion, hath taken* among your people to *defend them* from the threatened ruin of *their commonwealth* have been so slothfully, yea painfully, levied?" (Fish 32, emphasis added).

Substantial changes could not be effected without altering the power equation between the ecclesiastical and the lay courts. The interrelation between legislative and spiritual control and the servile capitulation of law to religious blackmail is highlighted through the issue of excommunication. Although elaborate directives delineated the conditions under which charges of heresy could be brought and a person excommunicated, Fish cites the exceptional case of Richard Hunne to argue that it was subject to personal whims, malice and the instinct of self-preservation. Lay prosecutors could be pre-empted or find the tables turned against them with clerical offenders playing judge over their spiritual lapses (Fish 35-36, 37-38). Thus the churchmen "translate all rule, power, lordship, authority, obedience, and dignity of Your Grace unto them" harangues Fish, evoking fears of emasculation and impoverishment in a king beleaguered by problems of heirship, empty coffers and claustrophobic papal authority (Fish 33). The issue is one of contending control over national resources—both people and money—and can only be resolved by establishing the unchallenged supremacy of a single governor in all spheres. Fish's solution is to offer a third dimension to the twin aspects of the monarchical figure: to 'body natural' and 'body politic' can now be added—if one may coin the phrase—'body religion' that would enhance royal levies and legitimise usurpation of clerical property under the guise of extending jurisdiction over the subjects' spiritual well-being. Theoretically the bodies were to remain distinct but in reality, as Ives observes, about the body natural and body politic: "There was little to encourage Tudor rulers to differentiate between the two and definitely not Henry VIII, a powerful, complex and contradictory personality who never doubted for a moment that *l'état c'est moi*" (Ives 13).

Professedly addressing the king, Fish nevertheless has a dual audience in mind: the king and the people. His conscious preference for the term 'commonwealth' over the more familiar 'kingdom' while speaking of national integrity and public welfare and the identification of the parliament as a regulating agency is symptomatic of the growing awareness that the state is "an artifice that had been created by a collective agency, rather than a natural hierarchy

embodied in the person of the monarch” (Fish 32, 34, 35; Norbrook 49). All current anxieties are invoked to impress on the masses the urgency of his proposal. In an era of apocalyptic social and economic changes that inevitably intensified the demand for spiritual sustenance, Fish exploits to the hilt the popular feeling of being let down by a thoroughly secularised and materialistic clergy. This is further iterated by a set of spurious statistics that nevertheless convince the readers because of their apparent exactness: the clerics have amassed £43,333 6s 8d through “grievous and painful exactions” and have usurped more than “half of the whole substance of the realm” (Fish 32, 33).<sup>10</sup> Their ratio in relation to male inhabitants of the country is 1:100 and in relation to the laity in general, 1:400 (Fish 33)! Apart from recognising the parliament as the future source of empowerment without whose support neither the king nor the ecclesiastics would be able to operate, Fish has also “discovered the power of statistics to support lies” (Marius 353).

As with the king, he agitates patriotic sentiments in the public by fostering the fear of foreign invasion and internal betrayal against the backdrop of emerging nationalism and cites historical evidence, however misinterpreted, to strengthen his assertions (Fish 32-33). One predictable site of territorial aggression is the woman in the domestic sphere. Fish evokes deep-seated male apprehensions of sexual encroachment and accompanying loss of “goods” to requisition the populace in the massive project of restructuring national and religious hierarchy: these “counterfeit-holy, and idle beggars” meddle “with every *man’s* wife, every *man’s* daughter, and every *man’s* maid,” and draw “*men’s* wives to such incontinency” that they “spend away their *husbands’* goods” and finally “run away from their husbands” (Fish 31, 34, emphasis added). The clergy also “corrupt the whole generation of mankind” through their promiscuity—they not only “catch the pox of one woman and bear them to another” but “their bastards [...] inherit the possessions of every man [...] [and] put the right-begotted children clear beside their inheritance in subversion of all estates” (Fish 34). The ‘*common* wealth’ of men— kings and subjects alike—is indeed jeopardised by these “sturdy loobies” who, Fish suggests, should be given wives/goods “of their own” so that “matrimony be much better kept” (Fish 39). The king’s problems being primarily matrimonial, it subtly underscores the complementary location of the monarch and his people as dupes of clerical

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas More, in his counter-attack in *The Supplications of the Souls* points out the inaccuracy of Fish’s statement: the figure of fifty-two thousand parish churches is reached by treating every hamlet as a parish (Hebel *et al.* 794-95).



machinations and the consequent necessity of joint retaliation.

The materialistic orientation of Fish's 'religious' agenda, his emphasis on corroborative proof, statistical or historical, anticipates counsel literature of the next generation but negotiates the emergent paradoxes more successfully. The dilemma of having to establish royal absolutism by extending the rights of the people and the difficulty of containing both within the single construct of the commonwealth generated acute tension within the post-Reformation polemical fabric. As the monarch was considered both the author of the commonwealth and a part of it, 'kingship' itself became an ambiguous site of untrammelled power circumscribed by its obligation to the principles of a 'very and true commonweal'. The inclusive rhetoric of the 'commonwealth', a strategic ploy to align the kings and the commons against the Catholic Church moreover, validated itself as a reversion to true, orthodox Christianity upholding the notion of the brotherhood of all true Christians. Consequently, a levelling tendency that focused largely upon the plight of the marginalised and urged economic parity and alleviation of poverty was basic to 'commonwealth' discourse. Fish, supplicating for the beggars, can be viewed as an ultra-radical championing the cause of the extreme periphery.

But the "beggars proctor"—as More labels him in his *Supplication of Souls*—deploys his advocacy to much more devious effect (quoted in Hebel *et al.* 794-95). He draws upon prevalent perceptions of social stratification not only to distinguish between the 'people' and the 'poor' but also to demarcate the infirm and the destitute from their able-bodied counterparts. A self-appointed spokesperson of the former, he presents them as objects of charity and labels the latter group as a highly disruptive force threatening the established order. This abides by the Henrician government's identification of the two categories of paupers: the impotent and the sturdy. The growing number of freewheeling poor taking recourse to legitimate *and* illicit means of subsistence however, included various sub-segments. Listed as vagabonds in *22 Hen. VIII c.12* (1531) are such divergent persons as beggars, university scholars, mariners, proctors, pardoners and diviners (Williams 1027). Public opinion therefore, regarded all paupers as subversive: they endangered the social infrastructure through their wilful non-participation in the activities of the commonwealth. Substantial rise in the number of parochial relief seekers and the unprecedented increase and spatial mobility of the 'masterless men' accentuated fears of a counter-commonwealth that could forcibly extend the notion of spiritual equality to the field of material possessions as well. Fish's patronage of the

social and economic outcasts is merely a ruse to accentuate the “fear of the mob” which formed “a basic component of the psychological make-up of the middle and upper classes of Tudor England” (Powell and Cook 41-42). His redressive measures are more akin to terror tactics. The threat of religious topsy-turvydom is not allayed but counter-balanced by a parallel threat to the social order, namely, the growing discontent of the “daily bedemen, the wretched hideous monsters [...] the foul, unhappy sort of lepers and other sore people, needy, impotent blind, lame, and sick” whose alms are appropriated by the sturdy beggars, that is, priests ranging from bishops to summoners (Fish 31). The deeply ingrained terror of the tramp violating the boundaries of personal ownership and trespassing upon sexual, material or monetary property is deliberately whipped up to galvanise people into action: tolerance of clerical malpractice might lead to social upheaval of a more radical kind. Moreover, order will be restored through the dismantling of and not reversion to an orthodox hierarchy. The prime mover effecting this will be the monarch, the traditional upholder of status quo. The revolutionary, or from a different point of view, the disruptive effect of absolutism is grasped early by this promoter of religious reform.

The scurrilous, ranting rhetoric of *A Supplication for the Beggars* is not only instrumental in persuading the public, it matches the violence embedded in the remedial proposals. Graphic imagery through hyphenated word phrases such as “counterfeit-holy,” “ocean-seaful of evils” and clashing sets of antithetical metaphors—“ravenous wolves [...] devouring the flock,” “a charitable sort of holy men” that “interdict an whole realm,” a “blessed sort” of “bloodsuckers,” the “grievous shipwreck of the common wealth” that was previously “so prosperous”—add to this impression (Fish 31, 34, 33, 35). “Redundant amplification,” designated by Fox as one of Fish’s “favourite syntactical figures” and effected either through rhetorical questions, exclamatory sentences or an onrush of descriptive words can be viewed as a native, popular and perhaps inverted version of Erasmus’s celebrated *Copia* that aims to sweep the reader off his feet through sheer multiplicity of examples (Fox, *Literature and Politics* 214).<sup>11</sup> Henry VIII, for instance, is incited through a series of queries on the relative ascendancy of the king and the clergy:

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<sup>11</sup> Fox provides an extremely competent analysis of Fish’s style but unfortunately does not elaborate upon his humanist antecedents. See Fox, *Literature and Politics in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII* 214-16.

What remedy? Make laws against them? [...] Are they not stronger in your own parliament house than yourself? What a number of bishops, abbots, and priors are lords of your parliament? Are not all the learned men in your realm in fee with them [...]? What law can be made against them that may be available? (Fish 35)

Exclamatory sentences are likewise intended to rouse jingoistic sentiments: “Oh case most horrible that ever so noble a king, realm, and succession should thus be made to stoop to such a sort of bloodsuckers!” (Fish 33-34). Descriptive lists abound. The clergy are amplified as “bishops, abbots, priors, deacons, archdeacons, suffragans, priests, monks, canons, friars, pardoners and summoners;” their appropriated wealth derives from tithes levied on “corn, meadow, pasture, grass, wool, colts, calves, lambs, pigs, geese, and chickens” and their crimes include “murder [...] ravishment [...] robbery, trespass, mayhem, debt, or any other offense” (Fish 31, 35). The repetitive cadence of “then shall” which initiates every sentence in the concluding passage translates proposed resolutions into prophetic utterances awaiting immediate fulfilment:

Then shall these great yearly exactions cease [...] Then shall you have full obedience of your people. Then shall the idle people be set to work. Then shall matrimony be much better kept. Then shall the generation of your people be increased. Then shall your commons increase in riches. Then shall the Gospel be preached. Then shall none beg our alms from us [...] Then shall we daily pray to God for your most noble estate long to endure. (Fish 39)

The absence of analysis is not a register of the writer’s crude mental capabilities but a deliberate opting out by an author who aims to stir the emotions and instincts of his readers, not their rational faculties.

Fish’s polemical enterprise is an embryonic testimony of things to come and a bridge between medieval and modern sensibilities. The ideological fervour of religious reformers combines with a pragmatic appreciation of material attractions and a calculated highlighting of the same in his programme. Scurrilous vehemence and racy vigour anticipate the style of the Elizabethan pamphleteers. The castigation of idlers and the promotion of forced labour hark back to the anti-parasitic bias in primitive Christian communism and prefigure the Puritan insistence on ‘labour for living’. Dispensing social justice by appealing to the greed of the dispenser is indeed novel but the tracing of all evils—social, moral and economic—to clerical hegemony proves a satisfactory solution for several quarters. Fish’s tract is but a minuscule part of the massive re-organisation of human relations and power structures occurring in the Tudor era. The hitherto ‘included’ and ‘empowered’ clergy are peripheralised as the

threatening Other. Their unpatriotic behaviour is repeatedly emphasised as power equations shift gears. This diverts the readers' attention from the emerging acquisitive forces and the new perpetrators of inequality, provides material incentive to administrators for implementing social reform, and allows a populace stumped by unprecedented price hike a visible and plausible means of redress.<sup>12</sup> More important, it offers the real social and economic casualties of history, the spurious satisfaction of belonging to the well-ordered polity and an equally false sense of empowerment at the expense of the hitherto powerful. The tract thus effectively tackles the problem of maintaining social control while seeking popular endorsement for a change in the ruling caucus. However, the idea of social inversion implicit in the call for dismantling clerical hegemony could and did induce the lower orders to demand a transference of power actually beneficial to themselves, as the 1536 and 1549 rebellions testify. Even more subversive potential is embedded in the fictional framework of the diatribe. The narrative device of presenting the text as a humble supplication for the beggars which enables Henry "to consider himself as the protector of his people, and [...] to identify the enlargement of his regal sovereignty as an altruistic act," unravels quite explicitly the expert manner in which Fish comprehends and plays upon the psyche of the king (Fox, *Literature and Politics* 215). This obvious manipulative control of a mere subject over God's anointed denotes the growing confidence of the citizen participating in his nation's destiny and hints at a disturbingly unorthodox relationship between the ruler and the ruled.

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## ÉTICA Y ESTÉTICA DE LA COMPASIÓN EN MAYRA MONTERO: AGUACEROS *DISPERSOS*

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Para un buen amigo, Luis Alberto Pérez Martínez.

Justice: a kind of loving attention, an attitude of waiting, patiently, for the other to appear as he or she *is*. Anything more or less would be unjust: "Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest)."

—Teuber. "Simone Weill: Equality as Compassion."

En las últimas décadas, las actividades de la crítica cultural y de la teoría literaria han insistido en reconocer y dar voz al Otro, en traer a un primer plano las alteridades tradicionalmente suprimidas por prácticas culturales homogeneizantes, y en respetar la voz de esas otredades que nuestras respectivas modernidades han intentado controlar, suprimir, o silenciar, como respuesta y apoyo de nuestros respectivos procesos o proyectos de modernización. Igualmente, en los textos de la literatura Caribeña, la otredad, sus silencios y sus ausencias, han sido el objeto de estudio sistemático, de elucubración y especulación intelectual.

Aunque algunos críticos y estudiosos de la literatura latinoamericana y caribeña han revisado las limitaciones de los discursos que exploran dichas otredades, novelas más recientes, como las de Mayra Montero, han aportado críticamente al debate e insistido en la necesidad de escuchar atentamente y compasivamente las voces de las experiencias subalternas en la región caribeña.<sup>1</sup> Novelas como

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<sup>1</sup> Críticas como Mercedes López-Baralt han estudiado textos de Alejo Carpentier y de Levi-Strauss en el contexto de los discursos antropológicos de los narradores de principios y mediados del siglo XX. Igualmente, críticos como Roberto González Echevarría han revisado y reformulado los planteamientos de los escritores latinoamericanos del siglo XX que iban en busca de una mitología originaria capaz de expresar la propia otredad.

*La última noche que pasé contigo* (1991), *Del rojo de su sombra* (1992), *Tú la obscuridad* (1995), *Púrpura profundo* (2000) y una colección de algunas de sus columnas periodísticas publicadas para el *Nuevo Día* en Puerto Rico entre los años de 1993 y 1996, recogidas posteriormente en forma de libro y tituladas *Aguaceros dispersos* (1996), despiertan en el lector o en la lectora un interés por sondear las emociones fuertes y personales de sus personajes y estimulan a desarrollar una perspectiva que invita a asumir una posición de lectura que le permita ver a través de los ojos del otro, a compartir sus miserias, sus ansias, el dolor ajeno y su felicidad.

Los textos de Mayra Montero, por su invitación a esta mirada y de posesionarse de las experiencias ajenas, recuerdan la invocación y el proceso de posesión que experimenta el creyente de las prácticas caribeñas y sincréticas del vudú.<sup>2</sup> En estas prácticas colectivas el espíritu proveniente del cielo *monta* a su caballo terrenal (un hombre o una mujer iniciados en el culto) y habla a través de él o de ella para el beneficio del mismo y de la colectividad a la cual se dirige. Esta práctica, tanto cultural como textual, coincide en el campo de la ética con la noción de compasión. En el sincretismo religioso afro-cubano algunas de las deidades, como Orúnla, tienen la capacidad y el talento de ver el futuro y usualmente representan arquetípicamente a aquellas personas en una búsqueda continua de conocimiento. Orúnla y sus hijos, por su curiosidad, se encuentran fascinados por el universo y siempre están intentando develar los misterios que éste oculta. Sus hijos, de acuerdo a Migene González-Wippler, son sabios, saben pasar juicio sobre la conducta humana y son naturalmente visionarios. En la tradición cristiana, Orúnla coincide con San Francisco de Assisi, quien es caracterizado por su generosidad, amor incondicional y compasión hacia todos los seres vivos. En otras prácticas religiosas, como en la filosofía budista, la compasión es encarnada en la imagen de una deidad conocida como *Avalokitesvara*, descrita como una divinidad que tiene mil brazos y mil ojos. Siguiendo su impulso de compasión, igual que Orúnla, con sus mil ojos ella ve las necesidades de todos los que sufren y con sus mil brazos los toca para aliviar su sufrimiento.<sup>3</sup> Igual que estas divinidades, los textos de la escritora cubano-

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<sup>2</sup> En otro estudio, no publicado hasta este momento, titulado "El Caribe en posesión o el Caribe montado en *Del rojo de su sombra*" estudio la conexión entre la posesión espiritual y el proceso de lectura.

<sup>3</sup> No es fortuito que en este ensayo se utilicen conceptos como el de la compasión relacionado con filosofías asiáticas como el budismo. Novelas de Mayra Montero, tales como *Tú la obscuridad*, basan parte de su armazón teórica en el figuras mitológicas de la India, como Ganesha. Lo que indica un reconocimiento por parte



puertorriqueña, Mayra Montero, nos ofrecen mil ojos a través de los cuales metafóricamente se nos invita a ver el mundo, nos conmina a cambiar de perspectiva, a estudiar lo que nos rodea usando las experiencias del otro o de la otra.

En este ensayo se propone una lectura de los textos de Mayra Montero como basados en una *ética de la compasión*, como una actitud asumida ante lo leído, y como resultado de un proyecto estético-literario, generado y generante de dicha actitud o posición ética. Ética en cuanto respuesta moral derivada del aprendizaje de formas de vidas ajenas y estética en cuanto a producto literario que se relaciona con el efecto producido por su ética. Para poder hacer concreta esta propuesta, este estudio ancla sus premisas y ejemplos en las columnas o artículos periodísticos recogidos en *Aguaceros dispersos* por tener éstas un apelativo y alcance inmediato y directo al lector promedio, y porque textos de tal brevedad pueden ser indicio de la efectividad e intensidad de su empresa o proyecto literario.

Tanto en la santería como en el budismo y otras prácticas u otras filosofías religiosas la compasión es definida como la habilidad para sentir con la otra persona. Este último punto resulta de interés para este análisis porque es precisamente en la posibilidad de *sentir con y como los otros* donde el tema de la compasión adquiere dimensiones o posibilidades literarias, o donde la literatura y la estética de Mayra Montero se acercan a dicho concepto. Adrian M.S. Piper, en su ensayo "Impartiality, Compassion, and Modal Imagination," argumenta que "In compassion, I sympathetically feel the same inner state I empathically imagine you to feel, namely, suffering, and with the same vividness I imagine you to feel it" (745). Según él, para que una persona experimente empatía hacia otra persona es necesario prestar cuidadosa atención a los signos que la otra persona exhibe en cuanto a su comportamiento y condición. Se requiere, por lo tanto, lo que en el análisis literario llamaríamos un *close reading*: "it requires that one empathically experience those drives, feelings and thoughts as one observes her behavior. To empathize with another is to comprehend viscerally the inner state that motivates the other's overt behavior by experiencing concurrently with that behavior a correspondingly similar inner state oneself" (737). Precisamente, en los textos de Montero existe una invitación similar, un deseo de que en el lector ocurra un desplazamiento mental y emocional que le dé voz y cabida a la experiencia del otro, usualmente caribeño (transatlántico) como se demostrará más adelante.

Es posible argumentar que tanto el concepto de la compasión y

la noción del punto de vista en la literatura convergen en el concepto de *imaginación modal* (*modal imagination*). Para Piper se necesita de nuestra imaginación modal para extender nuestra concepción de la realidad más allá de nuestras experiencias inmediatas: “The term modal imagination is intended to remind us of our capacity to envision what is possible in addition to what is actual” (726). La imaginación modal requiere que una persona imagine la posibilidad de una emoción, acción o suceso que no se ha experimentado todavía. Continúa Piper argumentando que no podemos imaginarnos a las demás personas, su interioridad, sus experiencias, emociones, deseos, respuestas sensoriales sin la capacidad de ejercer nuestra imaginación modal.

Esta lectura propone que *Aguaceros dispersos* es una invitación a hacer esta traslación, a ocupar momentáneamente, con la ayuda de la columnista que investiga las intimidades de los demás por medio de su escritura, ese espacio imaginario que habita el otro y que bien puede ayudar a iluminar el espacio íntimo que uno mismo ocupa. Esta intención informa una ética y una estética de la compasión en su escritura, reflejada en sus columnas, que en última instancia refieren a una interiorización o incorporación de una caribeñidad ajena.

Lo significativo de las ideas de Piper y de *Aguaceros dispersos* resulta en que para leer y entender toda otredad se requiere un acto de contemplación, se requieren los mil ojos de *Avalokitesvara*, la sabiduría y curiosidad de Orúnla, donde uno (o el lector o la lectora) no debe mirar a los otros en términos de algún conjunto de expectativas automatizadas que tengamos sobre esta otredad (o sobre nuestras expectativas en cuanto a la manipulación del idioma), sino que uno debe permitir que esa otredad emerja por sus propios fueros. Sin embargo, ocurre que cualquier lector puede preguntarse cómo es posible lograr ese contacto, permitir que la otredad se apodere de uno sin aniquilar ni la propia identidad, ni la identidad ajena, sin permitir que los mil ojos del punto de vista atrofien la claridad de la visión, sin que nuestra identificación con la otredad se vuelva vicaria. La manera de lograr este cruce de fronteras se ejemplifica bien en los textos de Montero y en las teorías desarrolladas por Andreas Teuber, quien al discutir las teorías éticas sobre la compasión que presenta Simone Weil argumenta que “[...] Weil sees respect for a

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del la autora de sus intereses y la complejidad de la formación cultural de los textos del Caribe. Es notable, por ejemplo, la influencia hindú en países como Jamaica y como Trinidad.

person as a way of regarding another human being from a point of view of which [...] ‘is concerned primarily with what is for *him* to live that life and to do *those* actions in that character’” (224).<sup>4</sup> Para experimentar algún sentimiento de compasión necesariamente se implica el uso de la imaginación, la imaginación modal que explica Piper. En consecuencia, el arte, la literatura, son en general un medio excelente que nos prepara para este tipo de inversión:

However, it is at least clear that forms of creative expression such as music, painting, poetry, fiction, and first-person narrative accounts enhance our ability to imagine modally another’s inner states, even if we have had no such first-personal experience ourselves. Fresh combinations of images, words, metaphors, and tonal progressions enable us to construct an imaginative vision that may in turn casually transform or enlarge our range of emotional responses. (739)

Evitar una identificación vicaria se logra por medio de combinar la imaginación modal y la contemplación del otro con un deseo de justicia que preste atención al interés y al derecho humano. La compasión en el texto que presta atención a la otredad debe intentar ver desde adentro el derecho propio que tienen los demás a la paz y a la justicia y de ahí tomar un interés por el otro en el propio corazón. Todo punto de vista e intento de entender al otro sin compasión y sin justicia lleva a la esclavitud, imaginaria y real, del otro.

Los textos de Mayra Montero, incluyendo a *Aguaceros dispersos*, se basan en la construcción imaginativa, modal, que permite transformar la visión que tenemos de nosotros mismos y de los demás, pero sobre todo nos permiten una visión ante la cultura del Caribe o de la otredad caribeña. Como ejemplo inicial, Montero comienza estratégicamente su colección de ensayos con una columna periodística titulada “La flor más viva de Port-au-Prince.” Inmediatamente Montero nos da una clave sobre el manejo de diversos discursos que nos hacen familiar la extrañeza, la otredad de sus personajes, puesto que habla de una mujer llamada Mme. Lulú, vieja practicante del vudú que siente una nostalgia indecible por Haití y que interactúa con el mundo de los muertos. Mundo que a la autora le parece misterioso y extraño, pero que sin embargo, es uno con el cual ella pronto aprende a identificarse. Montero comenta que Mme. Lulú poseía un “misterioso arcón de donde salieron todas mis novelas” (13). De Lulú, de las historias que le cuenta y de sus experiencias vitales que tienen que ver con el mundo del más allá, Montero recibe y elabora su propia narrativa estableciéndose así un puente imaginario entre dos mujeres provenientes de dos trasfondos

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<sup>4</sup> El énfasis es del autor.

raciales y culturales similares, pero simultáneamente diferentes, dentro de una misma, pero compleja, región del mundo.

De hecho, la autora insiste en la conexión que logra establecer con Mme. Lulú por medio de su propio quehacer literario y que le lleva a posesionarse consonantemente del punto de vista de ella. Así la había invitado Mme. Lulú cuando le pide a sus interlocutores habituales (Montero de niña y a una prima suya) que entiendan el mundo a través de su experiencia: “No, no iba a permitir ella que nosotras pusiéramos un pie en esa oscura tierra de pesares [Haití]. Sólo teníamos que mirarnos en su espejo” [...] (15). Montero se identifica con Mme. Lulú, con su experiencia cultural del Caribe y su modo de transmitirla: “Esos fueron los auténticos inicios de una novela oral —y por entregas— que Lulú contaba cada sábado a la medianoche” (15). Más allá de todo, Montero reconoce en su relación con ella una intertextualidad que trasciende toda ansiedad de la influencia y acepta gustosamente la conexión y secuencia que hay entre ellas dos, por ser ambas narradoras: “El hilo que yo tomé, mucho más tarde, para contar mis propias historias, todas las cuales le deben desde siempre el alma a quien Lafargue bien llamó “pequeña y delicada flor de Port-au-Prince” (16). Al Montero hacerse eco de las palabras de Lafargue, a quien Mme. Lulú adora y venera, se establece una triple conexión entre tres realidades temporales y espaciales diferentes, ejemplificadas en estas tres personas.

En el primer artículo periodístico presentado en el libro, significativo por demás, Montero resalta, no tan sólo la identificación con el talento creativo de Mme. Lulú, sino que Montero siente empatía hacia ella por medio de comunicar la humanidad más íntima y profunda de esta mujer, permitiendo así que la realidad propia de Mme. Lulú emerja por sí sola: “Nunca supo ella que aún en sus grandes momentos de rencor, en el fragor de una poderosa narración de odio contra Haití, se le escapaba a su pesar un hilillo de amor y de nostalgia” (16). El tema de la compasión se extiende más allá del mundo de los vivos, como cuando a Mme. Lulú viene a buscarla uno de sus muertos para acompañarla en su proceso de morir y cuando otras personas refrenan su opinión por no herir la sensibilidad de ella y por respetar sus últimos momentos de vida:

Madame Lulú acarició las mejillas de la foto con la seca reliquia de sus dedos, se apoyó en el brazo de su nieta y le hizo —y se hizo— esta misericordiosa pregunta: “¿A qué habrá venido mi primo después de tanto tiempo?”.

Ambas pensaron, pero no lo dijeron, que el alma de Lafargue se había tomado la molestia de regresar a la antillana cuna sólo con el propósito caballeresco y tierno, de acompañar a Mme. Lulú a su última morada” (14).

De esta significativa relación se pueblan las memorias de la autora y se nutre el proceso de construcción de sus relatos.

En todos los artículos periodísticos incluidos en *Aguaceros dispersos* la autora igualmente narra desde sus personajes, como en un proceso de posesión divina o transubstanciación, donde el efecto primario de tal encuentro nos brinda la posibilidad de entender algo que de otra manera resultaría arcano, de una invitación al diálogo con la otredad. Por ello el lenguaje de sus artículos columnas está lleno de un vocabulario que acusa solidaridad, ternura y compasión (nostalgia, tierno, acompañar, desvalido, acarició las mejillas, misericordiosa pregunta, acompañar, el primer recuerdo, etc.) y de frases que aluden a la intimidad e interioridad de los personajes como: “El primer recuerdo que guardo de Mme. Lulú es el de su rostro envuelto en sombras: las sombras propias que le venían de adentro, y que las arrojaban sobre su frente las volutas del humo de tabaco.” (14)

Sobre todo, sus columnas periodísticas refieren a un deseo de entender la búsqueda personal ajena, a la dispersión de las sombras, a comprender las penas, ansiedades y alegrías que a ella, de otra manera, le resultan un misterio. Por ejemplo, en “Escrito para Miguelina” las primeras líneas aluden a tal preocupación: “Sonríe poco y calla demasiado; nunca la vi mirar de frente ni sentarse a contemplar el paisaje; habla en susurros y se mueve sin ruido” (17). Ese silencio, moverse sin ser notada, captura la atención de la autora y la lleva a intentar entenderla, a darle voz a su silencio. Esta es la clave de un principio narrativo para los textos de Mayra Montero (incluyendo sus novelas): permitir que la voz del otro emerja.<sup>5</sup> Según descubre la narradora, Miguelina es una mujer atrapada por su circunstancia histórica y cultural, es una sirvienta dominicana por quien ella se interesa, a quien quiere escuchar: “Le pregunté con qué soñaba, no los anhelos, sino los sueños verdaderos, esos de los que regresamos a medianoche con la frente empapada de sudor. Quise que me dijera qué color prefiere, qué animales la entusiasman, qué fruta suele comer en las pocas ocasiones que se le permite elegir” (18). Contar, narrar las experiencias de aquellos que no tienen acceso a un capital cultural que les permita expresarse,

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<sup>5</sup> La intención de la autora responde a una preocupación antropológica y narrativa, en donde se prefiere que “la verdad” del personaje aparezca por sí sola o cuando menos con un mínimo de intervención por parte del investigador, artista o antropólogo, en donde se prefiere que lejos de mantener una pretendida distancia objetiva y fría haya un espacio de identificación entre entrevistado y entrevistador, entre el objeto investigado y el investigador.

escuchar la intimidad de otro es el medio para la autora expandir su propio horizonte de expectativas, escuchar es un medio de ejercer justicia, “a kind of loving attention, attitude of waiting, patiently, for the other to appear as he or she is” (Teuber 226).

Evidentemente, la imaginación modal de la autora hace en este caso un esfuerzo consciente por entender esa otredad que por su caribeñidad le resulta propia y aunque interroga a Miguelina hace un intento por permitirle que su narración le haga justicia al silencio de este personaje. En este proceso, sin embargo, Montero mantiene su propia identidad narrativa a lo largo de *Aguaceros dispersos*, pero reconoce su intento de cambiar de posición o punto de vista: “Sin atreverse a levantar la vista y sin decir palabra, incapaz de imaginar la forma que iba a tener sobre el papel su nombre impreso; incapaz de leer, aquí y ahora, *lo que yo escribía en nombre de ella*” (20).<sup>6</sup> A lo largo de su proceso narrativo, la autora tiene claro que se encuentra en una posición similar a la de una antropóloga, no obstante es una antropología de la vulnerabilidad que se somete y se resigna gustosamente a la contaminación frente a la otra observada: “La dueña de la casa, casi tan joven como Miguelina, vino a preguntar si era que yo quería aprender a hacer sancocho, no se explicaba de otro modo mi presencia junto a los fogones. Dije que sí, que estaba allí aprendiendo, porque en el fondo era verdad: el silencio de esa muchacha fría y eficiente era por el momento mi mejor escuela” (19). Este interés es contrastado por la actitud fría y distante que asume otra mujer frente a la sirvienta y al notar el interés de la narradora por Miguelina:

“Acabo de preguntale a esta joven”, dije por decir algo, “que qué va a ser cuando sea grande.”

Me sorprendió una carcajada de traviata mala a mis espaldas.

“Cuando sea grande”, dijo una mujer madura, con unos ojos de juguete que detesté inmediatamente, “ella será lo mismo que es ahora.” (19)

En estos artículos periodísticos, Montero basa la exploración de su propia otredad en las mujeres que encuentra en su camino y sobre ellas y sus vidas intenta reconstruir sus historias a partir de los vacíos y silencios. A su paso y encuentro con estas diferentes mujeres (de diversas edades, trasfondos culturales, incluyendo a una travesti) se da cuenta de que ellas buscan cierto control sobre sus vidas, que es el fundamento de su dignidad. Como botón de muestra, Montero cuenta sobre la vida de María Nicolasa, una cocinera de

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<sup>6</sup> El énfasis es mío.

la República Dominicana quien puede convencer a la narradora “que preparar huevos revueltos es un oficio de iluminados” (29). El caso de María Nicolasa es uno también que le sirve porque con su ejemplo demuestra que ella escucha cuidadosamente las necesidades de aquellos a quienes atiende en su cocina: “Así he sabido, por ejemplo, que un paquistaní de paso hacia Jamaica durmió una noche en el hotel y a la mañana siguiente bajó a desayunar. Como no hablaba más que el sindhi, María Nicolasa recurrió a la mímica para averiguarle el gusto” [...] (30). Por las experiencias nuevas que María Nicolasa le da a Montero ella dice que “Si a estas alturas me tuviera que apartar de la literatura, creo que no se me ocurriría otra cosa sino correr junto a María Nicolasa” (29). Se interesa por ella, la maravilla, y aunque reconoce que entre ellas dos existe una gran distancia, su imaginación logra unir las: “Así me gusta imaginarla, en la espesa penumbra de la madrugada, esperando el autobús privado en el que viajará a su reino, aferrada al paquetito envuelto en plástico” (32).<sup>7</sup>

El caso de la identificación de la narradora con otras personas se presenta más agudamente cuando ella se refiere a un grupo de mujeres adictas a las drogas y que deambulan por uno de los rincones del pueblo de Santurce en Puerto Rico (en la parada 18). Pero de todas ellas quien más le interesa es Myrna Loy, una desmerecida travesti. Aunque la narradora no es hipócrita, puesto que reconoce que les teme un poco, “Myrna me ve a lo lejos y viene corriendo con los brazos en alto. Me pregunto qué demonios voy a hacer el día en que ella no baje esos brazos (hasta ahora, cuando llega junto a mí, baja los brazos y se queda a una distancia prudencial)” [...] (35), ella se interesa por el pasado y el destino de estas mujeres, en especial el de Myrna. Por ella siente compasión: “Le tiene que haber pasado mucho para haberse convertido en ese esqueleto agobiado por tantos meses, acaso años, de vida a la intemperie. Le he prometido que hablaremos un día de éstos, que nos sentaremos juntas [...] y ella empezará por el principio, por el hermoso varón que vino al mundo [...]” (35). Pero para poder suplir la historia que todavía no se ha concretizado, la autora utiliza su imaginación modal:

No sé. Se me ocurre que nació en noviembre y que era una criatura alegre. Hoy es muy alta, altísima y huesuda; pudo haber sido un hombre apuesto con su propia vida y una persona al lado para acariciar. O pudo haber sido una mujer independiente [...] Pudo haber sido lo que hubiera querido, pero no allí, tan débil y tiznada, junto a las demás mujeres repudiadas [...] (35)

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<sup>7</sup> Paquetito donde lleva los productos específicos utilizados para complacer al más exigente de sus clientes.

Es necesario comentar que esta serie de anotaciones se repiten en otros textos de Montero, como en *Tú, la oscuridad*, donde el sufrimiento de las personas y el entendimiento propio y compasivo del mismo es lo que hermana a todos los seres humanos. Los personajes de Thierry (el guía haitiano para el herpetólogo norteamericano) y Víctor (dicho herpetólogo), que van en búsqueda de una ranita en vías de extinción (la *grenuille du sang*), así lo confirman cuando entre ellos dos se desarrolla una relación que evoluciona del silencio a la compasión:

De repente dijo algo que me impresionó: un hombre nunca sabe cuándo empieza la pena que le durará por siempre. Lo miré y vi que había una lágrima bajándole por la mejilla.

—Ni la pena ni la alegría —le comenté bajito—. Un hombre nunca sabe nada, Thierry, ése es su espanto. (*Tú, la oscuridad* 133)

Anterior a la identificación de Víctor con Thierry evidenciada en estas palabras, Thierry había experimentado algo similar con el predecesor de Víctor:

Al día siguiente me acerqué a la tumba y vi tierra revuelta. Sentí satisfacción de ver que mis sospechas eran buenas, un hombre se prueba siempre sobre las cenizas de otro, y yo probé lo mío con Papá Crapaud. Tomé un puñado de esa misma tierra y lo besé, lo pasé por mi cara y lo froté sobre mi cabeza. La tierra me cayó un poco en los ojos y se me metió en la boca. Algo de eso bajó por mi garganta y entonces me quedé en paz por dentro. (*Tú, la oscuridad* 122)<sup>8</sup>

Esta propuesta ética de escuchar la voz del otro y la identificación de unos personajes con otros, o de la narradora con los personajes, forma parte de una estética de la escritura que se presenta como un proyecto donde se espera que los lectores participen de manera activa por medio de invocar su propia imaginación modal.

Es posible argumentar que los textos de Montero, como los que encontramos en *Aguaceros dispersos*, responden a una narración de la ternura, a una antropología del corazón de sus personajes con los cuales la narradora se solidariza y en donde a la misma vez se invita al lector a contaminarse con sus emociones y experiencias. La narradora explora la vida íntima de los personajes, con ellos conversa y de sus silencios llena los blancos, conecta los intersticios de las historias incompletas. Este proceso de adivinación la incluye como narradora y nos incluye a nosotros como lectores haciéndonos

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<sup>8</sup> Para una elaboración extensa sobre esta idea y en el contexto de una retórica del silencio véase mi artículo titulado "Silence, Voodoo, and Haiti in Mayra Montero's *In the Palm of Darkness*" publicado en la revista *Ciberletras*.



cómplices. Este gesto se ejemplifica en la columna “A la sombra del árbol de María.” En ésta la narradora cuenta sobre cómo todos los días llega a la sombra de éste árbol una mujer en su viejo auto, se estaciona y comienza un complicado ritual de maquillaje, al cual responde intensamente la narradora:

Durante meses me he preguntado de dónde viene esa mujer. De qué hogar repleto de niños que se pelean desde el amanecer, embarrados de mocos y jalea; de qué desordenada alcoba donde el esposo exige que le planche la camisa, precisamente la única camisa que ella no tuvo tiempo de planchar ayer; de qué rutina huye, de cuáles prisas, de qué pequeños y miserables agobios. Son días y días que vengo observando [...] Así he tenido tiempo de darle vuelta a la madeja [...] (38)

El interés de Montero en este caso es explorar las razones del porqué esta mujer lleva a cabo el mismo ritual cada día, de imaginarse cuál es su historia, de imaginarse quién es ella, de imaginarse una acción que posiblemente ella misma no ha experimentado todavía. Así continúa Montero el resto de sus columnas o artículos periodísticos, explorando la curiosidad y las emociones humanas que los otros despiertan en ella. Al fin y al cabo, la habilidad para entender y pensar nuestras propias experiencias dependen de cómo nos imaginamos, entendemos, aceptamos o rechazamos las experiencias de los demás. De ahí evoluciona o se desarrolla nuestro yo.

En su estilo narrativo, que Montero mantiene a lo largo de las columnas compiladas en *Aguaceros dispersos*, y dada la brevedad de las mismas, encontramos golpes de pluma que detienen la narración en seco. Sin embargo, el efecto es uno que continúa abriendo el mundo de lo narrado a nuevas posibilidades imaginadas para el lector o la lectora. Así es la vida de los personajes en las columnas, que a punto de su clausura vital se niegan a morir abandonados, solos, o faltos de dignidad. Las columnas de Montero tienen una estructura cíclica proyectada en un abrir y cerrar de la narración que captura nuestra atención. Sus narraciones son un mirar hacia atrás, donde somos iluminados a partir del primer instante narrativo una vez se ha coincidido con el otro, es una invocación a la comunidad de lectores que va a experimentar con ella un viaje por la otredad de los personajes narrados o descritos para luego, como la estructura misma, regresar a donde el lector, al punto de partida, por medio de la clausura. Simbólicamente se invita, como en toda narrativa de viajes, a regresar a puerto y a reflexionar sobre lo visto.

La imaginación que nos presta la autora en sus columnas nos ayuda a extender nuestra concepción de la realidad más allá de nuestras experiencias humanas inmediatas. Este malabar narrativo,

este coqueteo con intentar adivinar las intimidades de los personajes, pretende lograr una perspectiva imparcial de nosotros mismos y del estado interno de los demás. Esta perspectiva, de acuerdo a Piper, es un estado necesario para poder experimentar compasión por los demás. Compasión que al fin y al cabo nos podría mover hacia algún tipo de justicia. Toda nuestra habilidad de entender y de pensar nuestras propias experiencias, unidas a la de los otros, presupone la estimulación de una imaginación modal. Montero parece apelar a sus lectores en su insistencia en atender la interioridad de sus personajes, para que se reconozca y experimente la existencia de subjetividades alternas. Por ello, de acuerdo a Piper: “When we lack a visceral comprehension of what we read, the text in question is a conjunction of empty words without a personal meaning to us. Our intellectual grasp of the material is impeded by a failure of the modal imagination those words are intended to spark” (735).

Aunque la analogía entre literatura y compasión es útil en este ensayo, es necesario tener claro que participar de un discurso ético no necesariamente compromete a una persona a interesarse por el otro. Sin embargo, cuando una persona presta atención a la belleza del arte, o la literatura, tal esfuerzo contemplativo puede ayudarle en su proceso de comprender a los demás de una manera más justa, puesto que la contemplación artística implica imaginar aquello que está fuera por medio de prestar atención cuidadosa a los signos que la obra de arte emite, ayuda a cultivar el mismo tipo de atención que requiere la justicia. Sencillamente, se adquiere la facultad de escuchar al otro, la atención pura y desinteresada. Desde un punto de vista ético sobre la compasión podría argumentarse que los textos de *Aguaceros dispersos* exhiben los mil ojos de Avalokitesvara, la sabiduría de Orúnla y la compasión de San Francisco de Assisi, cuya iluminación personal depende de lo que sus mil ojos alcancen a ver y comprender. Sin embargo, la definición que implícitamente hace Montero en sus textos sobre la compasión, dado la mayoría de los temas tratados y según lo exhiben sus otros textos como *Del rojo de su sombra*, *Tú la oscuridad*, *Como un mensajero tuyo* y como *Púrpura profundo* es una definición que presta mucha atención a la subalternidad femenina y afrocaribeña. Orúnla cobra un nuevo ojo que ilumina nuestras alteridades abandonadas de nuestra región, iluminación que al fin y al cabo calma y consuela las propias angustias y ansiedades de sus personajes. Como dice Thierry en *Tú, la oscuridad*:

Veré venir a todos los que espero, a lo mejor a todos los que me quisieron, les tenderé los brazos y les hablaré despacio para que me entiendan bien:

“Tú, la oscuridad [que envuelve el espíritu de aquellos que ignoran tu gloria]...”

Entonces ellos me darán la luz. (239)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> La oración completa es “Tú, la oscuridad que envuelve el espíritu de aquellos que ignoran tu gloria.”



**DIFFICULT WRITINGS: AIDS AND THE ACTIVIST  
AESTHETIC IN REINALDO ARENAS'  
BEFORE NIGHT FALLS\***

*Diana Davidson*

In a letter addressed “Dear Friends,” Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas explained to his loved ones and to his readers why he chose to end his fight with AIDS by his own hand. Arenas wrote: “Due to my delicate state of health and to the terrible emotional depression it causes me not to be able to continue writing and struggling for the freedom of Cuba, I am ending my life” (rep. *Before Night Falls* 317). Before he committed suicide, at the age of forty-three, Arenas left instructions for his handwritten “Farewell” letter to be given to both friends and newspapers. The “Farewell” letter was included as a postscript in the 1992 and the reprinted 2000/2001 editions of Arenas’ posthumously published autobiography *Before Night Falls*; the recent reprints coincided with the 2000 release of a film of the same name directed by Julian Schnabell. Originally published in Spain as *Antes que anochezca*, Arenas’ autobiography speaks to both his individual life experiences and to his sociopolitical situation of being persecuted in and exiled from Castro’s Cuba. Arenas had a tumultuous life in Cuba: he grew up in abject poverty near Holguin, as a youth he fought against Fulgencio Batista and for Fidel Castro’s revolution, he worked as an award-winning writer in Havana, he was arrested by Castro’s regime for “ideological deviation” and publishing abroad without consent, he hid in Havana’s Lenin Park as a fugitive, he was imprisoned for two years, and he escaped Cuba in the 1980 Port Mariel exodus.<sup>1</sup> Arenas documents his persecution under Castro’s “system of *parametrage*” which not only persecuted but detained gay writers, artists, and dramatists in forced labour

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<sup>1</sup> While all of this information is documented in *Before Night Falls*, Francisco Soto provides an excellent “Chronology” of Arenas’ life at the beginning of his study *Reinaldo Arenas* (xvii-xx).

camps and prisons (BNF 138). In its final sections, *Before Night Falls* testifies to the difficult conditions of Arenas' life as a Cuban exile living in New York City. As the above quotation from his "Farewell" letter suggests, Arenas saw the fight for personal and political freedom, the act of writing, and quality of life as inextricably linked.

*Before Night Falls* documents Arenas' life as a creative and critical writer. Besides using writing to testify to life experiences, *Before Night Falls* also documents how the act of writing created a quality of life amidst horrific persecutions and violations of human rights. Arenas tells us: "In Cuba I endured a thousand adversities because the hope of escaping and the possibility of saving my manuscripts gave me strength" (ix). *Before Night Falls* speaks about writing and the creative imagination not only as ways of witnessing but also, as providing ways through poverty, oppression, and persecution. Hence, we might expect that Arenas' would turn his personal diagnosis of HIV/AIDS into a political and aesthetic topic of writing, as he does with other adversities in his life. However, in his introduction and "Farewell" letter, Arenas' expresses his frustration at the fact that writing about HIV/AIDS cannot provide a way through HIV/AIDS-related devastations. In the book's introduction, pointedly titled "Introduction: The End," Arenas records the difficulties of writing about HIV/AIDS. He tells us: "Now I see that I am almost coming to the end of this introduction, which is also my end, and I have not said much about AIDS. I cannot. I do not know what it is" (xvi). HIV/AIDS is an adversity that becomes a struggle in his writing rather than a problem that inspires writing. The body of this short essay is organized into sections (II, III, IV) which explore three possible reasons why Arenas may have found it difficult to write about AIDS: the epistemological, the political, and the personal/physical. Ironically, the act or project of writing, which gave him "strength" to "endure a thousand adversities in Cuba," becomes impossible due to the physical and emotional nature of his illnesses (ix). Implicit throughout this essay, and explicit in its introductory and final sections, is an argument that Arenas' difficulty in writing HIV/AIDS demonstrates a tension often found in AIDS narratives; that is, the difficulty of achieving an activist aesthetic. However, I do not read Arenas' text as failing to achieve an activist aesthetic, but as activist precisely because it expresses both the need to write about AIDS and the difficulty of writing AIDS.

## **I. Introducing the Activist Aesthetic**

The activist aesthetic is much more complicated and yet just as simple an idea that writing can offer a way of understanding the

collective and individual devastation of HIV/AIDS. This paper introduces a reading of Arenas' autobiographical writing with a philosophy that writing not only documents political catastrophes in a personal way, but can also offer an individual writer and his/her collective readership ways through devastations. Writing can do this through its existence as a work of art, and through its function as a mode of communicating ideas for change. Writing enables people to form arguments; provide testimony; break silences; trace histories; expose inequities and injustices; and imagine new ways of relating, loving, and desiring each other. The activist aesthetic obviously applies to writing about HIV/AIDS which documents and explains the realities of HIV/AIDS in the hopes of enlightenment and change. Tensions often emerge when writing finds it difficult to merge or balance the interests between the public and private and the political and the aesthetic. The activist aesthetic also applies to writing that expresses doubt and/or the realization that sustainable political reform of HIV/AIDS-related issues involves questioning and dismantling deeply entrenched cultural prejudices about identity and contagion.

In the final chapter of his groundbreaking *AIDS Narratives: Gender and Sexuality, Fiction and Science*, Steven Kruger sub-titles his last section "Toward an Activist Aesthetic?" (294). He describes how in Sarah Schulman's 1990 novel *People in Trouble*, a narrative tension arises between the characters' political organizing and "the artist's claim that art in and of itself does political work" (298), asserting that "*People in Trouble* also does political work, and not just in helping its readers 'decide to take action.' As Schulman's novel itself repeatedly suggests, language, representation, and narrative do matter" (300). Kruger argues that Schulman's novel is both art imitating life and life imitating art, as it becomes a self-reflexive exploration of art's potential to make a political difference in the HIV/AIDS crisis. He comes to the conclusion that:

Novels like Schulman's intervene in the broader discourses of AIDS, suggest how such discourses often do discredit to the realities of people's lives, and find other language, other narratives that might allow those realities to be differently represented and understood. Such work in rethinking AIDS, while it does not stand in for other, more direct political work, is a necessary way of responding to a health crisis still largely understood in (homophobic, racist, sexist) terms that continue to block an honest and open public discourse on sex and safer sex; a real commitment to the health not just of the uninfected but of those living now with HIV and AIDS; and effective health care and education for all. (301)

I have been inspired by, borrowed from, developed, and revised

Kruger's definition of the activist aesthetic, as he outlines it in his concluding reading of AIDS narratives, throughout this essay and other work on AIDS narratives.

Creative and biographical writing about AIDS often expresses the depressing realization that while changing deeply entrenched cultural values is necessary to change how we view HIV/AIDS, this reform will take too long to help or 'save' the afflicted artist who provides such realizations. Creative work can convey this message of both hope and loss in a way that obliquely political material, such as activist manifestos and HIV-education material cannot. Sometimes the tensions and realizations expressed in AIDS literature are difficult to resolve or accept; and yet, it is sometimes in the very irresolvability of the tensions between private/public and hope/loss that real illuminations and truths about HIV/AIDS occur. This latter point is how I read Arenas' *Before Night Falls*.

Arenas' prolific oeuvre often merges the personal and political, and the activist with the aesthetic. Arenas used writing to document truths and inequities as well as to survive these truths and inequities: "the possibility of saving my manuscripts gave me strength" (ix). Arenas successfully merged activist with aesthetic and personal with political concerns when he wrote about his life in Cuba. *Hallucinations* (1971 translation of *El mundo aluciante*), *Farewell to the Sea* (1986 translation of *Otra vez el mar*), *Graveyard of the Angels* (1987 translation of *La loma del ángel*), *Singing From the Well* (1987 translation of *Celestino antes del alba*), *The Palace of White Skunks* (1990 translation of *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*) are all about life in Cuba, both before and under Castro's communist dictatorship. Arenas wrote about Cuba's hope for communist promises of economic and social equality and the reality of the regime's corruption, violence, and terrorism. Arenas' works also testify to the difficulties of life in exile; *The Doorman* (1991 translation of *El portero*) tells the story of a Cuban exile in New York City. Arenas used writing to voice the inequalities and persecutions he experienced in Cuba and as a Cuban exile in the USA. Arenas wrote in order to enlighten readers in the hopes of reform; this reason for writing is well-documented in his autobiography. For example, in response to his government-ordered enslaved labour on a sugar plantation, Arenas wrote the long poem *El Central* (BNF 129). In response to a friend's imprisonment in a Cuban concentration camp, Arenas wrote the novel *The Brightest Star* (BNF 149). In response to the conditions of Guanabo jail, where he escaped from shortly after an initial arrest, Arenas wrote the poem "Leper Colony" (157). Arenas also wrote texts that questioned beliefs



about beauty and aesthetics: one such text is the short story “Mona,” which is the center of the anthology *Mona and Other Tales* (edited and translated into English by Dolores M.Koch in 2001). Arenas’ triumph as a writer is his ability to explore universal questions of beauty and freedom within his ‘political texts’; he successfully merges the activist with the aesthetic when he wrote about Cuba. Poet and critic Francisco Soto rightly observes that:

despite their [Arenas’ texts’] concerns about the specific Cuban condition, they contain a universal argumentative center that persistently resurfaces: a staunch defense of the individual’s imaginative capabilities and self-expression in a world beset by barbarity, intolerance, and persecution. (22)

Indeed, Arenas’ texts celebrate humanity’s “imaginative capabilities and self-expression,” as Soto puts it, not only as a form of resistance, but as a potential form of revolution. When Arenas describes the horrific conditions of Morro Castle prison, where he was imprisoned for two years, he tells us: “anyone who takes part in certain acts of beauty is eventually destroyed. Humanity in general does not tolerate beauty, perhaps because we cannot live without it” (194). Throughout *Before Night Falls*, Arenas balances the tensions between the activist and the aesthetic when writing about conditions in Castro’s Cuba and his pursuit of public and private freedom.

Arenas is able to strike a balance between documenting brutality and persecution in Cuba with a hope and pursuit of freedom on both political and personal levels for the Cuban people and culture. He says that he cannot and will not remain silent about the conditions of life in Castro’s Cuba. In response to the specific conditions of indentured labour in the sugar cane fields, he says “I could not remain silent witness to such horror” (129) and, in relation to his persecution under *parametrage*, he writes: “after twenty years of repression, how could I keep silent about those crimes?” (301). In addition to breaking silences about conditions of life in Castro’s Cuba, Arenas conveys a strong hope that exposing these conditions will lead to change. He holds firm that “One day, eventually, the people will overthrow Castro, and the least they will do is bring to justice those who collaborated with the tyrant with impunity” (xv). Arenas’ writing breaks silences about homosexuality in Cuban and Latin American culture. Soto argues that *Before Night Falls* “strives to celebrate homosexual identity and to represent gay relationships based on mutual respect and equality” and “marks an important step in breaking the silence surrounding homosexuality in Latin America, where homosexuality continues to be a topic that is very much in the closet” (ix). As David William Foster observes, “Arenas left a legacy of exceptional novels

on gay themes, but it is his personal memoir that is destined to serve as a master narrative of homoeroticism in Latin America” (19). Arenas attains a level of disclosure and exposure with Castro’s regime in Cuba, the criminalization and prosecution of male-male sex acts under *parametrage*, and Cuban cultural issues surrounding homosexuality that he finds difficult to engage with when he tries to write about HIV/AIDS in *Before Night Falls*.<sup>2</sup> The body of the essay proposes possible reasons why Arenas finds it so difficult to achieve a balance between aesthetic and activist concerns when trying to write about HIV/AIDS.

## II. *Epistemological Problems Writing HIV/AIDS: Histories and Breaking Silences*

Arenas makes it clear in the autobiography’s “Introduction: The End” that he finds HIV/AIDS difficult to write about partly because, for him, HIV/AIDS is shrouded in unknowability and silence (xvi). He says “I do not know what it is” (xvi). His difficulty in knowing AIDS seems at odds with the critical praise his writing receives for breaking silences about homosexuality and Latin American masculinities. On one level, we can contextualize Arenas’ self-described silence and lack of knowing surrounding the HIV/AIDS crisis as a consequence of the time that he was shaping his autobiographical writings into *Before Night Falls*. Arenas details in his introduction that he was diagnosed with AIDS in 1987 (i). By this time, he had escaped from Cuba and was living as an exile in New York City. He tells us how he suffered from a multitude of AIDS-related illnesses (such as Kaposi’s Sarcoma cancer, PCP pneumonia, phlebitis, and toxoplasmosis) from that time until his death in December 1990. Since the epidemic was only half-a-decade old, information about both the epidemiological nature of HIV and the politics of AIDS increased exponentially from the 1980s into the 1990s. On the medical front, the human immunodeficiency virus was not isolated until 1985, four years into the epidemic, and HIV-antibody tests were only developed later that same year (see Randy Shilts’ *And the Band Played On* and James Kinsella’s “Timeline of the Plague: A medical, political, and media history of

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2 To the best of my knowledge, the only other English-translated piece where Arenas speaks about AIDS is the short story “Mona.” Throughout the story, the main narrative is interspersed with fictional journalistic, editorial and referential accounts. One of these accounts reads as follows: “As for Reinaldo Arenas, mentioned by Mr. Sakuntala, he was a writer of the 1960s generation, justly forgotten in our century. He died of AIDS in the summer of 1987 in New York” (35).

AIDS” for further discussion of these histories). AIDS treatment options remained few throughout the 1980s, and those that were available focused on curing opportunistic infections as opposed to the virus itself. The only retroviral drug available during the time Arenas lived with AIDS was AZT, and it became available in the United States and much of Western Europe from the spring of 1987 onwards.<sup>3</sup> On the activist front, in late-1986, early 1987 ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) formed out of the remnants of Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) making New York City the centre for HIV/AIDS activism in the West. In October 1987, ACT UP launched its well known “SILENCE=DEATH” activist media campaign encouraging people to engage in dialogue and fight for political representation and action on AIDS-related issues. I point out these historical occurrences to suggest that, in Arenas’ 1987 residence of New York City at least, AIDS was a dire and urgent personal and public concern that was still shrouded in silence and it was a disease with few treatment options at the time of his diagnosis and leading up to the time he decided to end his life. Arenas battled his AIDS-related illnesses in a dynamic of urgency and unknowability that has changed over the past decade—especially since the advent of new HIV-treatment options in 1996.

The decade following Arenas’ death saw significant changes not just in the cultural dynamics of HIV/AIDS, but also in the medical and scientific understandings of the virus/syndrome. In 1996, a breakthrough in HIV/AIDS research was announced at the Fourteenth International AIDS Conference in Vancouver, Canada. North American scientists, led by *Time Magazine*’s 1996 “Man-of-the-Year” Dr. David Ho, discovered that a combination of certain drugs inhibited the reproduction of HIV and had the power to dramatically lower the presence of HIV in the bloodstream of some patients.<sup>4</sup> In some case patients, it initially appeared that “cocktail therapy” or HAART (Highly Active Anti Retroviral Therapy) as it has come to be known, had the potential to eradicate the virus. These new antiretroviral drugs, also referred to as protease inhibitors, improved the quality of life and health of many people suffering from clinically defined HIV and AIDS-related illnesses.<sup>5</sup> Of course, anyone affected by HIV/AIDS or involved

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3 See Kinsella (268) and Stoller (118) for a history of AZT in the USA.

4 This information is summarized from Garrett and Wilkinson’s articles about antiretroviral drugs and the public complacency over HIV-prevention and AIDS activism in the March 1999 edition of *Esquire* magazine.

5 According to the CDC, AIDS-related deaths in the USA fell because of the availability of HAART. In 1994 and 1995, there were 49, 442 and 49, 895 recorded

in the politics of the phenomenon soon realized that these new medications did not completely eradicate the virus from the body, the drugs did not work for everyone who had access to them, and the expensive treatments were available to specific populations (primarily those in urban centres in North America and Western Europe who had financial resources and access to treatment). However, unlike people living in the West, and indeed, in New York City today, who have a higher chance of having access to life-prolonging protease inhibitors and multiple antiretroviral treatments for HIV, at the time he decided to take his own life, Arenas was definitely dying rather than living with AIDS. Perhaps Arenas says he “cannot” write about AIDS because, in 1987 to 1990, he is unable to offer us hope—either for potential liberation from oppressions in the context of the HIV/AIDS phenomenon or hope for his own survival. Because, as he states in his farewell letter, Arenas’ project of writing, freedom, and quality of life are inextricably interlinked, Arenas feels that he cannot write about AIDS in the same way he writes about other adversities.

*Before Night Falls* is not a typical AIDS narrative: HIV/AIDS is only ever discussed explicitly in the Introduction and alluded to in the final pages and “Farewell” letter. Throughout the body of his autobiography, Arenas directly mentions AIDS once (310) and refers to it indirectly (as a plague, as a curse, and as destruction) three times (297, 310, 315). AIDS, and Arenas’ difficulty in writing it, frame the text rather than being a focus of Arenas’ testimony and narrative. Ricardo L. Ortiz comments on the structure of *Before Night Falls* when he argues, in a section called “Before Night Falls: AIDS and the Possibility of a Pro-Life Suicide,” that:

Time and history work different shifts in both the life and the fiction; in the former Arenas marks the transformation of his literary output by the day of his diagnosis .... It is here, in this inverted, paradoxical space, that we can return as well to the question raised by Arenas’s attempt, at the end of his life, in the intimate threshold of his own fatal moment, to understand AIDS. (100)

The “intimate threshold” Ortiz refers to is one between life and death—the time “before night falls” as Arenas explains in the Introduction (xii). Despite the fact that *Before Night Falls* is not a typical AIDS narrative, in that HIV/AIDS is barely mentioned, AIDS-related death frames the memoir. I believe there are multiple reasons for this frame, or “inverted, paradoxical space” as Ortiz identifies it: since *Before Night Falls* was published posthumously, we know that death

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AIDS-related deaths, respectively. In 1996 and 1997, there were 37, 221 and 21, 445 recorded AIDS-related deaths, respectively. See <[www.cdc.gov/hiv.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv.htm)>.

is the outcome of Arenas' struggle with HIV/AIDS-related illnesses; because the introduction explicitly mentions Arenas' diagnosis with HIV/AIDS, we begin reading the account of his life already knowing the circumstances surrounding his death. Hence, even in the body of the work where AIDS is not written, desire, sexuality, oppression, persecution, and struggle mark Arenas' account of his life and writing. We connect our readings of desire, sexuality, oppression, persecution, and struggle in the body of the book to our knowledge of AIDS: we make connections to our knowledge of HIV as a sexually-transmitted infection, to our knowledge of AIDS as a set of debilitating and often fatal illnesses, and to our involvements in the political struggle to dismantle the homophobia, sexism, racism, and Euro/Western centrism that mark HIV/AIDS. Arenas' AIDS-related death haunts us as we read how his life unfolded in pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Cuba, in New York City, and in the literary world.

### **III. Political Problems of Writing HIV/AIDS: Conditions of Exile**

Even though he feels he does not "know" and "cannot" write about AIDS, in one of the few instances where he mentions AIDS directly, Arenas makes astute connections between the oppression created by a dictatorial government and the oppression experienced by people with HIV/AIDS. In the concluding pages of his Introduction Arenas writes:

AIDS is a perfect illness because it is so alien to human nature and has as its function to destroy life in the most cruel and systematic way. Never before has such a formidable calamity affected mankind .... Moreover, all the rulers of the world, that reactionary class always in power, and the powerful within any system, must feel grateful to AIDS because a good part of the marginal population, whose only aspiration is to live and who therefore oppose all dogma and political hypocrisy, will be wiped out. (xvii)

Arenas makes important connections between poverty, political corruption, persecution, oppression and the social history/present of HIV/AIDS in the above paragraph from "Introduction: The End." Hence, I read his epistemological statement with AIDS, i.e. that he does not "know it," not only as a reflection of the time of his diagnosis, but also as a resistance to "knowing" something he reads as having the potential to "wipe out" the marginal population. Arenas identifies AIDS as threatening the "margin" to which he belongs, "whose only aspiration is to live," and he identifies it as threatening his life's project to write towards liberation.

Connecting his life experiences in Cuba with his AIDS diagnosis,

Arenas complicatedly blames Castro's public policies in Cuba for his private AIDS crisis in New York.<sup>6</sup> In his "Farewell" letter, Arenas writes:

Persons near me are in no way responsible for my decision [to end my life]. There is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro. The sufferings of exile, the pain of being banished from my country, the loneliness, and the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country. (317)

Arenas wrote *Before Night Falls* while running as a fugitive in Cuba and while living as an exile in the USA. Arenas began his memoirs during the four months he hid in Lenin Park (after his initial arrest and before his two-year imprisonment in Morro Castle) (158). He finished the autobiography while battling AIDS-related illnesses in New York City. Arenas left Cuba as part of the Mariel exodus in 1980, when Castro 'purged' the country of criminals, the insane, homosexuals and other "riff raff" (278) and "undesirables" (281). The emigration from Port Mariel began with an incident at the Peruvian embassy: a bus of Cuban citizens drove into and held a protest inside the Peruvian embassy in Havana (276-287). The people sought political asylum and the right to leave Cuba. In a tactical error, Castro ordered the Cuban guards at the Peruvian embassy to leave, which enabled over 10,800 people to crowd inside the embassy and, Arenas says, over 100,000 to surround the outside of the embassy in hopes of claiming asylum on Peruvian territory (277). Castro's government soon turned its blunder into a 'purge' and allowed limited numbers of Cubans to leave Port Mariel for the USA. Arenas 'turned himself in' as a homosexual and, by changing the "e" of his surname on his passport to an "i" to escape bureaucratic recognition, he boarded a ship leaving Port Mariel (283). Like many Cuban exiles, refugees, and immigrants to the USA, Arenas' boat arrived in Miami and he stayed in Florida for a few months before relocating to New York City. Since his AIDS-diagnosis comes seven years after his landing in the USA, it seems odd that Arenas blames Fidel Castro, even indirectly let alone directly, for his ill-health.

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6 Other writers living and working in New York City, and publishing in the early 1990s, also write about specific political leaders as being responsible for their private battles with AIDS. In David Wojnarowicz's 1991 work *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, Wojnarowicz lists government, Church, and medical officials whom he sees as clinicalizing sexuality, moralizing HIV/AIDS, and perpetuating AIDS-related homophobia and ignorance (124-131). Wojnarowicz names various public officials like former US President Ronald Reagan, former NYC mayor Ed Koch, US Senator Jesse Helms and Catholic Cardinal John O'Connor as personally responsible for the HIV/AIDS crisis in New York City and the USA.

In "Pleasure's Exile: Reinaldo Arenas's Last Writing," Ortiz points out that Arenas' HIV/AIDS status can be read as another form of exile; in response to Arenas' paragraph on AIDS in the introduction, Ortiz argues that "the suggestion that somehow AIDS began as an orchestrated political conspiracy against marginalized communities is certainly not exclusive to Arenas, but in his hands it takes on a particular eloquence, especially given the content of triple exile into which AIDS throws him" (101). When Arenas writes in his "Farewell" letter "the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country" (317) he situates HIV-infection in the oppressive politics of Castro's Cuba.

While HIV/AIDS is obviously a politicized virus/syndrome, and Arenas astutely states so in his introduction, Arenas' final thoughts blaming his condition of exile for his HIV-infection are complicated and surprising. While the USA's HIV-infection rates from 1987 to 1990, and in New York City in particular, were much higher than Cuba's HIV-infection rates during the same years, HIV in resident Cuban populations has been reported to the United Nations from 1987 onwards. On a logical level, since people living in Cuba were reported to have been diagnosed with AIDS during the same years Arenas was diagnosed in the USA, HIV-infection is not a condition unique to Cubans living in exile. Arenas' connections speak more to the degree of his feelings of alienation and loss than to realities of HIV/AIDS in Cuba and for Cuban people.

Significantly, even if Arenas had been able to return to Cuba sometime between 1987 and 1990, as an HIV-positive person he would have been subject to quarantine in one of Cuba's *sidatorios*: "asylums for AIDS patients isolated against their will from the rest of Cuban society" (Soto x). Cuba is the only nation in the world to have publicly implemented an institutional containment policy for people testing positive for HIV-antibodies. Cuba attributes its low rates (0.03%) of HIV-infection today to its *sidatorio* policies.<sup>7</sup> According to

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<sup>7</sup> In a report entitled "How Cuba Controlled the HIV/AIDS Pandemic," Jonathan Tennenbaum quotes Dr. Tim Holtz as posting on the internet the following 1997 report of AIDS in Cuba:

Since the beginning of the epidemic in the Western Hemisphere, Cuba's approach to the HIV problem has been integrated into its comprehensive, nationalized health care system. Its policies toward HIV have been consistent with its policies toward other diseases and epidemics. In short, Cuba treated the introduction of HIV into the country as a public health emergency, instituting traditional public health control measures to contain the spread of the disease. They have been rewarded with one of the lowest prevalence rates of HIV-infection in the world (approximately 0.02%). See

the United Nations' "Report on the Global HIV/AIDS epidemic 2002," Cuba has an HIV-prevalence rate between 0.03 and 0.12%. This estimate is well below the low and high estimated rates for the Caribbean region, at an HIV-prevalence rate between 1.42% and 2.43%. Cuba is also well below the rates for Latin America, the average low rate being 0.26% and the high rate estimated at 0.69% for the region. Other nations reporting low HIV-prevalence rates estimates comparable to Cuba's are Bangladesh, Iran, the Philippines, Azerbaijan, and Finland. Depending on the account, Cuba's *sidatorios* are both sanctuary and concentration camp; they are upheld as a sign that Castro's government provides for and protects its citizens while being cited as proof that Castro's government violates basic human rights. In his 1994 book, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS*, Marvin Leiner documents and digests Cuba's complicated history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He describes *sidatorios* as "draconian institution[s]" and as a "serious mark against an otherwise admirable public health system" (2). Leiner observes that while people in the *sidatorios* receive "the best available treatment for AIDS patients," at the time these policies were implemented, Cuban residents were "lacking an independent press and the right to independent assembly, Cubans were not able to hear and debate publicly the proposed quarantine or possible alternatives" (2). From 1986 to 1994, it was mandatory for HIV-positive people in Cuba to live in a sanatorium, hence, if Arenas had been diagnosed with AIDS in Cuba rather than the USA, he would have been forced to live in a *sidatorio*.

Just as many other realities of living with HIV/AIDS changed in the 1990s, so too did Cuba's *sidatorio* policies. According to Minnesota-based journalists Tasya Rosenfeld and reporter Kira Herbrand, who went to Cuba in January 2001, stays at the *sidatorios* have been ambulatory since 1994 (See the website <http://www.kfai.org/programs/locnews/aids.htm> for transcripts of these interviews). If they are diagnosed with HIV and/or AIDS, Cubans are now recommended to go to *sidatorios* for educational purposes; individuals can decide if they want to live in the institutions. The reasons for this shift in policy are complicated. According to Dr. Tim Holtz's 1997 report to the *USA-Cuba InfoMed Project*, "the US embargo on Cuba has made caring for HIV+ patients in Cuba extremely difficult" (See <http://www.cubasolidarity.net/cubahol2.html>). Obviously, the collapse of

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<[www.aboutsudan.com/issues/biological\\_holocaust/how\\_cuba\\_controlled\\_the\\_hiv.htm](http://www.aboutsudan.com/issues/biological_holocaust/how_cuba_controlled_the_hiv.htm)>.



the Soviet Union in the early 1990s meant the loss of a great economic and political ally for Cuba. American embargos became increasingly strict in the early 1990s, even prohibiting “foreign ships entry to U.S. ports if they are trading with Cuba,” in 1992.<sup>8</sup> Hence, we may read the change from mandatory to voluntary containment for HIV patients two years later as an indirect result of Cuba’s economic problems: drained of resources, the Cuban government lacks the money to house, feed, and keep all HIV-positive people in quarantine. This shift may be good for human rights as we see them in the West, but it also means that HIV-positive patients receive less medical attention now than they did in the first decade and a half of the epidemic.

I include the above paragraphs introducing the complex history of Cuba’s *sidatorios* not only to contextualize Arenas’ HIV-infection and exile status, but also to emphasize a reading that Arenas longs for a Cuba that did and does not yet exist. Throughout his autobiographical account, Arenas’ longing for a sense of home and belonging consumes him; he even buys a plane ticket from New York to Miami, the place he calls “purgatory,” when he learns he has AIDS so he can “die close to the sea” (ix). In the last thirty pages of *Before Night Falls*, Arenas tells us that the life of an exile brought new challenges and struggles on socio-economic, artistic, and personal levels. Despite his career achievements, Arenas says his status as an exiled writer haunted him.<sup>9</sup> Despite the Cuban diaspora and freedom from the Castro regime’s persecution, Arenas did not find peace in Miami. He describes the character of Miami as “a caricature of Cuba, the worst of Cuba” and its physicality as “the ghost of our island, a barren and pestiferous peninsula” (292). He tells us that he became known in literary and social circles for his opinion that “If Cuba is

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8 In an article entitled “Stiffer Rules on Cuba Enforced,” *The Miami Herald* reported on September 15, 1992:

The Bush administration for the first time has enforced a new regulation denying foreign ships entry to U.S. ports if they are trading with Cuba, State Department officials said Monday. A Greek-flagged freighter carrying Chinese rice to Cuba was turned away from the harbor at Long Beach, Calif. on Saturday after U.S. Customs agents alerted the Treasury Department, the officials said. The ship, which had sought servicing at the port, was ordered away under a 5-month-old U.S. policy. (11A)

9 Arenas enjoyed academic and literary success while living in the United States: he was a visiting professor of Cuban literature at the International University of Florida (289), he was invited to speak at Columbia University (293), he lectured at the University of Stockholm and traveled Europe (303), and he co-launched the short-term but influential literary magazine *Mariel* (298).

Hell, Miami is Purgatory” (293). In *Before Night Falls*, Arenas claims that Cuban writers “have suffered throughout our history: on our Island we have been condemned to silence, to ostracism, censorship, and prison; in exile, despised and forsaken by our fellow exiles” (291). Arenas maintains that he not only suffered philosophically, but economically as an exiled writer. Even though he was a prolific and celebrated writer, Arenas died in poverty in New York City, turned away from hospitals because he could not pay for medical insurance (BNF x). He tells us, “In exile one is nothing but a ghost, the shadow of someone who never achieves full reality” (293). For Arenas, exile is a socio-economic and artistic condition. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes that “Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one’s native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one had lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss” (336). In the frame of *Before Night Falls*, Arenas connects the multiple losses of his life—loss of freedom, loss of friends and family, loss of his homeland, loss of his health—with the longing and hope for different future experiences (for both himself and fellow Cubans).

#### **IV. Personal Problems of Writing HIV: Physical Realities of Dying with AIDS**

The difficulty of writing HIV/AIDS is not just a political or even an epistemological problem for Arenas: it becomes a physiological problem as well. As his “Farewell” letter states, Arenas’ multiple AIDS-related illnesses eventually made it physically impossible for him to continue writing (by both dictation and on paper). On nearly half the pages of “Introduction: The End,” Arenas tells us how his illnesses prevent him from writing (see xii, xiii, xi, x-xi, xvi, xii). Due to the nature of his AIDS-related opportunistic infections, Arenas had difficulty putting pen to paper or hand to typewriter because he was encumbered by invasive hospital tubes and he was besieged with pain and fatigue. He recounts that even while in intensive care, he wrote lyrics for songs and worked on the French translation of *The Doorman* (xi). Eventually, even dictating his thoughts on audio tape (which is how most of the final version of *Before Night Falls* was ‘written’) becomes difficult for Arenas because cancer spread to his throat, and he found speaking “uncomfortable” (xvi).

Arenas makes it clear in both his “Farewell” letter and the Introduction to *Before Night Falls* that he finds multiple debilitating and terminal AIDS-related opportunistic infections to make his life

unlivable, and his life was unlivable because he was unable to write. When earlier I quoted Arenas' statement that "In Cuba I endured a thousand adversities because the hope of escaping and the possibility of saving my manuscripts gave me strength," I left out the following statement which refers specifically to his battle with AIDS: "At this point, the only escape for me was death" (ix). Arenas indicates that he decided to commit suicide because he could no longer write. When he tells us, "The important fact is that I managed not to die that time as expected .... With all those tubes and a mechanical respirator, I managed, as best I could, to scribble two songs," he again connects the act of writing and creating with physical survival (xi).

Arenas tried to commit suicide at least three times before his death in 1990 and it is a recurring theme in both his autobiographical and fictional writing. In *Before Night Falls*, he tells us that he tried to end his life very soon after his initial arrest under *parametrage* while he was a fugitive (161), upon arrival at Morro Castle Prison (179), and while awaiting sentencing at Morro Castle Prison (200). He tells us that Cuba's political history "is a history of endless suicides" (44). When speaking about other people's suicides, he reads them as caused by political circumstances and yet, complicatedly, as actions that can redeem an individual spirit. He says of his friend Olga Andreu, who jumped off a balcony, that "her death was perhaps an act of affirmation. There are times when living means to degrade yourself to make compromises, to be bored to death" (135). In his novel *The Brightest Star* (1984), Arenas presents suicide as a way to attain freedom from oppression and persecution when one is no longer able to write. In his critique of *The Brightest Star* in *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Writing*, David Foster argues that in Arenas' novel:

writing, the creation of a radically private text, becomes [the protagonist] Arturo's only form of salvation and, yet, paradoxically, also the confirmation of his need to escape through an induced suicide from the prison house of his oppression as a human being. Writing is a form of definitive, if pathetic liberation for Arturo. (71)

In both his fictional and autobiographical writing, Arenas writes suicide as both a personal and public response to an unlivable political situation.

The difficulty Arenas has in writing AIDS is ultimately in the disease's irredeemable nature. While he maintains hope that Cuban people will prevail over their adversities and struggles, "one day, eventually, the people will overthrow Cuba" (xv), Arenas loses hope

that he will win his personal battle with AIDS. Although he testifies to the insidious ways the virus has been politicized and made a public concern, Arenas comes to face HIV/AIDS as a private and internal struggle with mortality. He cannot redeem or even explain his condition in the same way that he can write and contextualize collective homophobia, forced labour, imprisonment, and exile. When he writes about these adversities, he not only breaks silences about persecution and injustice but, I believe, Arenas also tried to redeem or make something out of the losses of freedom, home, and nation that he has survived. However, he finds that there is nothing redeemable from the AIDS-related loss of his quality of life and the loss of his ability to write. Furthermore, as his readers, we are left with nothing redeemable from the loss Arenas' death creates in both the communities of literature and humanity in general.

In reading the tensions of the activist aesthetic in *Before Night Falls*, I have begun to ask what it means for Arenas' autobiography, and specifically its frame, to be read, if not as an AIDS narrative, then as a narrative about the difficulty of writing about AIDS. This question is especially pertinent now as the 1992 book has recently received renewed attention with its re-publication and with the release of Schnabell's film version in 2000 (Americas) and 2001 (Europe). The dynamics of HIV/AIDS have changed dramatically in the eight years between the book's initial publication and the release of the film. Not only have AIDS-treatment options in the USA and HIV-related containment policies in Cuba changed significantly since the first publication of *Before Night Falls*, but so has the world's collective visibility of AIDS in the new millennium. HIV/AIDS is shrouded in a new kind of insidious silence: HIV/AIDS is in real danger of becoming invisible in the West and is being viewed with a neocolonial visibility in "the Rest." The "real" AIDS crisis points of the last five years were seen to be in "Third-World" or "developing" countries. While no good could come from downplaying the statistics that clearly show how quickly HIV is spreading and how AIDS-related deaths are increasing in sub-Saharan African, the Caribbean and Latin America, and South East Asia, we should be aware that the West's reading of these statistics and the consequent Western proposals to change them often emerges from a deeply imbedded imperial consciousness. Current patent laws and pharmaceutical legal battles demonstrate that many Western governments are still more concerned about producing money, the business of capitalism, as opposed to using money to improve social conditions. It is hence not an exaggeration when *The Observer's* Nick Mathiason writes in a December 2000 of the UK newspaper that "access to cut-price HIV pills would save millions of

lives worldwide” (6). Two decades into the epidemic, AIDS remains a disease identified with ‘Otherness’ and silence but the terms of this ‘Otherness’ and silence have changed.

This short essay asks many more questions than it answers. Arenas’ difficulty in writing about HIV/AIDS in 1990 may be read differently a decade after his death. In the new millennium, Latin America is reporting exploding rates of HIV-infection and AIDS-related deaths, new HIV-treatments exist but are only widely available in the West, and Cuba’s controversial HIV/AIDS policies continue in voluntary form. Arenas was besieged by AIDS-related illnesses at time in the virus’ history when hope was hard to maintain, and his illnesses kept him from his life project of writing. While *Before Night Falls* is a text of a particular history, I also believe it is a text that can illuminate our present and our futures. Arenas ends *Before Night Falls* by saying “I do not want to convey to you a message of defeat but of continued struggle and of hope” (317). Although Arenas is unable to find a sense of hope in the particular context of his struggle with HIV/AIDS, his testimony—especially to the difficulty of writing AIDS—should serve as a reminder to us to try to find hope. We must continue to pursue new ways of reading, writing, desiring, and relating to one another in our struggle to survive and change the HIV pandemic. We will not redeem the losses of the past and present, but we may be able to prevent the losses of the future.

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## LA RECREACIÓN DEL GÉNERO GÓTICO A TRAVÉS DE LA PERCEPCIÓN SENSORIAL: LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA HIPOTIPOSIS EN *AURA* DE CARLOS FUENTES\*

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La literatura gótica se caracteriza por ser una “literatura de sensaciones”, que al adentrar al lector en la dimensión psicológica de los protagonistas, incorpora en el entramado narrativo un plano descriptivo más cercano al lector de lo habitual. El género gótico<sup>1</sup> revive historias y leyendas que han permanecido en la cultura popular como inexplicables. Por esta razón, la trama se ambienta en un *locus* de acción cargado de elementos arquetípicos que contribuyen a enmarcar lo sobrenatural. Lo gótico es oscuridad, pero una oscuridad construida intencionadamente a partir de imágenes, objetos, animales e historias, creando con todos estos ingredientes un caldo literario que desorienta al lector. El efecto buscado es llevar al receptor del texto hasta el más absoluto desconcierto de los hechos, aunque siempre augurando un nefasto desenlace de la acción. Para que la mezcla narrativa surja efecto, se tiene que dejar el escenario interno de la novela en penumbra, descalificar cualquier acción sensorial, y así, desconcertar al lector-personaje.

En *Aura* se recrea al pie de la letra el encuadre literario requerido que sigue los dictámenes culturales de este tipo de género, ya que “casi toda la acción ocurre en una atmósfera de penumbra, cuando

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\* Me gustaría expresar mi gratitud a la Dra. Marianne David por sus comentarios críticos durante la elaboración de este artículo.

<sup>1</sup> Una de las primeras obras de ficción considerada gótica nos remite a *El Castillo de Otranto* (1765) de Horace Walpole o *El monje* (1796) de Matthew Gregory Lewis. Ambas creaciones surgen como reacción al racionalismo predominante en el siglo XVIII, utilizando para ello enclaves de desarrollo de la acción que resultan novedosos y poco convencionales para la época. Encontramos escenas de misterio en parajes lejanos preferiblemente de Europa, fenómenos sobrenaturales, escenas de horror y duda sobre la realidad dentro de la ficción narrativa.

no de completa oscuridad, que además de diluir las diferencias entre el día y la noche acaba por reducir casi a la nada la importancia de la luz, tradicional representante sensorial de la racionalidad” (Herrera-Montero 46).

Octavio Paz caracterizó *Aura* como una novela: “both macabre and perfect (as the genre demands: geometry as the antechamber of horror)” (Oliveira 238). En las palabras de Paz se nos están definiendo dos aspectos vitales que guardan relación con los hechos de la narración: el género gótico y la simetría semántica. Esta última, que establece un vínculo definido entre el lector y los protagonistas, opera en el hecho descriptivo edificada por el autor a partir de su conocimiento profundo de este enclave genérico:

Fuentes, educado en los Estados Unidos y habiendo vivido largos años fuera de México, conoce especialmente bien la literatura inglesa, incluyendo la gótica. Por cierto, que varias obras de Fuentes ejemplifican su interés en lo gótico, los cuentos de fantasmas, y horror y lo diabólico. [...] Con sus extensos conocimientos de crítica y teoría literarias y su uso, durante décadas de varias formas de intertextualidad, no sorprende que Fuentes incorpore elementos góticos en su narrativa. (Pérez 11)

Carlos Fuentes se vale del artificio retórico de la hipotiposis para construir el plano descriptivo, estableciendo un vínculo de unión entre el género literario y el grado de descripción que se desarrolla en la novela. Por hipotiposis nos referimos a “la presentación o descripción de una persona o de un objeto, hecha con gran riqueza plástica de anotaciones y matices sensoriales de forma que pueda producir al lector o receptor la sensación de presencia o evidencia de dicho objeto”.<sup>2</sup> Esta taxonomía de la descripción, que en el presente estudio identifico como el principal mecanismo que conforma el plano semántico, refuerza la construcción del hilo narrativo, por lo que en el análisis de la obra tomo como referencia momentos en la trama en los que se da primacía al discurso de la percepción sensorial, y en los que la hipotiposis no sólo refuerza la intencionalidad descriptiva argumental, sino que además, ayuda a sustentar el entramado gótico al aproximar la percepción del protagonista a la del lector:

Todorov considera que es importante entender que las visiones en una obra literaria no se refieren a una percepción real del lector —como una percepción de factores exteriores a la obra— sino que la percepción tiene que ser inherente a la obra en sí, dirigida a un

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<sup>2</sup> Estébanez Calderón, Demetrio. *Diccionario de términos literarios*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2001. (p. 508).

destinatario (o “narratorio”) virtual. La importancia literaria de las visiones *no se fija solamente en la percepción de lo que se percibe, sino que incluye también quién percibe.* (énfasis añadido, Bejel 466)

Dentro de esta relación recíproca entre el receptor del texto y el arquetipo presentado en la trama, advertimos un primer elemento que unifica la percepción sensorial en el lector a modo de desconcierto discursivo, mediante el uso de la inusual voz narrativa en segunda persona. Esta marca lingüística<sup>3</sup> funciona a la manera de agüero o destino en el lector, quien camina *in aeternum* con el protagonista —sin poder persuadirle— encerrado en “un espejo hablado, reflejando no sólo su presente sino su futuro inmediato, infundiendo así su devenir de un fatal automatismo” (Paiewonsky-Conde 8), que ya leemos en las primeras páginas, “Lees ese anuncio... Lees y relees el aviso... Tú releerás” (9); un elemento-guía introductorio que seduce al lector-personaje hasta el lugar macabro hacia el que se ve inevitablemente impedido.

Un anuncio en el periódico sirve de preludio-señuelo ante el que sucumbe Felipe Montero, el protagonista, como cabe esperar en este tipo de narraciones: “se solicita historiador joven. Ordenado. Escrupuloso. Conocedor de la lengua francesa” (9). Éste lo interpreta como un aviso “que parece estar dirigido especialmente a él: un joven historiador con conocimientos de francés requerido para trabajo secretarial” (Merino 136), para de este modo trasladarnos hasta el umbral de la casona donde delante de la cual “tocas en vano con esa manija, esa cabeza de perro en cobre, gastada, sin relieves: semejante a la cabeza de un feto canino... imaginas que el perro te sonríe y sueltas su contacto helado” (11). En la manecilla de la puerta, se extiende querer asociar este material con la significación y augurio de lo demoníaco. Es palpado por la mano del protagonista, con la consecuente reacción que este contacto perceptivo provoca “soltando el contacto helado”, y acompañado a su vez por el lector, viendo cómo lo aparentemente material se personifica en un gesto humanizado de animal-persona: “imaginas que el perro te sonríe”.

A partir de este momento nos adentramos en el *Sancta Sanctorum* de sensaciones góticas, donde Felipe es consciente del abandono de lo terrenal que se describe como si de una despedida se

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<sup>3</sup> Otro recurso que contribuye a edificar la significación de la obra desde el punto de vista lingüístico, es el que apunta Nelson Rojas al hablarnos de la categoría verbal como elemento que realza el proceso descriptivo: “the selection of active verbs instead of stative verbs, which tends to impart a dynamic character to the still-life descriptions in the novel” (860).

tratará: “frunces el ceño porque la larga fila detenida de camiones y autos gruñe... Tratas inútilmente de retener una sola imagen de ese mundo exterior diferenciado” (12). Al mismo tiempo, mediante esta caracterización se hace referencia a una bipolarización entre la ciudad, o mundo exterior, y el interior de la casa,<sup>4</sup> pasando de un hábitat<sup>5</sup> animado a otro en el que la vida es escasa y se respira lo inerte.

Ya en esta segunda dimensión nos describe, a la vez que transmite, sus sensaciones tanto visuales como olfativas: “intentas penetrar en la oscuridad... puedes oler el musgo... la humedad... las raíces podridas... el perfume adormecedor y espeso” (12). A continuación, una voz de mujer activa su percepción auditiva ante la negación de la capacidad visual, privándole de romper el maleficio de oscuridad instaurado del que podría salir encendiendo un “fósforo”: “No...no es necesario. Le ruego. Camine trece pasos hacia el frente y encontrará la escalera a su derecha. Suba por favor. Son veintidós escalones. Cuéntelos” (12). Esta escena se complementa con el elemento romántico del perfume, para confirmar al lector la presencia claustrofóbica del aroma de la mortífera naturaleza que le rodea.

Numerosos objetos recrean al personaje-lector estableciendo un enlace semántico entre las distintas tonalidades, que pertenecen a una misma gama y sirven de entorno decorativo, y que en su devenir discursivo instauran paulatinamente el hábitat gótico: “La luz combinada de la plata (gris), cera (blanco), vidrio (blanco), dibuje esa cofia de seda que debe recoger un pelo muy blanco” (14). Observamos a través de los ojos de Felipe para depositar nuestra atención como lectores en “Los vasos y las cucharas de aluminio... los demás vasos manchados de líquidos blancuzcos” (15). Es una acumulación cromática de colores fríos que entrelazan mediante este mecanismo, el vínculo perceptivo entre el lector y el protagonista:

As the novel unfolds, the reader's questions concern not only what will happen, but what is happening as well. Explanations are required. The reader's discoveries are gradual, made as Felipe makes them.

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<sup>4</sup> El interior de la casa “se perfila, pues, como una zona intermedia, interior al devenir del presente histórico que excluye, y exterior al pasado estático que incluye. Se perfila como el ámbito del pasado vivido, del pasado en el presente” (Paiewonsky-Conde 13).

<sup>5</sup> El traslado de Montero a la casona en las primeras páginas de la obra se asocia con una separación definitiva del mundo exterior, “una vez que entra en la casona, Montero ya no sale más” (Zeit 82).

If the reader has understood better than the protagonist, it is only because he is more perspicacious, not because he knows more. As it becomes more and more obvious that all is not “normal” in Consuelo’s house, the reader’s tension and expectation grow along with Felipe’s confusion and anguish. (Titiev 404)

No son sólo las sensaciones visuales las únicas que se repiten de manera paralela, sino que el frío<sup>6</sup> se propaga para inundar todo aquello que palpa el protagonista: “toca la tuya con unos dedos sin temperatura que se detienen largo tiempo sobre tu palma húmeda” (13).

Un cromatismo amarillento caracteriza la mirada de la anciana tía Consuelo en su primera aparición, quien se escenifica ante Felipe en toda una representación perceptivo-visual:

Quando vuelves a mirar a la señora, sientes que sus ojos se han abierto desmesuradamente y que son claros, líquidos, inmensos, casi del color de la córnea amarillenta que los rodea de manera que sólo el punto negro de la pupila rompe esta claridad... piensas en el fondo de su cueva seca. (16)

Esta percepción del color se asocia en toda la obra con el mismo significado de “lo caduco”, como los “papeles amarillos escritos con una tinta de color mostaza” (28), cromatismo que entrelaza la pigmentación con la posterior percepción visual del protagonista y la recepción textual del lector.

Más adelante, la anciana confirma el regreso de la efigie femenina, que introducía a Aura, y que escuchábamos al cruzar el umbral de la casona:

- Le dije que regresaría.
- ¿Quién?
- Aura mi compañera, mi sobrina. (17)

El personaje de Aura tiene la cualidad de entrar y salir de la narración de manera indefinida, como cuando escuchamos su voz por primera vez en la escena de la escalera, o por la simple significación de su caracterización nominal: “In English and Spanish this word of Greek extraction means an invisible emanation or vapor; or in medicine a sensation that comes before an epileptic seizure of hysteria” (Oliveira 242). Del mismo modo, y dentro de la extrañeza que suscita ella, ejercita todo un ritual de comportamiento hasta que nos permite percibir visualmente sus ojos:

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<sup>6</sup> “Varias imágenes táctiles sirven el mismo propósito al sugerir el frío, opuesto al calor que simboliza la vida; por ejemplo: Su contacto helado (11); unos dedos sin temperatura (13); sientes un frío húmedo (22); tu espina helada (41)” (Zeitv 89).

La muchacha mantiene los ojos cerrados, las manos cruzadas sobre un muslo: no te mira. Abre los ojos poco a poco como si temiera los fulgores de la recámara. Al fin podrás ver esos ojos del mar que fluyen... vuelven a la calma verde ... tú los ves y te repites que no es cierto, que son unos hermosos ojos verdes... que has conocido o que podrás conocer... como si te ofrecieran un paisaje que sólo tú puedes adivinar y desear. —Sí. Voy a vivir con ustedes. (18)

La evocación del color verde, y más importante aún, su percepción bajo diversas formas materiales y humanas dentro del mundo agri-dulce al que acaba de acceder el joven becario —mediante la aceptación voluntaria de compartir techo con Consuelo y Aura— acentúa el ejercicio de hipnosis que esta última despliega con su verde mirada, dotando a este cromatismo de una constante significación en la obra que se enlaza semánticamente, desde el elemento húmedo y vegetal del musgo que se nos introducía al comienzo de la narración. Para Titiev, el color verde comparte un claro antecedente<sup>7</sup> con la obra de Michelet, *La Sorcière*, de la que se desprenden paralelismos en el argumento, como por ejemplo el que la crítica considere una “bruja” a la señora Llorente para su perfecta inserción dentro del género gótico:

Fuentes places great emphasis on the striking green eyes and the habitual green clothing of Aura and the young Consuelo. In Michelet we learn that green is Satan's color, and an important step in the medieval woman's evolution to sorceress is the acquisition of a green dress which she subsequently wears constantly. (401)

Como ya he mencionado, Aura tiene los ojos verdes, sin embargo, es llamativo el hecho de que Consuelo compartiera esta misma afinidad cromática en su juventud: “*ma douce Consuelo, toujours drappé dans des velours verts, verts comme tes yeux*” (39), tal y como la acostumbraba a llamar su marido. Este uso del color es un mecanismo más del paralelismo de sensaciones que se ramifican a lo largo de toda la novela:

El simbólico color verde predomina por todo el interior: Aura tiene ojos verdes, se viste de verde y hasta las cortinas que se ven desde la calle son verdes. El lector debe tener presente la asociación del verde con la lujuria (como también, de manera irónica, con la convención de nueva vida). [...] El color verde por lo general simboliza la sexualidad (además de la primavera, renovación de la vida). (Pérez 16)

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<sup>7</sup> Otra de las fuentes que se han barajado en relación con la novela son los escritos de Poe, quien también construye la narración a partir de una falaz percepción sensorial que sufre el protagonista y que es transmitida al lector “Poe’s “Ligeia” also plays a role in shaping Fuentes’s Aura. Fuentes finds in Poe the unique play with narrative voice, the construction of an unstable narrator whose perceptions cannot be trusted” (Zubizarreta 141).

Ante los sonidos estridentes emitidos por la anciana, el protagonista vuelve a activar involuntariamente su capacidad auditiva: “La anciana sonreirá, incluso reirá con su timbre agudo” (19), antes de que Aura le muestre el único lugar en toda la casa en el que podrá recrear un espacio iluminado, sirviéndose de su percepción auditiva a fin de hallar el camino adecuado: “al seguir los pasos de la joven te das cuenta de que no la sigues con la vista, sino con el oído: sigues el susurro de la falda, el crujido de una tafeta” (19). Este sentido es de una mayor utilidad para el joven becario y es recogido por el lector como una recreación del espacio interno de la descripción. Felipe sufre una inevitable ceguera momentánea, y por consiguiente, padece de una anulación de su campo visual debido a la carencia de luz en el lugar: “asciendes detrás del ruido, en medio de la oscuridad, sin acostumbrarte aún a las tinieblas” (19).

El uso de candelabros posee una intencionalidad tanto estética como semántica, al reforzar el enclave gótico de la obra, reincidiendo en cómo la percepción de la luz ejerce una constante “tortura sensorial” sobre Felipe, y al intensificar el contraste entre la atmósfera de luz y de sombra dentro de la casa: “sonríes al darte cuenta de que ha bastado la luz del crepúsculo para cegarte y contrastar con la penumbra del resto de la casa” (20). Tras entrar en su habitación —después de la tortura sensorial que acabamos de compartir— podemos ver, gracias a los ojos del protagonista una vez habituados a la intensidad del contraste. El protagonista acopia una multitud de sensaciones que le producen los objetos que allí se encuentran y que continúan en la tónica estética característica de los relatos góticos. Dichos ornamentos se enlazan con las descripciones anteriormente mencionadas, en consonancia con la misma atmósfera cromática de seres inertes que se respira en la casa:

Recorres con la mirada el cuarto: el tapete de lana roja, los muros empapelados, el sillón de terciopelo rojo, la vieja mesa de trabajo, nogal y cuero verde, la lámpara antigua de quinqué, luz opaca de tus noches de investigación, el estante clavado encima de la mesa, al alcance de tu mano, con los tomos encuadernados [...] un baño pasado de moda: tina de cuatro patas con florecillas pintadas, sobre la porcelana, una agumanil azul. (20)

Felipe se recrea visualmente mirándose en un espejo ovalado, realizando todo un ritual para pronunciar el nombre de Aura: “mueves tus cejas pobladas, tu boca larga y gruesa que lleva de vaho el espejo... cuando el vaho opaque otra vez el rostro, estarás repitiendo ese nombre, Aura” (20). Juan Goytisolo atribuye a este elemento decorativo, en el que se ve reflejado el protagonista, una función explicativa de la obra en términos del desarrollo de la acción, ya que

“Carlos Fuentes nos hace entrar, a medida que el relato se extiende, en un deslumbrante juego de espejos, en un extraño ceremonial de desdoblamientos e identidades que indefinidamente se repiten, como el rumor del eco entre las montañas” (43).

De igual manera, todos los objetos que rodean a Felipe se hallan dispuestos en el lugar apropiado y suponen una reacción, no sólo en el personaje que es testigo ocular del entorno, sino también en el lector. A ésta contribuyen las imágenes enumeradas con una significación dentro del marco gótico que conforman un espacio antagónico: “cruzan el salón: muebles forrados de seda mate, vitrinas donde han sido colgados muñecos de porcelana, relojes musicales, condecoraciones y bolas de cristal; tapetes de diseño persa, cuadros con escenas bucólicas, las cortinas de terciopelo verde corridas” (22).

La seda, uno de estos elementos, dota al lugar de una cierta belleza que se ve complementada con los “tapetes de diseño persa” y las vitrinas en las que se hallan “muñecos de porcelana”, como si estuvieran encerrados aunque atentos a lo está ocurriendo. “Los cuadros de escenas bucólicas” también despliegan esta doble función de observar y ser observado, una manera recíproca de contemplar que vincula al protagonista con los objetos, incrementando así la descripción gótica del lugar. Se cierra la enumeración descriptiva con las “cortinas de terciopelo verde corridas”, que parecen estar hechas de la misma tela y del mismo color que embriaga a Aura.

Felipe menciona explícitamente el término “gótico” aludiendo a la manifestación artística homónima que reviste el lugar: “Todos los muros del salón están recubiertos de una madera oscura, labrada al estilo gótico, con ojivas y rosetones calados” (22). También identifica el mismo estilo en uno de los objetos sobre el que deposita su tacto, “acariciando el respaldo de madera de la silla gótica” (24).

El sentido del gusto aparece a modo de preludeo, unificando la vinculación personaje-lector que se estrecha mientras se comparten más sensaciones. El gusto comienza por el olfato, que nos revela los ingredientes del menú<sup>8</sup> que van a degustar: “Tú aspiras el olor punyente de los riñones en salsa de cebolla” (22); el “líquido rojo [...] beben ese vino particularmente espeso”, elemento acuoso de la comida, un cromatismo sugerido que se ve reforzado al “tomar unos

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<sup>8</sup> Cuando se sientan a la mesa el protagonista se percata de que “han sido dispuestos cuatro cubiertos” (22), aunque irónicamente en la novela tan sólo escuchamos la voz de tres personajes, la señora Cosuelo, Felipe y Aura.



tomates enteros, asados” (22), realizando así una breve pausa discursiva después de “enteros” para que, por un momento, el lector piense que se tratan de tomates en estado natural, pero a continuación, y tras leer “asados”, descubra que los tomates son de un color rojo todavía más acentuado y de una tonalidad negruzca.

En más de una ocasión degustamos el sabor de la comida en el paladar ajeno de Felipe, desde la cena: “comes tu cena fría —riñones, tomates y vino” (43), a su estado sensorial interior, “saboreando la acidez pastosa de la lengua” (49), o su percepción gustativa inmediata, “apenas pruebas el café negro y frío” (53). Es un crudo menú que no varía de contenido: “sientes en la boca, otra vez, esa dieta de riñones, por lo visto preferida de la casa” (33). Esta sucesión de estímulos sensoriales produce en el lector-personaje una sensación de repudio hacia la atmósfera de descomposición que habita la casa.

El tacto nos remite a una repulsión al contacto mutuo entre los personajes, pese a las ansias del protagonista por depositar sus manos sobre Aura. En varias ocasiones, nos narra cómo está a punto de tocarla, “pero ella aparta el contacto de tus manos” (23), en una amalgama de sensaciones que lleva a Felipe a corroborar el correcto funcionamiento de su sistema sensorial, “tú vuelves a dudar de tus sentidos” (24) al encontrarse bajo un hechizo hipnótico: “cada vez que desvíes la mirada, las habrás olvidado ya que una urgencia impostergable te obligará a mirarla de nuevo [...] el mareo que te producen esos ojos verdes” (23-24), que desemboca en “a crisis of identity [...] to maintain the integrity of self” (Zubizarreta 144).

El protagonista nos conduce al lugar donde se encuentra la señora Consuelo, y enumera gráficamente una serie de imágenes que describen su entorno y santuario; su “camisón de lana burda” (25) sobre el que posa la vista Felipe —que la identifica con el macho cabrío denotando lo demoníaco— y cuyo tacto imagina sobre la piel de Consuelo “piensas en el roce continuo de la tosca lana sobre la piel” (25). De esta manera, se establece una oposición semántica, en primera instancia, entre el tejido que envuelve a la anciana como si fuera una segunda piel “la burda lana”, hasta que se divide la escena entre ella rezando “como si librara una batalla contra las imágenes”, y los iconos religiosos presentes que se transmutan mediante su invocación en fuerzas antagónicas a su servicio “Cristo, María, San Sebastián, Santa Lucía, el arcángel Miguel” (25).

Por la carencia de luz, Felipe se ve incapaz de encontrar unos

papeles amarrados con un cordón amarillo en un baúl, a lo que Consuelo le responde: “Es que yo estoy tan acostumbrada a las tinieblas” (27), resaltando así la deficiencia perceptiva del protagonista. El “baúl” es caracterizado por Paiewonsky-Conde como un espacio alternativo a la bipolarización previamente establecida entre el espacio interior y el exterior:

El espacio interior no sólo se define por contraste con el exterior, se define también con extensión de una tercera zona: el baúl. A manera de núcleo, el baúl crea un espacio interior dentro del espacio interior. En ese lugar estático se preservan los residuos del pasado puro: los manuscritos de Llorente y el traje de boda de Consuelo. (13)

Otro de los elementos que acentúan la discrepancia perceptiva entre los personajes son “los gatos”, ya que activan el oído del protagonista-lector: “te detienes a escuchar los maullidos dolorosos de varios gatos... para cerciorarte de que son varios gatos... Son los gatos-dirá Aura-. Hay tanto ratón en esta parte de la ciudad” (21). Sin embargo, la presencia felina alrededor de la casona, a la que aluden tanto Aura como Felipe, es puesta en duda por la anciana:

—Debería usted traer los gatos aquí.

—¿Gatos? ¿Cuáles gatos? (27)

Hacia el desenlace de la novela llegamos al punto máximo de desarrollo del mecanismo descriptivo de la hipotiposis, y de la percepción sensorial como su principal agente retórico. Felipe Montero nos introduce a una visión de connotaciones históricas, insertadas en la narración, a través de la vida legendaria del ya fallecido esposo de Consuelo, el general Llorente, a la vez que más adelante se recrea el sentido del gusto y del tacto en la anciana: “Consuelo de pie, erguida, transformada, con esa túnica azul de botones de oro, charreteras rojas, brillantes insignias de águila coronada, esa túnica que la anciana mordisquea ferozmente, besa con ternura, coloca sobre los hombros” (38) para denotar un canibalismo del recuerdo que animaliza la nostalgia del pasado.

Felipe consuma su contacto sexual con Aura en el que se nos relata cómo actúan el tacto y el olfato que nos sirven de guía ante la anulación del campo óptico: “Alargas tus propias manos para encontrar el otro cuerpo, desnudo... No puedes verla en la oscuridad... pero hueles su pelo el perfume de las plantas... sientes en sus brazos la piel más suave y ansiosa... tocas en sus senos la flor entrelazada... reteniendo en las yemas de los dedos el cuerpo de Aura” (36).

A partir de este encuentro materializado, el protagonista acciona

los mecanismos para idear un plan y escaparse con Aura de la tiranía de la anciana, intentando convencerla de su propósito para huir de la atmósfera inerte que habita en la casa:

- Dime que te irás conmigo en cuanto...
- ¿Irnos? ¿Adónde?
- Afuera, al mundo. A vivir juntos...
- Trata de enterrarte en vida. Tienes que renacer Aura. (51)

Sin saberlo, y en un juego de palabras, el personaje-lector descifra parte del hechizo ante la sensación de angustia que se intensifica al leer los papeles del General Llorente, que hablan de Consuelo y del final de una anterior historia predestinada: “La encontré delirante... Gritaba: ‘Sí, sí, sí, he podido: la he encarnado; puedo convocarla, puedo darle vida con mi vida’” (55).

Tras haber realizado un análisis explicativo de la hipotiposis en la novela, hay que mencionar que este recurso retórico no sólo refuerza la intencionalidad descriptiva en la trama argumental, sino que además, sustenta el entramado gótico que encuadra la narración. La percepción sensorial unifica este propósito compartido en todo momento por el receptor, que como colofón lleva al protagonista a despertar del terrorífico sueño en el que se ha visto sumergido desde el comienzo de la acción, mostrando cómo mediante la hipotiposis se da primacía al discurso sensorial.

La novela cierra sus últimas páginas rompiendo el encantamiento del joven becario para despertar<sup>9</sup> finalmente junto al lector, plasmando —en tan sólo una escena final— la sensación macabra augurada y reiterada durante el transcurso de la novela. Ante la oscuridad que ciega toda posibilidad de campo óptico, la percepción sensorial, junto con la posterior confirmación de los falsos estímulos enviados, sirve de pórtico al ansiado contacto físico en la recámara; una negación de la capacidad sensorial<sup>10</sup> cómplice del nefasto final: “las luces de las veladoras se habrán extinguido” (58). Felipe se deja llevar una vez más por el deseo de percibir con su tacto el cuerpo de la joven. Deposita las manos en plenitud sobre

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<sup>9</sup> Desde el principio, el lector augura un desenlace apoteósico que confirme el enclave gótico de la novela; un despertar final “de este ambiente de penumbra y oscuridad, tendiente a la creación de un ámbito mágico regido por un deseo que derrota a las defensas racionales” (Herrera-Montero 47).

<sup>10</sup> “El carácter irracional y dionisiaco de la experiencia a que se ve arrastrado Felipe es recalcado de numerosas maneras, desde la casi anulación de la vista, el más apolíneo de los sentidos en el decir de Nietzsche, hasta los sacrificios de gatos y un macho cabrío” (Herrera-Montero 46).

Aura y, a continuación, recupera la percepción visual racional que le había abandonado al traspasar el umbral de la casa, corroborando los estímulos recibidos a través de cada uno de los sentidos en su conjunto. La vista confirma el hecho de que no es Aura la que está y ha estado con él, sino una dualidad unificada en una sola de la que se ha visto preso: "Aura and Consuelo are *one*, and it is *they* who tear the secret of desire from Felipe's breast" (Fuentes, "On Reading and Writing about Myself" 536). Aura-Consuelo, tan sólo una falacia o engaño más de sus-nuestros sentidos: "Aura... te amo... tus ojos abiertos, en el pelo plateado de Consuelo, la mujer que volverá a abrazarte cuando la luna pase" (60).

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**FROM SAROJINI NAIDU’S “CURVED AND  
ELOQUENT LITTLE MOUTH” TO ARUNDHATI ROY’S  
“MASS OF UNTAMED CURLS AND  
SMOULDERING DARK EYES”:  
STEREOTYPICAL DEPICTIONS OF FEMALE,  
INDIAN AUTHORS IN REVIEWS OF THEIR WORK**

*Melissa Purdue*

*“Language, any language, has a dual character:  
it is both a means of communication and a car-  
rier of culture.”*

—Ngugi wa Thiong’o<sup>1</sup>

Sarojini Naidu, writing around the turn-of-the-century, is often described in contemporaneous reviews of her poetry as an exotic other, as infant-like, and as a less capable writer of English literature. Although these descriptions are disturbing, they are not surprising when one considers the wide-spread acceptance of imperialistic attitudes at the time.<sup>2</sup> What is surprising, however, is that these same types of descriptions continue to appear nearly one hundred years later in reviews of another female, Indian author: Arundhati Roy. Yet the aim of this paper is not simply to point out that these reviewers are wrong in their word choices or to defend Naidu and Roy. In her essay “Where Have All The Natives Gone?” Rey Chow asserts that “many critics of colonialism attempt to write about these peoples [non-white citizens of postcolonial countries] in such a way as to wrest them away from their status as symptom or object” and that the result of these attempts “is a certain inevitable subjectivizing” (125).

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<sup>1</sup> The epigraph is from Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, written in 1986.

<sup>2</sup> I will be focusing largely on reviews found in British periodicals for this essay, although a small portion of them will be from North American periodicals as well. Thus, the patriarchal and imperialistic attitudes I mention here largely refer to the British colonial mind-set.

Thus the intent of this paper is not to wrest Naidu and Roy away from the objectification, infantilization, and exoticization that exists in reviews of their work and to emphasize that such practices are deplorable. The degrading nature of these reviews should already be apparent. Rather, this paper strives to make known that these historical practices are still quite prevalent today, to examine the reasons behind these persistent stereotypes, and to consider how and why the authors' use of the English language is discussed by reviewers.

Before delving into the reviews of Naidu and Roy, a brief biography of each is needed to justify the comparison of the authors. Sarojini Naidu was born in 1879 to a fairly upper-class family. Because of her privileged economic standing, Naidu was educated and taught English from an early age. Despite her childhood aversion to the language, she later published numerous volumes of poetry in English: *Songs* (1895), *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), and *The Broken Wing* (1917). Although Naidu is chiefly remembered as a poet, she was also "deeply involved in politics" and played an important role in the struggle for independence (Tharu & Lalita 330). She worked closely with Gandhi, was elected president of the Indian National Congress, played a part in setting up the All India Women's Conference, and was appointed governor of Uttar Pradesh (Tharu & Lalita 331). Likewise, Arundhati Roy also grew up learning English and in 1997 published a novel, *The God of Small Things*, in the language. Roy is also currently a diligent activist and has "immersed herself in such causes the anti-nuclear movement," the Narmada dam controversy, and has donated the proceeds of the Malayalam edition of her book to support Dalits and Dalit literature (SAWNET). Further, the similarities between the two have not escaped the notice of at least one critic. Elleke Boehmer, in her essay "East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy" compares the authors.<sup>3</sup> Although it is obvious, it is also important to point out that both authors are females and that any reviews of their

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<sup>3</sup> While Boehmer's interesting essay does address the similar critical reception of Roy and Naidu, this paper will differ in some important ways. Boehmer's main focus is to establish the similarities between the two authors and to point out that both authors have been stereotyped as exotic others. While Boehmer's essay is useful in setting up my argument, I will be taking the comparison of Naidu and Roy that she also addresses and extending it to include reviews that not only use the stereotype of exotic, female other but also infantilize both authors, lock them into an essentialized past, and make troubling proclamations about their use of the English language. Further, to show these stereotypes I will be working closely with a number of reviews on Naidu's poetry and Roy's novel that Boehmer does not.



literature will be complicated not only by ethnic stereotypes, but by gender stereotypes as well.

While the other similarities are important, these two authors were chosen specifically because they each write in English. Although English is now one of the official languages of India, it is also a language that was brought into the country by the colonizing British. The British presence created a bilingual elite. Thus, not only was English a language of power during colonization, it “continues to be a language both of power and of prestige” (Kachru 291). It should be recognized that both Naidu and Roy are members of this bilingual elite class. This bilingualism gives the authors access to both British and Indian peoples, but it also serves as a barrier to complete acceptance in either group. As Albert Memmi states, “most of the colonized will never have the good fortune to suffer the tortures of colonial bilingualism” (106). Naidu and Roy both experience the difficulties involved in being an Indian author writing in English. It is the non-acceptance of these Indian authors by the popular British press that will be dealt with in this paper.

### **The exotic other: Sarojini Naidu**

Colonizers frequently positioned the colonized female as an exotic other. This phenomenon has been examined by many theorists.<sup>4</sup> Anne McClintock, for example, describes the way colonizers viewed the land, and the female population of the land, as a “pornotropics” trope (22). Within this tradition the colonized female is a site on which the colonizing male places sexual desire (McClintock 22). This way of looking at the female other is prevalent in reviews of Sarojini Naidu’s writing. Although the focus of book reviews is usually the literature in question, reviews of Naidu instead often center around her body and physical appearance. One should note that while there is “very little that is new about a woman writer being either censured or praised, and, either way, objectified, on the basis primarily of her gender,” the issue is more complicated when the female writer is also of a different ethnic group than the reviewer (Boehmer 65). The objectification then arises jointly from her identity as an exotic other and from her gender.

The majority of contemporaneous book reviews on Naidu’s writing, whether by male or female, British or American reviewers,

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<sup>4</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are just some of the theorists who have addressed this subject.

position Naidu as an exotic other. For example, in his review of Naidu's poetry Milton Bronner begins by describing Naidu as a "strange-gifted daughter of a wonderful race" (62). This description immediately sets Naidu apart from the reader and positions her as different; she is from a strange land and a different culture. Bronner goes on to explain that Naidu comes "from a land of cobras and those who master them" (64), that she expresses "the soul of the East" (64), and that her poems are "redolent of the Hindu world" (66). We see from these descriptions that Bronner is largely intrigued by Naidu's writing because she is mysterious and different. This positioning of Naidu as exotic is found in other reviews as well. Edith M. Thomas describes in detail the physical body of this author from "the mysterious Orient" (50). She tells the reader how she "observed the slight lithe figure in its Indian dress of flowing lines, the dusk hair falling upon the shoulders; the delicately modeled face, the curved and eloquent little mouth, and tenderly pointed chin, and above all, the soft, dark, quick-glancing eyes [...]" (Thomas 51). Nearly the entire review revolves around physical descriptions of Naidu, and it only briefly touches on her poetry. It is interesting to point out that this reviewer is female as well. Whether one argues that Thomas describes Naidu in this manner because she has been taught to write in a patriarchal fashion with a patriarchal language, or that this exoticized description occurs because Naidu is of a different nationality than Thomas and that gender is not so much the issue, the fact remains that these types of physical descriptions of Naidu existed and were prevalent.

Not only is Naidu's physical body exoticized by these reviewers, though, so is her writing. In fact, the majority of the praise given to her poetry focuses on what the reviewers see as its exotic subject matter. She is praised not so much for her talent as a writer, but for her willingness to reveal the secrets of a strange land to the western eye. For example, Bronner claims that Naidu's work is especially important because it is a "fresh voice from the inside" (68). Finally, Bronner excitedly explains, there is an Indian writer who can tell us about Indian life in *our* language. Another reviewer asserts that like the "elusive personality of this young Hindu woman," her poems are "strangely alluring" (T., E. 47). This reviewer goes on to claim that *The Golden Threshold* is a valuable contribution "to our understanding of the modern Hindu heart" (T., E. 49). Yet another reviewer praises Naidu's "profound native understanding of India" and is grateful that she shares this understanding in her poetry (Z., M.D. 169). Finally, Harold Hannyngton Child delights "to find an Indian atmosphere making fragrant English poems" (569). These reviewers all

proclaim Naidu's subject matter the chief aspect of her poetry deserving praise. But why does Naidu choose to be "a fresh voice from the inside"? Edmund Gosse, a British writer, tells us that he instructed her to write this way.

Gosse, who wrote the introduction to *The Bird of Time*, was disappointed in Naidu's poetry originally because it was "Western in feeling and in imagery" (4). He admits, in the very introduction to her book of poetry, that he explained to Naidu that what he, and other British readers, wished to receive was:

not a rechauffe of Anglo-Saxon sentiment in an Anglo-Saxon setting, but some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul. (Gosse 5)

He proudly reveals that he is the one who steered Naidu away from discussing "robins and skylarks, in a landscape of our Midland counties" (Gosse 5) and led her instead to express emotions which were more "tropical and primitive" (Gosse 6). His greatest praise for her poetry, like the above mentioned reviewers, is that it allows the western reader a peek into the eastern world and is able to give them understanding. This, Gosse tells us, is because she has been trained by them to write in their fashion (Gosse 6). So we see in the very introduction to one of Naidu's books of poetry a British male taking credit for making Naidu's literature more exotic, for teaching her to cater to the desires of the colonizer.

### **The infantilization of Naidu**

In addition to positioning the colonized writer as exotic, the discourse of infantilization is also prevalent amongst colonizers. Albert Memmi refers to this attitude as "paternalistic" (76). This discourse entails viewing the colonized as child-like and simple, as someone in need of proper education and discipline. It also encompasses the colonizer viewing himself/herself as the parent of the colonized. The colonizer then becomes the one who bestows knowledge and judgement onto a child-like people. Ashis Nandy, in *The Intimate Enemy*, also explores the issue of infantilization as being tied to the practice of locking the colonized into an essentialized past. Nandy argues that the infantilization of Indians came about in "two mutually inconsistent ways" (17). The first way was by positing that "civilized India was in the bygone past; now it is dead and 'museumized'" (17). Second, "the colonial culture postulated that India's later degradation was not due to colonial rule [...] but due to aspects of the

traditional Indian culture which in spite of some good points carried the seeds of India's later cultural downfall" (18). Thus, India's virtues were explained away as products of its contact with the colonizers and not as inherently Indian qualities. That is, the colonizers were positioned as the parent-like educators who enlightened a child-like people who might have been great in the past, but who were now in need of instruction.

This way of viewing the colonized as infantile is found in reviews of Naidu's poetry. If we continue with Bronner's review we see that in addition to describing Naidu as exotic, he also depicts her as infantile. Bronner explains that Englishmen have "always been ready to lend sympathetic ears to the verses of these Hindu children, these children matured after the manner of the Oriental" (61). Here, he explicitly compares Naidu to a child and positions himself as a patronizing parent who graciously reads her attempts at adult literature. Bronner also goes on to refer to Naidu as a "precocious poetess" (61) and as a "little rebel" (67). Again, both of these appellations relegate Naidu to the position of a child who needs parental guidance. Other reviews continue in the same fashion. One reviewer of *The Golden Threshold* makes clear that the author is "a very young girl" (*Academy* 1075), and another echoes this, calling her a "slender reed of a girl" (Thomas 51). One should also here remember the parent-like relationship Edmund Gosse clearly felt he had with Naidu. Gosse, in his own opinion, is the one who taught Naidu (as one would teach a child) how to be a true poet.

Additionally, just as Naidu's literature is exoticized as is her body in reviews, so too is her literature often described as infantile. In an anonymous review of *The Golden Threshold*, her poetry is described as "quaint and charming little songs" (*Times* 464), and Bronner refers to her poems as either "lovely things" (66) or "dainty things" (67). In the hands of these reviewers Naidu's poems become only "things," not even worth of being labeled literature. The reviewers clearly see Naidu's poetry as child-like and not meriting serious commentary. It is important to point out here that in positioning Naidu and her poetry as infantile, these reviewers are attempting to revise Naidu into someone who is non-threatening. These descriptions portray Naidu as unimposing, obedient, and harmless. They create a very different picture of the Naidu than that of at least one later reviewer who perhaps sees her more accurately. This anonymous reviewer argues that Naidu betrays:

an inflammable nationalistic spirit and an obdurate race consciousness that lead her to fling challenges at the white race, at the integrity

of the white man's honour, and even at the audacity of the white man in daring to take interest in this India that she feels he has treated so foully. ("Persons & Personages" 265).

The picture offered by this reviewer is so vastly different from that of Bronner or Thomas that one must either believe Naidu went through a complete change of personality, or that these beliefs were at least partially present and were altered or ignored by those who portrayed her as an infantile, exotic other.

### **Naidu's use of the English language**

In his *A History of Indian English Literature* M.K. Naik argues that Indian-English literature "is not part of English literature, any more than American literature can be said to be a branch of British literature" (4). Naik feels that Indian-English writing constitutes a literature of its own and should not be seen as simply imitating the British tradition. Additionally, D. Maya explains that "the Indian English novelist is involved in the potentially independent process of specific self-definition and national recreation" (159). That is, not only does Indian-English literature not follow in the British tradition, it helps to re-create a separate India apart from one defined by colonialism. It is, perhaps, beliefs such as these that reviewers of Naidu's poetry are responding to, whether consciously or not. There seems to be a trend in reviews of Naidu's poetry to explain away all positive aspects of her writing as a result of her British form or style. What is good about her writing, in their opinion, is that she has learned the British mode of writing well. Credit is only partially given to Naidu as an Indian or as a writer. Naidu's Indian identity is forgotten in discussions of her style of writing even though it is prioritized in discussions of her exotic subject matter. Indian authors are seen as "Hindu boys and girls who have written in our tongue" (Bronner 62). These reviewers do not acknowledge the possibility that Naidu, and other Indian authors writing in English, make the language their own. Or, if they do recognize that Indian authors are creating something uniquely their own (although in the English language), they choose to emphasize instead how the literature fits into the British tradition, perhaps to undermine any agency they see arising from the literature.

### **Have the descriptions changed?**

#### **The portrayal of Arundhati Roy as exotic other**

To what extent, one hundred years after Naidu was writing, and 54 years after India gained its independence, are the stereotypes of

Indian women as “exotic other” or “infantile other” still present? The answer, as found in contemporary, British reviews of Arundhati Roy, is that these stereotypes are still widely propagated. There are two differences, however. First, these stereotypes are not voiced as blatantly as in reviews of Naidu’s poetry. You will not find a present-day critic referring to Indians as “Hindu children” as Milton Bronner did. Yet, although much of the language has changed, the stereotypes are still readily apparent. Second, the whole body of reviews on Roy is much more balanced. Every review one finds about Naidu stereotypes her, or her writing, in some way. However, there are a large number of reviews on Roy’s *The God of Small Things* that discuss Roy and her novel in a respectful and conscientious manner. For my purposes in this paper, though, I will be concentrating on the equally vast number of reviews that perpetuate the above mentioned stereotypes.

Just as Naidu’s body was exoticized in reviews of her literature, so too is Roy’s physical appearance up for scrutiny in reviews of her novel. For example, Jan McGirk’s article on Roy in the *Sunday Times* begins with a physical description of Roy: “With her mass of untamed curls and smouldering dark eyes Arundhati Roy could be the model for one of her romantic heroines.”<sup>5</sup> McGirk goes on to emphasize how Roy is “beautiful” and even comments on the way her dachshunds “yipped at her slender legs.” Roy’s body is made prominent and exotic throughout the entire article. Jason Cowley, in his review of Roy’s novel, also emphasizes her physical appearance. Cowley comments on how Roy is “not much more than 5ft, and her legs scarcely touch the ground.” He also reveals, while studying Roy’s face, that “a small diamond gleams in one nostril, catching the light.” Additionally, in the *Sunday Telegraph* David Robson proclaims Roy “glamorous” and “engaging.” Although the concentration on Roy’s body is not as prevalent in reviews as the emphasis on Naidu’s body was in hers, it is clear that stereotypes of the exotic, female other are not dead. In fact, they still find their way into such unlikely places as reviews of literature where one would expect to hear about, well—literature.

Roy’s novel, along with her physical appearance, is also revealed in for its exoticness. Edward Said explains in his widely-read book *Orientalism* that “the Orient was almost a European invention, and

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<sup>5</sup> *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*, along with other newspapers like *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *Financial Times*, *The Daily* (or *Sunday*) *Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, and *Mail On Sunday* which will be used later in the paper, are all based in London.

had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes” (1). After reading Christine Barker’s review of Roy’s novel in the *Birmingham Post* one can change the “was” in this statement to “is.” Barker emphasizes the exotic nature of the novel’s world and tells readers that “Roy’s India smells and tastes like something hot and foreign” (36). She goes on to explain that the characters’ methods of dealing with problems “have more than a hint of jasmine and coriander and advice under the acaranda tree” (Barker 36). Barker delights in the novel chiefly because she sees it as a window to a strange, exotic land—much like earlier reviewers of Naidu. We see that Said’s description of how “the orient” was historically viewed is still with us today.

### **Has the female, Indian author reached adulthood over the last 100 years?**

As with the issue of exoticism, the infantilization of Roy is much less frequent than that of Naidu. Yet, this practice is also still alive and should be acknowledged. For example, in a review of Roy’s novel in *The Times*, Jason Cowley describes Roy as having the “vitality of a child,” and observes that there is “something childish about Roy,” emphasizing the comparison yet a third time by claiming that Roy views the world “as a child might” (Cowley). Cowley also reveals to the reader that Roy “is 37, but could be ten years younger” (Cowley). This reviewer seems set on infantilizing Roy. Cowley is not the only reviewer to do so, however. Tom Deveson, in his *Sunday Times* review compares Roy’s writing to “diary jottings or a teenager’s letters” (Deveson). Again, we see the lack of respect for a female, Indian author materialize through the comparison of an adult woman to a child or teenager.

### **Roy’s use of the English language**

The commentary on Roy’s style of writing falls into two categories: critics either dismiss it as inferior and complain that Roy does not know the proper nuances of English grammar, or they embrace it because it follows in the tradition of British canonical writers (just as reviewers praised Naidu for doing). Praise for the novel as a well-written and Indian piece of writing is scarce. According to these reviews, the value of Roy’s novel rests on how well it imitates the British style: if they do not like the book they argue that Roy does not have a firm grasp on how the English language works, and if they do like the novel they emphasize that it is good because it is so very

similar to the writing of certain well-respected British authors.

The complaints of those reviewers who do not like Roy's novel all sound strangely similar. For example, the same David Robson who we earlier learned described Roy as "glamorous" and "engagingly modest," has no praise for Roy's work itself. He describes her novel as "clumsy" and her prose style "awkward, crab-like" (16). In fact, Robson goes so far to comment on Roy's winning of the Booker prize saying her victory left him "close to despair" (16).<sup>6</sup> He melodramatically claims that if *The God of Small Things* is the novel of the year, "then the novel is dead" (16). Another critic, Alex Clark, laments the novel's "fairly serious weaknesses," saying Roy "is much given to anarchic capitalisation, in Order to Underline her Point, the repetition of phrases and symbols, and rapid-fire series of short, portentous sentences" (T16). Clark ends his review claiming that at times the novel is "desperately overwritten and sadly under-edited" (T16). Another critic tells of the novel's "technical defects" (Hensher 38), and the last chair from a previous year's Booker panel proclaimed Roy's writing "execrable" (qt. in Whitworth). Finally, a third reviewer, Tom Deveson, argues that the novel is "fatally compromised" because "Roy habitually capitalises phrases" and because "there are countless one-word and two-word sentences and paragraphs, usually verbless." All of these reviewers focus on what they perceive as Roy's misuse of the English language. She does not capitalize properly, she creates one- or two-word sentences, they complain. Essentially, these reviewers do not like Roy's writing because it is not what they are used to—it is not "British-English." These reviewers assume that this style of writing must be accidental; it must be a result of not knowing proper English grammar. Not one of these three reviewers acknowledges the possibility that Roy's style of writing is purposeful. Here is a passage from Roy's novel to demonstrate the style in question:

As Estha stirred the thick jam he thought Two Thoughts, and the Two Thoughts he thought were these:

(a) *Anything can happen to Anyone.*

and

(b) *It's best to be prepared.*

Having thought these thoughts, Estha Alone was happy with his bit of wisdom. (Roy 185-86)

The capitalization in this passage does not seem to be random at all; it is used here to emphasize certain important words. The

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<sup>6</sup> Arundhati Roy won the Booker McConnell book prize in 1997 for *The God of Small Things*. She was the first non-expatriate Indian author, and the first Indian woman to have won.



capitalization, italics, repetition and format all appear to be purposeful, not accidental. Although this manner of writing may not be appealing to some, there does at least seem to be method behind it.

In her book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist Thinking Black*, bell hooks argues that the work of liberation “demands of us that we make a new language, that we create the oppositional discourse, the liberatory voice” (hooks 29). Although hooks is here specifically addressing the struggle of black authors in North America, her statement certainly can also be applied to other groups of people such as Indians who have had a colonizer’s language imposed on them. Perhaps Roy is doing just what hooks advocates; she is creating a “new language” which is an “oppositional discourse.” It seems very likely that Roy is perfectly aware of the traditional grammatical rules of the English language and that she purposefully modifies them. Boehmer argues just this: “Roy’s writing persistently works an unsettling and undoing of the English language” (70). Thus, the reviewers are then not simply responding to bad grammar, they are also—whether consciously or not—rejecting a new Indian-English language found in the novel.

While many reviewers rejected the novel because of its perceived grammatical flaws, other critics embraced it for the inverse reason: they saw it as a very correct and British piece of writing.<sup>7</sup> Lisa Jardine, for instance, argues that *The God of Small Things* “is steeped in the canonical English writing which still provides the backbone of Indian education” (22). Jardine also states that Roy’s novel “pays playful homage to Shakespeare and Dickens, and her mischievous games with words depend on a rich literary language running back to Chaucer” (22).<sup>8</sup> This British reviewer even goes so far as to praise

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<sup>7</sup> It should also be noted here that some British reviewers recognized the language of Roy’s book as something new and non-British. Carla Power comments that “Roy’s novel, written in Delhi and with phrases of Malayalam mixed into the distinctly Indian English, was resolutely homemade” (55). Likewise, Christina Patterson finds the random capital letters of Roy’s prose evidence of a “fresh perspective and a sparkling sense of humor” (17). Patterson also finds Roy’s invented compound nouns and adjectives “wonderfully witty” (17).

<sup>8</sup> Although, as stated earlier, the purpose of this paper is not to systematically sift through reviews of Naidu and Roy and to contradict stereotypes or refute inaccuracies, it is hard to resist here offering my opinion that Roy’s writing is vastly different from Shakespeare, Dickens, and Chaucer. Specifically, Roy’s literary language in no way “depends” on Chaucer’s earlier example. Compare, for instance, a passage from Roy’s novel to one from Chaucer’s *Sir Thopas*:

Green weed and river grime was woven into her beautiful red-brown hair.  
Her sunken eyelids were raw, nibbled at by fish. (O yes they do, the deepswimming fish. They sample everything.) Her mauve corduroy pinafore

Roy's novel as "our literature" later in the review (Jardine 22). Not only does she praise the novel for being written in the British fashion, she praises it and claims it as British literature. So, it seems if a piece of Indian-English writing is good it is because it follows the British example, but if it is perceived as bad it is blamed on the author's misuse or ignorance of proper British English.

### The broader reception of Roy

While the reception of Naidu and Roy in British periodicals has been the focus of this paper, the wider reception of Roy should also be addressed in order to gauge how pervasive these colonial stereotypes are. Do Indian or Japanese or Canadian reviewers perpetuate the same images of female, Indian authors that have been discussed? The answer is complicated. For example, one review in *The Statesman* (an Indian newspaper) gives a balanced portrayal of Roy's novel and reveals that it has received both positive and negative reactions. Further, it avoids referring to Roy as either exotic or infantile. Yet, other Indian reviewers do seem to occasionally participate in the same stereotyping that British reviews use. Sumit Mitra, in *India Today*, infantilizes Roy by telling how she "chirped in a high, almost girlish note" (50); N.A. Karim, in *The Hindu*, praises Roy's novel because of its "Joycean use of the English language;" and Rohit Brijnath and Binoo K. John, in *India Today*, blatantly state in their review "it is better if we first get this out of the way, that she is truly beautiful" (114). These comments problematize the issue of colonial stereotypes. It seems that stereotypes which were created by colonizers are also absorbed into the cultures of the colonized. It is

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said *Holiday!* in a tilting, happy font. She was as wrinkled as a dhobi's thumb from being in water for too long.

A spongy mermaid who had forgotten how to swim.

A silver thimble clenched, for luck, in her little fist.

*Thimble-drinker.*

*Coffin-carwheeler.* (Roy 238)

Sire Thopas wax a doghty swayn;

Whit was his face as payndemayn,

His lippes rede as rose;

His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,

And I yow telle in good certayn

He hadde a semely nose. (Chaucer 213)

Chaucer and Roy differ in subject matter, style, tone and, I would even argue, language. Chaucer's English is almost a completely different language from Roy's English. In fact, I'd be hard-pressed to find a single similarity.

inevitable that some Indians might unconsciously incorporate the images of themselves that the British projected over many years. Further, it is also possible that these comments result from gender stereotypes just as much as they do from colonial ones. Infantilizing a woman or focusing on her physical appearance are not practices confined only to the discourse of colonialism. These are also subtle ways of discriminating against all women.

Roy's novel was reviewed in other countries as well, and again we see mixed reactions. A review by Michael Drexler in a Japanese newspaper, *Mainichi Daily News*, seems fairly straightforward and free of stereotypes as do Conrado De Quiros' in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Ong Sor Fern's in the *Singapore Straits Times*, John Moore's in *The Vancouver Sun*, and Philip Marchand's in *The Toronto Star*. Yet, another article in *The Toronto Star*, by Krishnan Guruswamy, describes Roy as "smiling impishly and twirling curly black locks straying from her hair band" (D1). Additionally, Mary Jordan writes in *Business Day* (a South African newspaper) that the novel is "irritatingly overhyphenated, incomprehensible in parts and an unbearable drudge to read" (15), and Eileen Battersby of *The Irish Times* laments the novel's "self-indulgent use of capital letters for emphasis" and the "profusion of three- and four-word paragraphs," concluding that "for all its lyric pretensions, this is a crude performance" (8). While we see that some of the same types of comments that were prevalent in British periodicals do occur in newspapers of other countries, it seems they are much less frequent.<sup>9</sup>

### Concluding thoughts

Although contemporary reviews of Arundhati Roy's novel are more balanced and do not so blatantly infantilize or exoticize Roy as reviewers of Naidu did, many of the same sentiments are still present, only couched in different language. It seems that many of the ways theorists argue that colonizers viewed those whom they colonized still exist in the minds of numerous individuals (not all British). Additionally, while exotic and infantile descriptions of female, Indian authors have decreased greatly since the time Sarojini Naidu was

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<sup>9</sup> In order to fully analyze these reviews in relation to this paper's argument one would have to first discuss the individual histories of each of these countries and then explain the relations each country has had with both Britain and India, and the English language. This paper does not attempt such an ambitious project. I refer to these reviews here simply to broaden the discussion of how Roy has been received by pointing out what has been said of her in non-British periodicals.

writing, it seems that disparaging the ability of these authors to write in English is still a perfectly acceptable criticism. Whether it is Bronner describing Naidu as infantile or Deveson shaking his head at Roy's grammar, the attempted dismissal of literature by Indian women, resulting from patriarchal and imperialistic attitudes, continues to exist today. We must also be careful to realize that gender and colonial stereotypes are tied up together in these reviews. Naidu and Roy are not only discussed and described in terms of their Indian identity, they are also commented upon as women authors. Nonetheless, it is clear that the effects of colonialism are present in reviews of British reviews of Indian literature. Many reviewers today continue to revive colonial tropes in order to suppress the writings of other cultures.

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## MUJER, MITO E HISTORIA: UNA LECTURA DE LAS ESTRUCTURAS TEMPORALES EN *MALENA DE CINCO MUNDOS* DE ANA TERESA TORRES

Maribel Acosta-Lugo

En la última década Ana Teresa Torres ha emergido como una de las escritoras venezolanas más prolíficas y reconocidas. Su quehacer literario se caracteriza, entre otras cosas, por su experimentación con innovadoras modalidades de ficcionalización de la Historia y su preocupación por presentar en ella la perspectiva femenina. De esta forma, se dedica a reflexionar sobre los hechos pretéritos para interpretarlos y reconstruirlos desde la perspectiva de individuos silenciados y sus circunstancias particulares. Como resultado, su escritura se convierte en una herramienta eficaz para comprender y revisar el presente, a la vez que plantea múltiples interrogantes sobre el futuro. Por ello, Torres no sólo se ha convertido en denunciadora de los problemas que han enfrentado las mujeres, sino que al mismo tiempo lleva a cabo un proyecto de búsqueda de sentido y de dirección que permita la concientización y el desarrollo integral de este grupo marginal.<sup>1</sup>

Una somera revisión de su trayectoria novelística iniciada en 1990 con la publicación de *El exilio del tiempo*, seguida por *Doña Inés contra el olvido* (1992), *Vagas desapariciones* (1995), *Malena de cinco mundos* (1997) y su obra más reciente *Los últimos espectadores del acorazado Potemkin* (1999), evidencia que Ana Teresa Torres inserta en la ficción la mirada, la experiencia y la imaginación

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<sup>1</sup> En una entrevista con Rubén Wisotzk, Torres ha señalado que escribir sobre el pasado: “Es una necesidad del ser humano de contarse a sí mismo, de tratarse de entender y de ser entendido dentro de una historia. A mí el pasado no me interesa para volver, el pasado me interesa para entender dónde estamos” (2). También, la crítica Gloria da Cunha-Giabbai en su libro *Mujer e historia. La narrativa de Ana Teresa Torres* (1994), al referirse a las primeras novelas de Torres comenta que uno de los rasgos distintivos de su narrativa lo constituye “la perfecta simbiosis de historia y literatura como fuente de conocimiento” (31).

femenina, la cual siempre ha estado ubicada en la periferia que le ha asignado el patriarcado. De esta forma, impugna la lógica falocéntrica dominante, desarticula el sistema de pensamiento dualista por el que éste se rige, revalora a la mujer y reescribe la Historia.<sup>2</sup>

Dentro de su producción narrativa se destaca la obra *Malena de cinco mundos*, su primera novela publicada en el exterior, no sólo porque constituye un buen ejemplo de la preocupación de esta autora por la posición que ha ocupado la mujer a través de la Historia, sino que se puede apreciar un cambio en la manera de hacerlo. En primer lugar, trasciende los límites de lo nacional para abarcar el mundo occidental. Asimismo, presenta la trayectoria de dicho sector marginal a través de los tiempos con sus rebeldías, sueños y esperanzas. Como resultado, señala los orígenes y la evolución de las estructuras en las cuales se han cimentado y justificado las creencias del presente.

## **I. Questionando la Historia o el arte de la subversión**

El acercamiento de la Historia a la ficción transmite a la literatura las dudas sobre la causalidad de ésta. Según Hegel, la apariencia de una conexión evolutiva de la historia es sólo una función de los esfuerzos de la mente para comprender el mundo de relaciones puramente espaciales bajo el aspecto del tiempo. Por su parte, Nietzsche impugna la veracidad de la Historia por lo que se propuso destruir la creencia en un pasado histórico desde el cual los hombres podían aprender una sola realidad, para él había tantas verdades sobre el pasado como perspectivas individuales. Siguiendo esta línea de pensamiento, Foucault se refiere a dicho fenómeno como “la insurrección del conocimiento subyugado”, lo que genera la aparición de “aquellos contenidos históricos que han sido enterrados

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<sup>2</sup> Torres, en su ensayo “Ficciones del despojo”, puntualiza los diferentes papeles que ostentan los sexos en la Historia, a la vez que señala la necesidad de insertar a la mujer en ésta ya que “La Historia con mayúsculas es un campo de dominio importante. La escriben, primero, los que pueden escribir, y segundo, los vencedores. La Historia grande, la historia oficial, está escrita por hombres. Creo que eso es bastante claro. El problema es que la Historia la hacen los hombres y las mujeres, aunque éstas suelen tener una aparición mucho más discreta en los créditos. El problema no se mitiga escribiendo una novela en la cual la protagonista sea una heroica y maravillosa mujer. No tiene nada que ver con eso. La Historia de la que estoy hablando no es la de las batallas, ni de las independencias y revoluciones, a las que tan aficionados somos los latinoamericanos. La Historia de la que estoy hablando es la de la reproducción y creación cotidiana del tejido social, de la vida esa que ocurre todos los días” (169).

y disfrazados en una coherencia funcionalista o de utilización formal” (81). Dentro del contexto de la novela histórica hispanoamericana Alicia Chibán le otorga una función específica, la de “...despojar a la historia anterior de su jerarquía distante y absoluta para atraerla hasta un presente que sólo esclareciéndola consolidará un punto de partida hacia el futuro” (117).

En los albores de la novela histórica en Hispanoamérica, ésta se vio marcada por la indagación de la identidad nacional. A este rasgo distintivo, Luz María Rivas, en el prólogo al libro *La Historia en la Mirada*, añade que actualmente en este tipo de narrativa también se puede apreciar la exploración “de la mujer y de los marginados como sujetos históricos en una búsqueda tanto individual como colectiva” (11). Aspectos como mujer e historia aparecen íntimamente relacionados en las obras de muchas escritoras contemporáneas. Entre ellas, Ana Teresa Torres se vale de continuos retrocesos al pasado a través de la ficción, para presentar un enfático rechazo al poder<sup>3</sup> patriarcal y así relatar la desafortunada historia de la mujer en la sociedad occidental, quien a pesar de sus luchas ha sido silenciada. Como respuesta a este fenómeno, la novela cuestiona e impugna las diversas manifestaciones del poder, junto con el cambio que se ha experimentado en Occidente respecto a los conceptos de Autoridad e Historia.

Esta escritora venezolana se vale de diferentes estrategias para presentar y examinar la posición de la mujer a través de la historia. Entre las estrategias narrativas que utiliza para la construcción del mensaje de sus novelas están los juegos temporales entre pasado, presente y futuro. Con ellos nos transporta en el tiempo y nos remite a diversos contextos para mostrar la división que ha existido a través de los siglos entre las posibilidades que tienen los hombres y las mujeres en la sociedad. En resumen, en sus novelas se subordina la recreación de ciertos periodos históricos a la presentación de una visión filosófica de la historia de la mujer en general. También se relata la versión de los ignorados y para lograrlo critica, ridiculiza y cuestiona la Historia, desmitificando el pasado, impugnando el presente e ironizando el futuro, para lo cual se vale de diversas estrategias en la organización temporal. Con esto en mente, el propósito del presente trabajo es analizar el texto *Malena de cinco mundos* para demostrar cómo la autora, al disponer de diferentes posibilidades temporales para organizar su obra, relaciona secuencias que

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault define el poder como: “...aquello que reprime. El Poder reprime la naturaleza, los instintos, una clase, a los individuos” (“Two Lectures” 90).

generalmente están separadas dentro de una organización cronológica, de tal forma que se interpreten mutuamente para producir un nuevo sentido.

## **II. El tiempo como instrumento técnico y formal en la estructura narrativa**

El tiempo constituye un elemento estructural clave dentro de cualquier narración,<sup>4</sup> por lo que hay múltiples pormenores que se pueden tener en cuenta al momento de estudiarlo. Al hablar de tiempo suelen incluirse tres tipos: el tiempo real, o en el que ocurren los hechos dentro de una realidad verídica o supuesta; el tiempo narrativo, o la dimensión en que se narran los hechos; el tiempo verbal o del discurso que puede coincidir con el anterior y está dado más que todo por elementos gramaticales.

Tradicionalmente, cuando se habla de análisis temporales también se pueden distinguir diversos tipos de estructuras. En primer lugar se encuentra la narración lineal progresiva, en la que los hechos se relatan siguiendo un orden cronológico que refleja el curso natural de la vida. Esta correspondería a la narrativa tradicional. En segundo lugar, se halla la narración lineal anticronológica, en la cual los sucesos se cuentan en línea recta, pero proyectados hacia atrás, por lo que constituye una inversión en el tiempo. Un tercer tipo lo conforma la narración en línea quebrada. En este caso la acción no sigue un trazo recto, ya sea progresiva o retrospectivamente, sino que se desarrolla alternativamente en planos temporales correspondientes a diferentes momentos, es una especie de contrapunto entre presente, pasado y futuro. Los recursos imprescindibles para dicha estrategia, usando la terminología de Genette, son la analepsis y la prolepsis (*Figures of Literary Discourse*). También se encuentra la narración circular, la cual consiste en un tipo de estructura en la que la acción describe o forma un anillo en el tiempo, de tal manera que el final vuelve al comienzo. Finalmente está la narración en espiral, que es muy parecida a la anterior y la diferencia radica en que, mientras en la narración circular la acción concluye, en la narración en espiral jamás termina ya que recomienza continuamente repitiéndose hasta el infinito.

Estudios más recientes como el de Alfonso Toro establecen tres grandes categorías al hablar de estructuras temporales en la narrativa

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<sup>4</sup> Para un estudio de la importancia del tiempo en la novela; ver a Paul Ricoeur en *Time and Narrative*.

contemporánea. Él aclara que esto no significa que se excluyan otras, sino que pueden ser incorporadas en clasificaciones más amplias. También señala la posibilidad de encontrar formas mixtas. La primera categoría temporal que postula el mencionado crítico es la constituida por la conducción lineal-circular de la acción, la cual se caracteriza por el empleo de analepsis y prolepsis. Luego destaca la simultaneidad que, a su vez, está marcada por el uso de permutaciones y superposiciones. Por último, incluye la basada en la transformación de estructuras temporales anacrónicas en un sistema de relaciones acrónicas.

A pesar de las diversas alternativas que ofrece el tratamiento del tiempo en la investigación textual, este estudio se limitará al análisis de la organización temporal, lo cual se puede definir como la suma de procedimientos para el arreglo temporal de las unidades de acción en relación con la equivalencia y desviación entre el tiempo de la acción y el textual.

### **III. La construcción de la novela**

Dos de los aspectos más relevantes de *Malena de cinco mundos* son la fragmentación de la narración y la escisión del concepto monolítico de Historia. La trama se fracciona al intercalar diferentes momentos de la vida de la mujer, representada por Malena, a través de varios momentos históricos y espacios geográficos; sin embargo la gesta de este grupo marginal está filtrada por la perspectiva masculina. Por otro lado, se recurre a la narración escindida que establece una tensión dialéctica frente a la historiografía. Dicha tensión resulta de la desmitificación de la Historia como estructura homogénea y de la inclusión tanto de sectores como de ámbitos tradicionalmente silenciados por ella como las voces no oficiales, los espacios domésticos y la sexualidad femenina, entre otros.

El argumento de la novela se centra en las diversas vidas que le han asignado a la protagonista los Señores del Destino. Estos cinco seres celestiales tienen la potestad de disponer y controlar el devenir de los seres humanos. Malena, inconforme especialmente con su última vida, se queja ante este grupo ya que ellos habían faltado a su promesa de permitirle ser una mujer moderna. Para analizar su caso, deciden realizar un recuento de las reencarnaciones anteriores de la reclamante, con las cuales se muestra el panorama histórico de la existencia femenina a través de diferentes tiempos y lugares. Además, Malena denuncia el escamoteo de otra de sus vidas, la de Diótima en la antigua Grecia. Al final, dicho tribunal celestial le

concede otra oportunidad, pero lejos de acceder a los reclamos de Malena y de validar sus ofrecimientos, procuran que ella vuelva a enfrentarse con los tropiezos anteriores, por lo que el ciclo aparentemente volverá a repetirse.

Como se analizará más adelante, el paso del tiempo aparece alterado y marcado por la narración de las diversas vidas de la protagonista. Estas reencarnaciones siguen teniendo, de alguna manera, ecos o reminiscencias entre sí, particularmente con la Malena de finales del siglo XX, por lo que se postula la circularidad como rasgo constante que siempre ha acompañado a la existencia femenina. Asimismo, se sugiere que todo continuará igual en el futuro si se sigue bajo la imposición de los paradigmas del falogocentrismo. Además, en la novela se modulan una serie de variaciones sobre el tema del tiempo a través de reflexiones que se interpolan en la narración ya sea por parte de la protagonista, de los Señores del Destino o del narrador omnisciente.

#### **IV. Linealidad, simultaneidad y circularidad: sistemas dominantes de las relaciones temporales y su efecto en el desarrollo de la Historia de la mujer**

En *Malena de cinco mundos* Ana Teresa Torres recurre a la superposición de tres estrategias temporales principales: una progresiva y lineal, una simultánea y otra circular en su deseo de convocar el pasado para entender el presente y especular sobre el futuro de la mujer. Como la misma escritora ha señalado en su ensayo "Ficciones del despojo" es necesario llevar a cabo un recorrido a través del tiempo porque:

la mujer, en el proceso de ocupar un espacio propio en el discurso social, tiene que partir de un lugar históricamente negado. Su nostalgia, por lo tanto no es una recuperación del paraíso perdido, sino, por el contrario, la constatación de una carencia como sujeto simbólico, en la que reconoce la precariedad de los otros (170).

Este viaje transtemporal reinscribe modelos femeninos, los cuales han sido omitidos en el acervo de la cultura hegemónica, al desenmascarar los cuarteles patriarcales de la Historia que han hecho de la mujer una marioneta con sus hilos puestos en una amalgama de prescripciones y mitificaciones. Junto con este periplo por la Historia en distintos tiempos y lugares se remite constantemente al presente, en el que se sigue un ordenamiento cronológico lineal.

## A. La linealidad como trampa

La linealidad del relato es identificable con el presente, a lo largo del cual se conocen las labores, juicios, comentarios y determinaciones de los Señores del Destino mientras están reunidos para revisar la petición de Malena. Ellos acuden a sus archivos históricos para determinar los motivos de la querrela presentada. La inminente muerte de esta mujer posiblemente ha suscitado por espacio de unos segundos las más prolongadas y minuciosas evocaciones del pasado, aunque en realidad este tiempo es sumamente breve ya que apenas corresponde a unos minutos.

No obstante, junto con este devenir natural que presenta la acción se observa la refutación del tiempo como línea mediante el artificio de la inmortalidad. En los cinco seres celestiales se enlarga indefinidamente la vida ya que el tiempo para ellos es perenne: “[el tiempo] ... es igual a un minuto que un siglo” (63). Para ellos el tiempo es “ilimitado” (113), lo que a su vez demuestra que se encuentran atrapados en una dimensión atemporal e infinita. Curiosamente, ésta constituye el dominio de los hombres, donde las mujeres no tienen cabida y no se les permite incursionar. En este sentido se podría argüir que para que los sectores relegados a la periferia controlen las riendas de su destino es necesario moverse del margen al centro, lo que equivale a una lucha titánica contra siglos de congregación del poder en ciertas esferas. Si la mujer lograra entrar en esta zona en igualdad de condiciones equivaldría a la muerte del patriarcado. Esta perspectiva encierra el deseo de combatir la praxis del poder como eje de la Historia hecha por los hombres.

Los Señores del Destino no contaban con la capacidad y el tesón de Malena, a la que describen como una “mujer normal y corriente” (11), pero aun así prefieren evitar un enfrentamiento con ella, al igual que lo hacían con “las mujeres destacadas” (10), e intentan evitar su muerte como se aprecia en el siguiente fragmento: “Se nos fue. No hay nada que hacer —exclamaron desolados mientras intentaban retroceder en el tiempo y veían la pantalla del monitor a los de la ambulancia recogiendo el cadáver” (261). Malena, decidida a llegar a la raíz del problema, cuestiona las funciones que éstos llevan a cabo, insinúa su ineptitud para entender los asuntos de la mujer y propone la incorporación al grupo de una Señora del Destino. Este planteamiento desconcierta al referido tribunal y para apaciguarla deciden concederle otra vida. Esta actitud por parte de ellos es muy ambigua, ya que detrás de este gesto aparentemente rectificador se ocultan otras intenciones encaminadas a mantener su posición privilegiada y el control sobre este sector marginado.

Lo anterior se aprecia con claridad al final de la novela cuando al reencarnar en el siglo XXI la mujer se percató que nuevamente va a encontrarse con las mismas condiciones opresoras.

## **B. La simultaneidad**

La simultaneidad en la narración se va dando mediante la superposición y permutación de las sensaciones y recuerdos de Malena, lo que se traduce en una fusión de los tiempos. Como estos momentos, más que al pasado, pertenecen a su conciencia, se puede decir que son estructuras privadas de tiempo porque éste no transcurre. En ocasiones, dichos recuerdos y alusiones conducen al cruce temporal que se hace evidente a través de los espacios tipográficos claramente diferenciados en el relato y por los comentarios del narrador. Un ejemplo de la extrapolación de tiempos pretéritos sería cuando Malena piensa en el nombre de la esposa de Martín, Julia, y trata de buscar en su memoria un referente cercano ya que le parecía muy familiar. De pronto “le vino de golpe la absurda impresión de que ella alguna vez se había llamado Giulia Metella” (28). Otro momento podría ser cuando ella experimenta un “sentimiento de orfandad que la acompañaba como consecuencia de haber sido Juanita Redondo” (115). Como se puede apreciar uno de los artificios utilizados en la novela consiste en el entrelazamiento de la instantaneidad ficticia y subjetiva a un nivel vital objetivo.

El uso de la superposición en la novela para crear la sensación de simultaneidad se puede ver a la luz del episodio en el que a Malena “le sobrevino un recuerdo que localizaba más o menos como una pesadilla del siglo XIII” (179). Esta parte es de sumo interés ya que es la única vez en que se presenta una visión detallada y precisa de una de sus vidas sin tener que recurrir a los archivos de los Señores del Destino. Sin embargo, este hecho no presenta la perspectiva femenina sobre el asunto ya que se narra a través de los comentarios de “un fraile maloliente” (179). Los comentarios del religioso reproducen el discurso que la religión utiliza para referirse a la mujer, el cual carece de argumentos lógicos pero ha sido una de las bases más fuertes en la consolidación del poder patriarcal. Por ejemplo, en clara alusión a Eva y el pecado original el hombre culmina diciéndole sentenciosamente: “Eres culpable porque eres culpable, porque has nacido culpable, porque vienes de la culpa. Albergas la culpa. Eres la culpa” (181). Ella recuerda este incidente por un castigo que le impuso el Quinto Señor del Destino por serle infiel a su marido. Se puede argüir que esto muestra los alcances del poder impuesto por los preceptos falocéntricos, apoyados por



diversas instituciones sociales como la religión, ya que ha llegado hasta un nivel inconsciente. El ámbito de lo onírico, que representa un cosmos carente de orden y de estructuras, aquí aparece dominado por uno de los poderes tradicionales.

La superposición de tiempos también se aprecia cuando Malena, durante su última reencarnación, se sume en un “voluntario recuerdo del siglo XIX” (190). En esta oportunidad la protagonista inventa una vida pasada, en la que se visualiza como una señora casada radicada en París. Ella lleva una existencia insatisfecha, entre algunas razones porque está enamorada de otro hombre y cuando tiene la impresión de que todo va a acabar mal, decide cambiar el curso de los acontecimientos y elabora un final como ella lo desea. Según su opinión no pudo terminar mejor y reflexiona sobre la diferencia entre el que ella inventó y el que hubieran hecho los que escriben su destino. Este episodio causa conmoción en las esferas celestiales, lo que da paso a la presentación de las preconcepciones tradicionales sobre la mujer como su supuesta inferioridad y su incapacidad para valerse por sí misma. Torres no presenta una crítica frontal, sino que recurre al humor al denunciar estas opiniones generalizadas para invertirlas y socavarlas.

La simultaneidad en la novela se crea con la superposición de sueños y el entrelazamiento de recuerdos y sensaciones que la protagonista experimenta en sus vidas. No obstante, otras reminiscencias que ella tuvo sirven como punto de partida para la reconstrucción de los episodios de sus existencias anteriores. De esta manera, sus memorias también constituyen, en su mayoría, analepsis externas, recurso relacionado con otra estructura temporal, la circularidad.

### **C. La circularidad**

Gran parte de la novela estudiada está compuesta por unidades de estructura circular. Las existencias de Malena son episodios que pertenecen al pasado, pero se alternan y, en cierta manera, se recrean con diversos instantes de otras vidas, especialmente la última, lo que contribuye a la circularidad de la narración. Por consiguiente, se puede establecer que existe oblicuidad a nivel de la historia de la mujer, en este caso la de “las Malenas”, la cual se completa con una circularidad a nivel del tiempo. La herramienta más usada para crear este tiempo cíclico es la analepsis, la cual consiste en cambios temporales realizados por el narrador o por un personaje, que van de presente a pasado. Estas retrospectivas son un recurso

narrativo constante que permeabiliza el tiempo del relato. La utilización de éste permite no sólo conocer las reencarnaciones de la protagonista, sino que admite el establecimiento de vínculos entre estas vidas.

La primera existencia de Malena de la era cristiana fue la de Giulia Metela. Ella tiene la súbita sensación de haber encarnado a esta mujer romana cuando estaba pensando en Julia, la esposa de su actual enamorado. No es por casualidad que sus nombres se repitan aunque con pequeñas variaciones lingüísticas. Dichas reiteraciones conforman otra de las técnicas que se utilizan para crear la circularidad en la obra. Los Señores del Destino se asombran de que pueda recordar e indagan en sus archivos la vida de Giulia pero sólo encuentran detalles someros de su existencia. Todo lo que se sabe de ella se narra posteriormente a través de su esposo Lucio Quinto Lucarnio, cuyo expediente a pesar de los avances tecnológicos está cruzado con otra de sus reencarnaciones, la de Martín Spósito, un ferroviario del siglo XX. No debe pasar inadvertido que los nombres vuelven a repetirse ya que el enamorado de Malena, esposo de Julia, también se llama Martín.

Cabe resaltar que las memorias que Lucio tiene de Giulia la presentan como una mujer inconforme y ambiciosa, sin embargo, no expresan directamente la visión parcializada y errónea que este hombre tenía de su esposa. La autora desacredita el discurso del marido por medio de la doble significación de la ironía. Esto se puede apreciar en diferentes instancias, por ejemplo, cuando él se presenta a sí mismo como un hombre noble y sin malicia, pero mediante el relato de lo ocurrido con un esclavo muy joven se desprende que esta imagen no corresponde a la realidad. Al explicar su relación con el chico dice: “Yo le dispensé el trato de un hijo y no quise nunca hacer de él un juguete de placer, aunque él, suponiendo que ese era mi gusto, se arrodillaba entre mis piernas y buscaba mis caricias” (48). Otro ejemplo sería cuando muy a su pesar y en contra de sus ideas sobre la importancia de la fidelidad, este hombre tiene una amante y la trae a su propia casa. Luego de describir este tipo de incidentes se pone en duda lo que sostiene con respecto a su “terrible” esposa. Al final del recuento de su vida con Giulia se puede inferir que los motivos para la inconformidad de este hombre provenían de la dejadez con la que enfrentaba la vida. Lucio prefería siempre el camino fácil y cómodo, lo que chocaba con las aspiraciones de su esposa.

Al terminar este recuento, uno de los Señores del Destino, el Quinto, hace alusión a la próxima vida de Malena, una dama feudal

que corrió con peor suerte que Giulia, sin embargo no se dan más detalles. Esto es una especie de anticipación o prolepsis, otro elemento usado para la creación de la estructura cíclica en el texto.

Otra analepsis nos transporta a la vida de una pícara sevillana que viaja al Nuevo Mundo buscando un cambio y lo que encontró fue una sociedad muy semejante a la que dejaba atrás. Al ser una pícara se puede argüir que representa a una mujer que no se rige por las ataduras sociales, religiosas y sexuales de la época, lo que de primera impresión podría causar confusión y entenderse como un adelanto al no estar sometida a las convenciones sociales. No obstante, en la realidad esto la confina a una existencia completamente periférica ya que no sólo es mujer, sino prostituta y pobre. Su vida no está narrada a través de un hombre, sino de ella misma, lo que va muy a tono con las pautas de la novela picaresca. Debido a las condiciones en las que le tocó vivir fue víctima de la sociedad y de sus diferentes amas: en este caso las propias mujeres son presentadas como las continuadoras de la sociedad estamental y patriarcal.

El nombre de esta mujer encierra una repetición. Ella se llama Juana, como el de la monja que la recogió, pero también el de una mártir, Juana de Arco, lo que sugiere que su vida va a estar llena de tropiezos y sufrimientos. Además, su apellido, Redondo, debido a que la dejaron en una cesta de igual forma, adelanta que está atrapada en un círculo, por lo que su historia es la continuación de otra, que de igual manera se repetirá en el futuro. Otro detalle significativo que resalta la oblicuidad de los hechos es que ella va a parar a una celda al igual que la cortesana del siglo XIII. Por otro lado, su última dueña, doña Manuela Bonavides, a pesar de estar casada tiene una intensa relación amorosa con su primo. Los hechos se repiten porque al igual que la romana de la décimotercera centuria y la dama parisina esta mujer le es infiel a su esposo. El nombre del amante, Alonso Riera, resulta muy revelador ya que sus iniciales (A.R.) son las mismas del “proceso” más significativo en la vida de Malena, Alfredo Rivero (A.R.).

Otra de las retrospectivas en la narración conduce a la vida de Isabella Bruni. Esta mujer se dedicó al estudio y a la ciencia en busca de una explicación para los ciclos reproductivos femeninos. Le tocó vivir en la Italia renacentista y su historia la cuenta un supuesto amante que tuvo luego de la muerte de su esposo. Su ubicación en el Renacimiento resulta muy significativa: en este momento hay una necesidad de reencontrarse con el pasado, con los orígenes. Además es una época crucial en el desarrollo y la renovación

de la sociedad. Este período histórico se caracteriza por la sed insaciable de conocimiento en todas las ramas. Sin embargo, hubo aspectos a los que no se les prestó atención y se continuaron viendo con el mismo lente de épocas anteriores. Una de las fuentes de sabiduría eran los textos y en éstos también se recogían ideas infundadas sobre el género femenino. Por ejemplo, el subtítulo de esta sección proviene de una supuesta cita de un libro renacentista: “Infirmatas, Imbecilitas, Humilitas...” (131). Es obvia la carga paródica de este paratexto, aumentada por otros recursos como el uso de puntos suspensivos, las itálicas y las letras mayúsculas. Al colocar este encabezamiento se le advierte al lector que vaya con cautela al enfrentarse a la narración.

En esta parte se presenta una de las denuncias más fuertes y directas a las estructuras sociales que fomentan y perpetúan el papel subordinado de la mujer. Isabella recurre a las fuentes pretéritas en busca de datos que pudieran esclarecer su investigación y encuentra que la opresión femenina se debía principalmente a la mentalidad moldeada e impuesta por la iglesia.

Decían los frailes, en tiempos pasados, que los hijos mostraban al mundo el placer lúbrico de las mujeres, y al mismo tiempo, acusaban a las estériles de haber sido castigadas por Dios, o consideraban a los hijos malformados como la prueba de sus pecados (139).

Esta línea de pensamiento encierra una indudable contradicción, la cual se explica a través de Isabella en los siguientes términos:

Si la mujer tiene hijos, demuestra su placer sensual, y por ende, su pecado. Si no los tiene, su esterilidad denuncia el castigo divino, y si por desgracia el hijo sufre de alguna enfermedad o malformación, también ello es prueba de haber pecado (136-7).

En síntesis, el hombre ha creado una serie de mitos negativos alrededor de la mujer que se han venido repitiendo a través de los siglos. A ella se le ha negado su valor y se han minimizado sus logros aun cuando se destaque por cualidades especiales como el caso de Isabella. No sólo en su época no se le reconocieron sus méritos sino que esta actitud continúa hasta el presente como se ve en los Señores del Destino, en los hermanos de Malena, en sus enamorados, etc.

En este segmento del relato se menciona a Diótima ya que Isabella escribió un libro de tema amoroso titulado *Del amor enamorado*, el cual giraba en torno a un diálogo con esta figura de la antigüedad en el que “expresaba su descontento porque los comensales del *Banquete* sólo se referían al enamoramiento de los efebos...” (161). Dicho detalle contribuye a la circularidad del relato

por medio de la repetición de nombres ya que Malena denuncia que le fue escamoteada una vida, la de Diótima también. A través de la novela se alude constantemente a la sensación de Malena de haber estado en Grecia mucho antes de su viaje con Alfredo Rivero. Lo que por la insuficiencia de los Señores del Destino al momento de organizar sus archivos lleva a suponer que es posible esta clase de omisiones.

La penúltima vida de Malena fue la de una mujer romántica. Ella comparte el apodo y el nombre con la que vivió en las postrimerías del siglo XX. Ambas se llaman María Elena; la primera parte alude a la Virgen, figura que conjuga el ideal femenino para la ideología patriarcal, mientras que la segunda podría referirse a la Elena causante de la guerra de Troya que encarna a una mujer valerosa.

Esta primera Malena vivía oprimida por su padre quien no la dejaba casarse. Luego de la muerte de su progenitor logra contraer nupcias con su amado pero enviuda prontamente. Ante la imposibilidad de concretar el amor esta mujer padece de “malenitis aguda” (214). La raíz de esta enfermedad según se explica radica en la “alteración del espacio y también del tiempo” (216) ya que Malena “percibe el tiempo como si fuese siempre el mismo momento, como si hubiese un vacío sin tiempo, o el tiempo se le hubiera perdido y estuviera completamente detenido” (216). En este fragmento se aprecia la refutación definitiva del tiempo lineal y la demostración de la plenitud del instante.

En un segmento del diario de Malena ella discurre sobre el tiempo y su relación con el ser humano, sobre lo que sostiene que:

Somos puro tiempo. Pero a veces el tiempo se nos cierra, y no hay nada más mortífero que la sensación de encontrar frente a nosotros una puerta que se niega a dejarnos pasar. La ausencia de futuro nos daña, [...] porque si se me está negado el futuro, puedo decir que estoy muerta. (216)

Estas ideas sobre el tiempo reflejan la inquietud por el porvenir y a su vez cierta desesperanza ya que la certeza de ausencia de destino equivaldría a la muerte en vida.

Como resultado de su dolencia Malena sufre la incompreensión de su familia, sólo su abuela parece adivinar parcialmente lo que la aquejaba, le comenta que es un “espíritu atormentado” (224) y culmina con un tono apocalíptico vaticinándole que será muy desgraciada y que nadie la podrá comprender. El tormento de Malena proviene de sus repetidas insatisfacciones, no sólo en su existencia actual, sino en las anteriores también. En busca de una explicación de sus tormentos esta mujer viaja a Europa y en Viena consulta al

doctor Sigmund Freud. Al sicoanalizarla éste más o menos llega a las mismas conclusiones que la abuela de Malena. A pesar de sus estudios, este médico no logra ayudarla porque su óptica masculina no le permite entender en realidad lo que afectaba a su paciente.

Finalmente, la última de las Malenas, a diferencia de las anteriores, ha podido avanzar en ciertos ámbitos como el profesional. No obstante, aún continúa en la periferia ya que el estancamiento de la sociedad en los parámetros tradicionales del patriarcado no le han permitido moverse al centro. Esta manipulación que el falogocentrismo ejerce sobre la mujer se ejemplifica en la figura de Alfredo Rivero, el “proceso” más importante en la existencia de Malena, el cual no la deja superarse y siempre aparece en su vida como un lastre que la arrastra y detiene constantemente.

Una de las funciones de la circularidad temporal en *Malena de cinco mundos* es apoyar las estructuras míticas para crear la ilusión de transtemporalidad, con lo que se representa la historia de la mujer como un ciclo eterno. En un nivel mítico se podría establecer un vínculo entre Malena y Sísifo. Este personaje legendario fue condenado en los Infiernos, después de su muerte, a subir una enorme piedra a la cima de una montaña, de donde volvía a caer sin cesar. En el caso de la novela podría entenderse que la mujer constituye un solo ser en el tiempo y que éste no cambia, sino que en realidad sólo se repite, puede alejarse, pero siempre está dispuesto a retornar y caer al igual que Sísifo.

Luego de repetidas analepsis y prolepsis configuradas a partir de las diversas sensaciones que experimenta la protagonista, se presentan sus existencias previas, las cuales sirven para establecer vínculos entre ellas y entre presente, pasado y futuro. En cada una de las vidas de la protagonista se puede apreciar cómo la mujer a través de los siglos siempre ha ocupado un lugar periférico y cómo se ha intentado silenciar y confinar a ciertos ámbitos.

El tiempo histórico en la novela es registrado a través de archivos y de narraciones en primera persona; el tiempo subjetivo corresponde al de los recuerdos, de las impresiones y de las sensaciones de la protagonista y del tiempo mítico por el eterno retorno a las estructuras y convenciones que han oprimido a la mujer en la Historia. Su constante alternancia en el discurso rompe la linealidad del tiempo y configura una serie de círculos como en una especie de espiral interminable, lo que conforma un rasgo relevante en la novela. En conclusión, asistimos a un tiempo intrahistórico, como lo describe da Cunha, motivado por el retorno periódico de la mujer a enfrentarse con los preceptos de antes y de siempre.

La narración de *Malena de cinco mundos* se basa en una serie de ciclos entre los últimos momentos de su existencia más reciente y el recuento de sus vidas pasadas. El registro histórico se extiende del Siglo II al XX, por lo que la trama central de la obra cubre dieciocho siglos de la historia de la mujer. A través de la circunnavegación por estas épocas y a pesar del tiempo transcurrido y del progreso que ha alcanzado la humanidad, la mentalidad masculina permanece invariable. Por este motivo, la mujer no ha podido o no le han permitido desarrollarse. El contexto social e histórico, como se ha podido apreciar, delimita las posibilidades del ser, por lo que los personajes a menudo se ven manipulados por consignas ideológicas impuestas por la sociedad patriarcal. Evidentemente, en la obra se plantea que los paradigmas que rigen nuestra percepción de la realidad son construcciones ideológicas, por lo tanto sirven para establecer un cuestionamiento de la creencia subyacente. De esta manera, condena la manipulación del sistema dominante y las actitudes asumidas por diversos sectores de la sociedad, así como su responsabilidad en el asunto.

## V. Consideraciones finales

Con *Malena de cinco mundos*, Ana Teresa Torres denuncia la falsedad y el silencio cómplice de la Historia capaz de encubrir el infausto pasado que ha padecido la mujer, junto con un presente ingrato y un incierto porvenir. Como resultado queda evidenciada la labor de subversión y el intento de la mujer por construirse a sí misma desde la exploración histórica y ficticia con la cual la narrativa y la sociedad la ha reconstruido en el presente y en el pasado.

Malena intenta abrirnos los ojos ante los problemas del pasado, que son los problemas de siempre, la centralización del poder. De este modo, la novela denuncia la invalidez de la Historia y advierte de las consecuencias de dicho poder que en términos generales está ligado con el género masculino y esto, como hecho histórico, puede revertirse. Para presentar sus denuncias Torres se vale, entre otras cosas, de estructuras temporales particulares. Como consecuencia, *Malena de cinco mundos* está constituida por una conducción lineal, simultánea y circular de la acción, con un masivo empleo de analepsis, prolepsis, entrelazamientos y superposiciones temporales.

Se percibe así una reescritura de la Historia pero no para escribir una historia de las mujeres paralela a la de los hombres, sino para descubrir, analizar y exponer las operaciones a menudo

invisibles en la base de la conceptualización de las diferencias sexuales que estructuran la organización de la vida social y que han propiciado la exclusión de las mujeres. Esta tarea constituiría lo que Joan W. Scott, en su libro *Gender and the Politics of History*, ha llamado un trabajo de “anamnesis histórica” (8), que consiste en ahondar en el pasado para evitar la tiranía del inconsciente histórico y así abrirnos a formas de pensamiento no sujetas a categorías rígidas sino abiertas a la revisión y a la reelaboración de la Historia.

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## NARRATIVES OF THE BOARDING SCHOOL ERA FROM VICTIMRY TO RESISTANCE

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Boarding schools supplied a major episode in the larger era of forced assimilation and acculturation of American Indians. Colonial efforts to educate and convert Native Americans are found as early as the seventeenth century, but by the mid-nineteenth century, administrators and educators were becoming increasingly frustrated with their endeavors in on-reservation day and boarding schools. "Efforts to raise up the child during school hours, it was argued, were obliterated at night by the realities of camp life," observes historian David Adams (Adams 29). Beginning in 1875, Captain Richard Henry Pratt conducted a grand experiment, relocating Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Caddo prisoners-of-war from the Indian wars to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida and subjecting them to a regime of Euroamerican military-style education and indoctrination. When Pratt's efforts showed early success through student religious conversions and their employment in the surrounding community, in 1879 he was able to convince bureaucrats to fund a larger project in the abandoned Carlisle Army Barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with the goal of assimilating Native American children who, separated from their homes for a period of several years, would be especially susceptible to his efforts. Pratt's example incited a major policy change, and by the turn of the century, there were well over twenty-five off-reservation government boarding schools.

Criticisms of these boarding schools and their precursors, on-reservation day and boarding schools run by churches, are so widespread that an adequate, yet brief description of their scope is a challenge. Student testimony and some official records reveal that boarding schools were often deficient in every manner possible: students were underfed and poorly clothed; facilities were unheated firetraps with group hygiene areas that encouraged the spread of

disease;<sup>1</sup> administrators were sometimes remiss in communicating students' illnesses and their severity to parents; the education received was often outdated and ill-suited to a reservation setting; schools were perennially understaffed by poorly trained and often abusive instructors; students faced punitive measures for speaking their language or practicing tribal religion; and students were separated from their families for periods as long as three to five years and denied leave to visit home during vacations. Concerns about the result of this colonial experiment proliferate, and beyond the emotional damage and cultural disruption created by it, scholarship suggests that tribal communities continue to suffer from the educational methods employed in boarding school settings.<sup>2</sup>

Recent studies by indigenous scholars, such as historian Brenda Child and anthropologist Tsianina Lomawaima, seek to highlight the agency that students and their families exercised in the face of federal policy. In *Boarding School Seasons*, Child examines letters written during the boarding school era by American Indian parents and students, and she successfully demonstrates how students and their families “resisted and frequently triumphed over [the] bureaucracy” and “used government boarding schools for their own advantage” (Child 8). Similarly, Lomawaima criticizes the predominating narrative of boarding school history that “begins with *federal* as the subject and encodes *Native American* or *Indian* as its object, mirroring the crusade even as it strives to delineate it” (Lomawaima xii). Certainly, American Indian students resisted acculturation in a variety of ways, from subtly subverting arbitrary school regulations regarding dress to setting fire to buildings to the outright rejection of running away;<sup>3</sup> in addition to these actions, students also transformed the

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda J. Child observes that “students shared not only pencils and books but also soap, towels, washbasins, beds, and even bathwater. Students who complained of sore and oozing eyes [from trachoma, a common disease in boarding schools] could be found working in the school’s laundries, preparing food in kitchens, and milking the school’s cows” (58).

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies on the Blackfeet show that the method of English instruction commonly used in boarding schools, forbidding the use of any native languages in the school, has created a major handicap in Blackfeet tribal members’ linguistic skills. Reading skills have been severely harmed as a result of this practice.

<sup>3</sup> In *American Indian Children at School, 1850-1930*, Michael Coleman differentiates between student resistance, which meant “those forms of pupil opposition to the school and to the staff that were compatible with continued attendance, often compatible with impressive achievement as a student,” whereas rejection denotes student actions that disrupt attendance, such as running away, setting fire to the school, or simply refusing to participate (146).

institutions themselves, as Lomawaima argues for the case of Chilocco,<sup>4</sup> creating a unique student culture and indigenizing aspects of school identity and practice.<sup>5</sup> Both scholars agree that compelling factors, such as poverty or the illness or invalidism of a parent, might have brought otherwise indisposed parents to send their children to the school for such pragmatic reasons as receiving sufficient food, clothing, and education; when possible, parents were selective as to when and where their children attended schools. Like these students' parents, Ellen Simmons consents to send her daughter, Gertrude Simmons, to boarding school in Indiana because she "will need an education when she is grown, for then there will be fewer real Dakotas, and many more palefaces" (Zitkala-Ša 44).

### **Writing Self, Writing Culture: Tribalized Sentimentalism and Regionalism**

In 1899, soon after her departure from a teaching position at Carlisle Indian Industrial school, the first off-reservation Indian boarding school, Zitkala-Ša quickly wrote three autobiographical essays, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl," and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians," firmly criticizing the boarding school system in general and Carlisle specifically; she published them as individual pieces in January, February, and March 1900 in *The Atlantic Monthly* [hereafter *TAM*]. Nearly two years later, in December 1902 in *TAM*, she published "Why I Am a Pagan," another autobiographical piece, which can be read as the ending to Zitkala-Ša's autobiography (Velikova 49).<sup>6</sup> Incurring the wrath of the Carlisle founder and head administrator, Capt. Richard Henry Pratt, Zitkala-Ša flippantly dismissed his irate assessment of her work as "trash" (Spack 26), feeling assured her criticism of the school was

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<sup>4</sup> Chilocco Indian Agricultural School, a federal off-reservation boarding school, opened in 1884 and enrolled students from over twenty-four tribes, although the Five Civilized Tribes predominated. Using student testimony, Lomawaima studies how students indigenized the institution and used it to their purposes, subverting the larger federal agenda where possible.

<sup>5</sup> Francis LaFlesche's *The Middle Five*, his memoir of his education in a Presbyterian mission school for the Omaha, particularly exemplifies student creation of a "third culture."

<sup>6</sup> "Why I Am a Pagan" resolves many of the issues of spiritual and cultural dislocation that "The School Days of an Indian Girl" and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians" raise. Zitkala-Ša actually renamed this essay "The Great Spirit" and changed its ending to symbolically address American Indians' right to vote when she republished it in *American Indian Stories* in 1921 (Velikova 61).

well-deserved. Perhaps Pratt's dismay was particularly acute given the publication of the essays in *TAM*, a sophisticated journal that "enabled her to engage a nationwide, middle-class readership, including those most involved with Indian policy" (Bernardin 216).<sup>7</sup>

Literary critics such as D. K. Meisenheimer, Laura Wexler, and Susan Bernardin, have used a variety of frameworks for understanding the Euroamerican heritage of Zitkala-Ša's writing, favoring the genres of regionalism and sentimentalism in their analyses. Regionalism, a mode of writing that was most popular from 1865 to 1895, emphasized the characters, customs, geography, and dialect of a specific region; sentimentalism is a strategy commonly employed by writers in the nineteenth century to provoke excessive emotion in the reader. The following passage from "The Cutting of My Long Hair" exemplifies this sentimentalist influence:

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. (Zitkala-Ša 55-56)

Regarding sentimentalism and regionalism, Meisenheimer's summation of Zitkala-Ša's motivation for using these Euroamerican modes most accurately describes the sophistication of her syncretism, or bicultural fusion: "she ... learns to manipulate the received literary tradition ... by operating in its blind spots" ("Regionalist" 117). In contrast, at least one critic has suggested that "by the time she came to write these autobiographical stories, Zitkala-Ša's self-conception had been so effectively ensnared within the codes of sentiment that there was no Indian in them that was left untouched by Western codes" seems problematic (Wexler 179). This construction of an authentic "Indian" core of Zitkala-Ša's identity that is somehow contaminated by her Euroamerican education is troublesome. Furthermore, numerous critics have diagnosed Zitkala-Ša as suffering from an "increasing inability to straddle the contradictions

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<sup>7</sup> Citing Frank Mott's *A History of American Magazines*, Margaret Lukens also notes that the *Atlantic Monthly* "through the mid-1890s ... began to include politically and socially controversial material" and "to 'approach ... that wide interest in the problems of the modern world which characterized the magazine under later management'" (163-164). Zitkala-Ša apparently enjoyed creative freedom in composing her three autobiographical pieces for their publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, as then editor Bliss Perry's "typical approach was to let writers design their own projects, and he gave them final say over his editorial comments" (Spack 28).

between the two societies [Euroamerican and American Indian],” an assertion which smacks too much of tragic mixedblood imagery (Wexler 179). Finally, the suggestion that her Native American identity is annihilated by Western codes seems to uncomplicate Zitkala-Ša’s position as the deployer of two cultural traditions.<sup>8</sup>

As Susan Bernardin argues in “The Lessons of a Sentimental Education,” Zitkala-Ša does seem to mindfully employ sentimentalism as a methodology for speaking to her readers’ sensibility and drawing their attention to concerns in Indian country (Bernardin 217): “a careful playing of her white audience’s expectations and pre-existing world view” (Diana 155). Of particular interest is the intersection between her use of sentimentalism, a mode gendered in specific ways by popular women writers of the nineteenth century, and her adaptation of Dakota forms of self-narration, several of which are gender-specific genres. The popular white authors upon whom Zitkala-Ša models her work made the mother/child relationship a centerpiece in their writing and referred to their own female identities as a source of moral authority. According to Bernardin, Zitkala-Ša mimics these strategies in her repeated use of themes of “mother-loss” and “mother-hunger” in her autobiography (Bernardin 223). More specifically, Bernardin observes that:

By structuring her story around domestic concerns of home, family, and mother-daughter relations, Zitkala-Ša explicitly casts her life story as a variant of popular nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. At the same time, her autobiography subversively engages with the indoctrination of sentimental ideology in boarding schools and on reservations. (Bernardin 218)

While Bernardin contends that Zitkala-Ša’s deployment of sentimentalism is subversive because of her exposure of the boarding school’s destruction of the mother/child relationship that her readership holds dear, I suggest that this subversiveness also has roots in Dakota familial and gender norms that Zitkala-Ša includes in the text. As a result, many of the Dakota genres that Zitkala-Ša uses become gendered vis-à-vis the sentimentalist mode. Moreover, because the extended family, or *tiošpaye*, is the central structure of Dakota national identity, I would argue that by centering her narrative around domestic issues of home and family, Zitkala-Ša intentionally places

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<sup>8</sup> I present these concerns not to critique Wexler in particular, but to show some of the common pitfalls to which scholars have been susceptible in their examinations of the presence of Euroamerican elements in Zitkala-Ša’s writing. A thorough inventory of the body of critical work on Zitkala-Ša’s writing will illustrate these troublesome assumptions as a general tendency.

her autobiography within a larger discussion about Dakota nationhood and sovereignty.

The discourse around family that Zitkala-Ša borrows from the Euroamerican sentimental tradition merges with or supports pre-existing Dakota values about family, but Dakota values also challenge the Euroamerican ideal of the hierarchical, nuclear family. As kinship, in concert with the extended family, is a vital concept for understanding Dakota societal relationships, so, too, is the Dakota reverence for children, which might be thought of as a specific expression of kinship. Thus, Zitkala-Ša's employment of sentimentalism works to express just this cultural truth while simultaneously performing a cutting critique of Indian policy. Because Zitkala-Ša is tricked by the Quaker missionaries into leaving her mother, the fiber of the Dakota nation is metaphorically torn, but because her mother figuratively dominates elements of the boarding school experience, such as her triumph over the Devil in Zitkala-Ša's dream, the autobiography affirms the continued survival and resistance of the Dakota.

The Yankton word for children is *wakanheza*, meaning "they, too, are sacred" or "sacred beings," and Marla N. Powers underscores the status of children among the Dakota in *Oglala Women: Myth, Ritual, and Reality*:

The concept of illegitimacy was inappropriate in Lakota culture. All children were cared for. Neglect was unknown, and technically there was no such thing as an orphan. (Powers 57)

Thus, children themselves were revered members of the tribe,<sup>9</sup> a fact that Zitkala-Ša alludes to often in her autobiographical essays, such as the description of her shock upon being tossed about like a doll by a school matron or her warm memory of a grandfather who avoids criticizing her childish mistakes. In light of the revered position of Dakota children and adults' responsibility to respect children's eminence, Zitkala-Ša appears not simply to manipulate the sentimental gender-role of white protectress of the home, in order to critique the boarding school system, but, rather, to selectively employ a

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Pond, a nineteenth-century missionary, further describes children's roles among the Dakota: "Parents did not commonly treat either their sons or their daughters harshly, and both boys and girls were taught to cultivate a self-reliant, independent spirit. Infants were tenderly cared for.... There was no efficient family government among the Dakotas, and severe measures were seldom resorted to for the maintenance of parental authority. The parents gave advice to their children, but fathers did not often lay their commands upon them....Fathers rarely, if ever, inflicted corporal punishment on their children. The mothers chastised them only when so provoked as to lose all command over their temper" (142-143).



Euroamerican gendered literary identity offered by sentimentalism to underscore her Dakota gender identity as a caretaker of same-sex children, which she foregrounds primarily through her mother and aunt's nurturing her as a child.<sup>10</sup> Her mother comforts her when she is scared; her mother educates her in Dakota women's work and behavior norms; and her aunt functions as a second mother, playing the expected kinship role of a mother's sister in Dakota society. Furthermore, Zitkala-Ša's use of tribal forms of self-narration, which she genders with her own Dakota identity, underscores this subversiveness by proposing a competing school of "femininity" to the Euroamerican ideal. For example, in her collection of autobiographical essays, Zitkala-Ša includes a variety of traditional forms of self-narration that are gender-specific in origin or that she genders in significant ways; these forms include the landscape narrative, the educational tale, honorific speech, and the dream narrative, genres within which she "encodes the lessons of collective tribal identity" (Bernardin 221).<sup>11</sup>

Refashioning "her traditional feminine Dakota role of cultural propagator" (Heflin 137), Zitkala-Ša adapts the oral traditional form of the landscape narrative to the written Western autobiographical genre and imparts tribal history as a critical part of her story of self, embedding a firmly resistant narrative of Dakota history in her self-fashioning. Furthermore, like Lomawaima's study of Chilocco boarding school, Zitkala-Ša's use of "placemaking" seeks to encode American Indians as the subjects, not the objects, of a narrative history of federal Indian policy; she claims subjectivity through her exercise of narrative control while still acknowledging the victimization of the Dakota. Zitkala-Ša implements the landscape narrative in "My Mother," the beginning chapter of "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," revealing the imbrication of land and community in her formulation of self. In his study of place names and landscape

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<sup>10</sup> While the mother/child bond was certainly important to the Dakota, I do not want to de-emphasize the centrality of men in parenting, particularly because traditional education was imparted primarily through same sex instruction.

<sup>11</sup> Articulating the commonalities between these gendered forms of narration should not lead to a conflation of Euroamerican and Dakota women's gender roles, as they differed in significant ways. Paula Gunn Allen neatly summarizes the tension that Zitkala-Ša must have felt between these differing norms: "The delicacy of the ladies of privilege whom she knew must have been in stark contrast to the ideals of womanhood she had been raised with, and for which her life, and that of her mother, must have been models" (*Spider* 30). Zitkala-Ša encodes this cultured and classed difference into her writings through the physical freedom that Dakota women and girls enjoy, as well as the bodily labor they perform.

narratives among the Western Apache, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso introduces the term “placemaking,” which he defines as “an adventitious fleshing out of historical material that culminates in a posited state of affairs, a particular universe of objects and events—in short, a *place world*, wherein portions of the past are brought into being” (Basso 6). There are two major instances of this form of placemaking in Zitkala-Ša’s autobiography, and she uses them as a venue for investigating how colonialism has complicated her tribe’s sovereignty and as a method for asserting a Native geography that supercedes colonial bounds.

In this chapter, the setting is the hills of present-day Greenwood, South Dakota, along the banks of the Missouri, where the girl and her mother, Ellen (Tate I Yohin Win or Reaches for the Wind), gather water: this landscape is the occasion of Ellen’s story. Zitkala-Ša’s mother suffers from melancholy, but she refuses to share her feelings with her daughter. Eventually, the seven-year old compels her mother to reveal what troubles her; Ellen Simmons struggles with the weight of history. Pointing to a nearby hill where the child’s uncle and older sister are buried, her mother retells the history of white theft of Ihanktowan (Yankton) land in Minnesota and South Dakota and their band’s forced removal westward. As a native audience hearing the story of the sadness and pain of this camp move, so does Zitkala-Ša give her readers the vision to understand the difference: the band travels “not in the grand, happy way that we moved camp when I was a little girl, but we were driven” (Zitkala-Ša 10). Ellen paints a vivid picture of her daughter and brother’s sickened state on the forced march and their eventual demise: her daughter’s throat is “hoarse with crying,” her body is “feverish” and “burning hot,” and her throat is “swollen and red” (Zitkala-Ša 10). Through this placemaking, Zitkala-Ša critiques the policy of forced removal and sets the stage for her mother’s empowerment in the landscape.

This presentation of this landscape narrative in the autobiography’s first chapter is complemented in the penultimate chapter, “My Mother’s Curse upon White Settlers,” by the closing presentation of a second narrative by Zitkala-Ša’s mother. This story empowers her mother and affirms indigenous agency. Sitting by the river, this time at night, Zitkala-Ša and her mother reflect upon the lights of white squatters who live in the caves across the river, and her mother interprets their presence on the landscape as an incursion upon their land rights. Her mother decries the “white beggars” who “make claims on those wild lands” (Zitkala-Ša 93) and who hypocritically offer the Bible and the bottle in the same breath

(Zitkala-Ša 94). Her mother warns Zitkala-Ša against the whites “who caused the death of your sister and your uncle” (Zitkala-Ša 93), referring again to the hill from her earlier story. As yet another fire-light appears on the bluff opposite them, Zitkala-Ša’s mother, rather than being paralyzed by the wrongs perpetrated against her, as she was at the autobiography’s beginning, takes revenge against her violators, casting a curse:

Raising her right arm forcibly into line with her eye, she threw her whole might into her doubled fist as she shot it vehemently at the strangers. Long she held her outstretched fingers toward the settler’s lodge, as if an invisible power passed from them to the evil at which she aimed. (Zitkala-Ša 94)

As a sign of her mother’s empowerment, Zitkala-Ša portrays her mother’s insertion of herself into this narrative and affirms her agency in the context of colonial history. The landscape narrative’s relationship to sovereignty becomes entirely clear: by asserting narrative mastery over the land, indigenes are able to claim literal mastery of it. Through this use of traditional, material forms of narration, Zitkala-Ša refashions the Western autobiography to her purposes and affirms the survival of the Dakota through the continuance of this cultural practice.

At the same time, this affirmation is uncomplicated by Ellen Simmons’ marriages to three white men, one of whom, a man named Felker, was Zitkala-Ša’s father. In the first landscape narrative, Ellen laments, “There is what the paleface has done! Since then your father too has been buried in a hill nearer the rising sun” (Zitkala-Ša 10), which, Ruth Spack argues, “exoticizes him [her father] as a victim of white oppression” (Spack 29). Other possible readings, however, suggest that placing her father in the tribal burial grounds more neutrally renders him a racial other or, at the least, allies him with Indians. Certainly, Zitkala-Ša’s choice to portray herself as a full-blood glosses over her own hybridity and, necessarily, raises questions about her motivations for the choice. One obvious benefit she receives is the ability to showcase to her Anglo audience, her primary readers in the 1900 *Atlantic Monthly* publication, an indigenous identity that is uncomplicated by the bare facts of colonial history. The duality of this approach accords with the melodramatic elements in her text; furthermore, Zitkala-Ša, quite aware of negative stereotypes of mixed-bloods as somehow degenerate, may have actively sought to limit the range of racial fantasy she had to address. Similarly to African American writers’ struggles with the tragic mulatto stereotype, had Zitkala-Ša included her father’s identity, she would have been compelled to address literary conventions of the

tragic mixedblood, engaging a discourse that might not have served her agenda around sovereignty. Finally, claiming a Yankton father seems fairly pragmatic for two reasons: Zitkala-Ša's father left her mother before she was born; hence, his influence was minimal at best. Second, the overwhelming tendency of many Native Americans to identify primarily with their tribal background, despite racial hybridity, probably contributed to the author's decision.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we need to consider how the author constructs a self for her reading audience, as well as herself.

In her autobiography, Zitkala-Ša also includes educational tales, which indigenize the genre, as well as affirm Dakota cultural continuity and sovereignty. Here I will read three instances when Zitkala-Ša employs the educational tale, all of which are variations on a theme about right relationship. As kinship relations form the center of Dakota society, these tales have the effect of normalizing Dakota identity to her readers and creating a counter-narrative about national identity and norms.

Traditionally, educational narratives were told to audiences, particularly children, in order to instruct them in proper behavior. We know that "for some autobiographical narratives the primary purpose was educational. A wide range of Indian education could be provided in this way. Don Talayesva remembers that even sex education was managed autobiographically" (Brumble 40). In a tale about coffee-making, however, Zitkala-Ša retells her foibles to a non-Indian audience, instructing them in this traditional generic form about the status and education of children in Dakota society, as well as how children become gendered. One day when Zitkala-Ša is left alone in the dwelling by her mother, an elderly grandfather drops by to visit. While he awaits her mother's return, the young girl assumes the role of hostess, serving him her version of coffee with unleavened bread; her enactment of a tribal gender role, however, is sound in appearance but not in result. Not knowing how to make coffee or start a fire, she puts warm river water into her mother's coffeepot and places it in the cold ashes of the fireplace: "I offered them to him with the air of bestowing generous hospitality" (Zitkala-Ša 28). Nonetheless, the grandfather does not pierce her pride by criticizing the quality of her food; in fact, he acts as if her behavior is completely normal, so as

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<sup>12</sup> Marla Powers describes this tendency in *Oglala Women*: "The terms 'full blood' and 'mixed blood' are cultural rather than biological designations; that is, they are based not on blood quantum but rather on the group a person identifies with socially and culturally" (144). Given her history as an activist for Native Americans on reservations, surely Zitkala-Ša identified as full blood using this definition.

not to embarrass her. Here Zitkala-Ša's desire to play the role of hostess properly is more important than how she performs it; the grandfather refrains from laughing at her, respecting her special status as a child, as well as conforming to the doting relationship commonly found between Dakota grandparents and grandchildren.<sup>13</sup> She reflects that her mother and the grandfather "treated my best judgment, poor as it was, with the utmost respect. It was not till long years afterward that I learned how ridiculous a thing I had done" (Zitkala-Ša 29). Zitkala-Ša uses this incident via the form of the educational narrative to hybridize the autobiographical genre as well as to instruct her audience in the upbringing traditionally afforded to Dakota children: this affirming atmosphere serves as a dramatic counterpoint to the later episodes in boarding school, such as the incident in which a teacher exacts good behavior by telling Zitkala-Ša "that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured" by the Devil (Zitkala-Ša 63). Furthermore, this incident includes a subtext about national identity, as the reason for the grandfather and many others' visits to her home rests upon her uncle's accomplishments as "one of our nation's bravest warriors" (Zitkala-Ša 12). With accomplishment in Dakota society came a heightened sense of responsibility: men who performed well in war and the hunt and earned respect as leaders were expected to extend hospitality to all who requested it of them. Thus, in visiting Zitkala-Ša's home and receiving her hospitality, both the grandfather and grandchild are performing a type of national identity that is constituted in right relationship.

Bonnin also acknowledges the Dakota women's form of self-narration through honorific speech by including an incident of imitative play from her childhood that incorporates it. She uses this episode to illustrate indigenous forms of education (i.e., imitation), to assert Dakota national identity, and to establish norms of children's conduct to contrast with the later boarding school section.<sup>14</sup>

After abandoning her "confining lessons" in beadwork, another expression of material culture that sometimes occasioned

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<sup>13</sup> This relationship is explained by traditional Dakota people as owing to children and the elderly's close ties to the spirit world, as a result of their proximity to birth and death.

<sup>14</sup> Although David Brumble has presented the argument that references to imitation in Dakota works, notably Eastman's *Deep Woods*, reflect an internalization of Social Darwinist theory that associates primitive peoples with imitation, I would contend that the prevalence of Dakota authors' mention of imitation seems to suggest that it truly was a staple of traditional education.

autobiographical stories,<sup>15</sup> Zitkala-Ša escapes with her friends to play in the hills. They gather sweet roots that grow nearby and delight “in impersonating our own mothers” who gift beaded clothing to each other and praise the recent accomplishments of their relatives (Zitkala-Ša 21):

We talked of things we heard them say in their conversations. We imitated their various manners, even to the inflection of their voices .... While one was telling of some heroic deed recently done by a near relative, the rest of us listened attentively, and exclaimed in undertones, “Han! Han!” (yes! yes!) whenever the speaker paused for breath, or sometimes for sympathy. As the discourse became more thrilling, according to our ideas, we raised our voices in these interjections. (22)

The girls model their speech on their own mothers’ narratives, recounting stories of their relatives’ exploits. To Bonnin, honorific speech seems an expression of self in the context of kinship relations, which form the core of Dakota society.<sup>16</sup> Hence, honorific speech exemplifies Hertha D. Wong’s concept of communo-bio-oratory, couching self-identity in the esteem of community. Furthermore, because honorific speech praises masculine war exploits, in this instance, it is also entwined with a traditional understanding of sovereignty.

In her autobiographical essays, Zitkala-Ša also includes a dream narrative that asserts the primacy of a Dakota cosmology. During her stay at White’s, Zitkala-Ša receives from a school matron an individual lesson regarding the Devil and his punishment of bad girls: “Out of a large book she showed me a picture of the white man’s devil .... Then I heard the paleface woman say ... that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him” (Zitkala-Ša 62-63). As a result of this storytelling, she has a nightmare in which the Devil chases her around her mother’s home on the reservation. Her mother does not see the Devil; thus she has not learned to identify his presence. At the last moment, however, as her knees are buckling under her, her mother reaches for Zitkala-Ša and saves her from the Devil. Thus, although she is subject to the violence of the boarding school experience, the Dakota worldview can “save” her from the victimization of Protestantism.

Ruth Spack contends that instances like this one, as well as

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<sup>15</sup> Women occasionally would gather in the council tipi to give their quill counts, in which they would recount the items that they had quilled or beaded.

<sup>16</sup> See Ella Deloria’s *Waterlily* and *Speaking of Indians* for an extended explanation of the function of Dakota kinship.

Zitkala-Ša's portrayal of her father, are exoticizing, presumably because "the idyllic traditional Sioux life Zitkala-Ša has been describing is a fiction" (Spack 31), I contend that they serve the larger purpose they serve of affirming Dakota cultural equality and survival. More importantly, the notion that Zitkala-Ša intends to create an "idyllic traditional life" is problematic in itself. Surely, Zitkala-Ša's portrait of her mother's troubled colonial state on the reservation assumes a history of Euroamerican contact and predation, dismissing the possibility of perfection in this life or a cultural vacuum, and the fear that Zitkala-Ša feels of different community members, such as Wiyaka-Napbina, "a tall, broad-shouldered crazy man" (Zitkala-Ša 25), suggests an emotional complexity that precludes the creation of an idyll. Although the representations of American Indians that Zitkala-Ša offers are largely complimentary, her characters are still imperfect in certain respects. To assess Zitkala-Ša's childhood world as idyllic is to overlook significant intra- and extra-tribal concerns that the author raises.

Zitkala-Ša utilizes honorific traditions of speech and the dream narrative, as well as the educational tale genre in her autobiographical essays; she uses these forms to adapt the Western autobiographical form to her purposes of redressing stereotypes of American Indians and raising public awareness of indigenous issues. In addition to the landscape narrative, Zitkala-Ša uses these traditional self-narrative forms in a mindful way, effecting a literary sovereignty called for by such contemporary scholars as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Robert Allen Warrior. She chooses genres, as well as tropes, that work to create a Dakota sovereignty analogous to the one she sought as an activist, whether she is remaking Euroamerican or American Indian literary conventions. Surely, Zitkala-Ša anticipates just these concerns in the formulation of her autobiographic writings and insightfully elects to employ either Euroamerican or Native American traditions where most politically and artistically expedient: she foresees the type of "intellectual sovereignty" that Warrior prizes and that twenty-first-century scholars still strive after. Alice Poindexter Fisher has said of Zitkala-Ša that:

she struggled toward a vision of wholeness in which the conflicting parts of her existence could be reconciled. *That she did not fully succeed is evident in her work*, which is a model of ambivalences, of oscillations between two diametrically opposed worlds, but is also a model of retrieved possibilities, a creative, human endeavor that stands at the beginning of many such endeavors eventually to culminate in the finely crafted work of contemporary American Indian writers [*emphasis mine*]. (Fisher 26-27)

Perhaps what Fisher senses as Zitkala-Ša's movement between poles of the reservation and the eastern United States should be thought of as a strategic enactment that revises the terms of honorific speech and sentimentalism, educational narrative and regionalism, through autobiography. This complex heritage results more accurately in a successful critique of colonial policy, rather than a failed autobiography in Fisher's estimation. Zitkala-Ša asserts the Dakota right to narrate tribal history on tribal terms, and while she employs Euroamerican genres in her narration, we should not victimize her in our glossing of her texts by presuming the totalizing force of those rhetorics. She clearly advocates for the Dakota by appealing to a Euroamerican sensibility, as she simultaneously remakes autobiography in an indigenous fashion through her use of Dakota genres and their concomitant worldview.

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**[EX]POSING SIGHTLINES:  
THE STAGING OF POWER IN  
CHERRIE MORAGA'S *HEROES AND SAINTS***

*Cynthia Degnan*

... the power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply.

—Avery F. Gordon

Agency and power constantly merge and mingle to give individuals various levels of choice and action. Many factors enhance or restrict an individual's agency, or power to act. Complexities of circumstance and human nature render the extremes in which one individual completely possesses agency or completely lacks it rare, restricting the extent to which power can be finally located. Avery F. Gordon's words invoke the difficulty of locating power and verbalizing that location. By limiting individuals to the categories of victim or victimizer, one neglects to acknowledge the various factors that blur and blend each category in a particular situation. Michel Foucault hypothesizes that location of power does not reside in the dichotomous categories of the oppressor and the oppressed, but rather exists fluidly in a cycle of power and pleasure:

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpitates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself as in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting (45).

This cycle transcends the uncomplicated categories of victim and victimizer. Instead, it acknowledges that pleasure and power are inseparable—that power does not exist solely in domination but also manifests in the decision to resist or accept domination. It suggests that power is located everywhere waiting to be possessed.

Cherrie Moraga's play, *Heroes and Saints*, probes complexities

in constructions of power and acts of agency. The play is set in the fictional town of McLaughlin, a Chicano farmworker community in the San Joaquin Valley. It is inspired by real events in the town of McFarland, California where, from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, a disproportionate number of children were born with birth defects or diagnosed with cancer. Moraga presents the audience with intricate readings of the ways in which seemingly fixed power structures, maintained by the field's owners, oppress those who work the fields. She furthermore portrays the actions that the farmworkers use to subvert this power, claim rights and exercise resistance.

Throughout the play, different characters face obstacles in their attempts to assert an agency that owners seek to deny them. The play's protagonist, Cerezita, for example, was born without a body due to the pesticides sprayed in the fields in which her mother worked. Cerezita's image itself problematizes the viewers' assumptions of domination. Her physical condition and the degree to which she relies on and is controlled by others imply an extreme lack of agency. Moraga describes her in the play's notes, however, as, "a head of human dimension, but one who possesses such dignity of bearing and classical Indian beauty she can, at times, assume nearly religious proportions" (90). Cerezita seizes an immense amount of power in the force of her image and the brilliance of her mind. Yet she cannot effect the degree of change that she wants as long as her mother, Dolores, keeps her hidden from the world outside of their home. Therefore, Cerezita strives for an agency through visibility whereby she can affect an audience with her image and further McLaughlin's struggle against pesticide poisoning.

Cerezita's conflict exemplifies the ways that the play questions simplified explanations of power, which deny depth of feeling and contours of agency. Throughout the play, Moraga reflects structures of power that are both written by and against hegemonic narratives of the oppressor and oppressed as inherently dichotomized categories. Moraga maps this struggle onto the tension in the play surrounding the possession and manipulation of an object associated with visibility: the camera. Characters seek power through the camera because it enables (re)production or location of image. It furthermore problematizes the way in which agency is determined by ownership of these objects and images. The production of the play itself parallels the camera's presence in its struggle for agency through visibility while critiquing hegemonic conceptions of power.

The question of whether one is (in)visible suggests inevitable

complication of the subject's ability to control productions and readings of their own image. While many narratives express a desire for privacy—the right to make certain aspects of one's life inaccessible to spectators—there is also a counter-narrative that seeks representation as a means of forming community and support. These interrelated narratives often arise in the context of oppression in which visibility is repressed in order to make the process and results of domination indistinguishable or where privacy is denied in order to prevent rebellion and induce fear. Gaining control over one's (in)visibility exerts agency over the use of one's image by determining context and meaning while resisting appropriation through commodification.

In the setting description of the play, Moraga creates a visual image of McLaughlin's isolation that articulates the town's invisibility. She describes McLaughlin as a small town with a highway running through the middle:

From the highest point of the overpass, a large island of single-family stucco houses and apartments can be seen... Surrounding the island is an endless sea of agricultural fields which, like the houses, have been perfectly arranged into neatly juxtaposed rectangles (91).

By describing the grouping of houses as an island, Moraga accentuates McLaughlin's constructed isolation from other communities, both those who have little in common with McLaughlin and others that are similar to it. The multiple structures that obfuscate the community compound feelings of isolation. The position of the fields in the observer's gaze exemplifies efforts by the growers to make their consumers see the produce but not the process. Their image is deemed more desirable than that of the people who face the consequences of the agricultural process—the workers who are directly affected by pesticide poisoning. Furthermore, Moraga notes that a passer-by can only see the houses from the highest point of the overpass, which is also the furthest point from the town. In order to see the houses, therefore, drivers must be at their most distant from the town making any real connections with the circumstances impossible. Thus, the play is motivated by a need to break free from restrained visibility and actually make McLaughlin and its residents visible in order to expose the effects that the agricultural process has on them.

*Heroes and Saints* breaks through the visual barrier of the fields and reveals the intricacies of a very real political issue that is often hidden and ignored. Moraga sets the play entirely in that town, illustrating the ongoing struggle against pesticide poisoning in every day

existence and the effects of that struggle on human lives. She presents a situation in which characters try to make their oppression visible from a secluded location and therefore introduces a camera to act as a visual mediator between those characters and the people whom they are trying to reach. The camera, however, is inherently limited and limiting in its capabilities. When used as a mediator, the camera does not lend itself to the total control of one party or the other. Even if owned by the person creating the image, the viewer must absorb and interpret the image with which the creator presents them thereby complicating notions of absolute control in any mode of visual representation. Thus, as a tool of agency, the camera works to shift dominant notions of power while introducing its own complicated dynamics of agency.

Ana Pérez, a news reporter who does multiple segments on McLaughlin throughout the play, first comes to investigate a series of crucifixions that have occurred in the fields surrounding the town. This scene occurs in front of the house where Cerezita lives. Pérez stops Amparo, a leader in the McLaughlin farmworkers' movement and a close friend of Cerezita's family, on the street in order to ask her questions about the recent occurrences. In this scene, Moraga questions the productivity of performing power and agency through the visual tool of the camera. Before beginning her segment, Pérez talks to Bob, the implied but unseen cameraman who operates the also invisible camera. Pérez addresses Bob, saying, "Bob, is my hair okay? What? ... I have lipstick? Where? Here? (*she wets her finger with her tongue, rubs the corner of her lip*) Okay? ... Good. (*addressing the 'camera'*) Hello, I'm Ana Pérez ..." (92). Pérez's attention to the details of her appearance firmly establishes her report as a type of performance, thus illuminating the multiple ways that a camera necessitates the production of image rather than simply capturing an image that already exists.

Pérez also demonstrates the potential of the camera to establish a dichotomy of normalcy and Otherness. She opens with the statement "this is another edition of our Channel Five news special: 'Hispanic California'" (92). By identifying the segment as a "special," Pérez locates Latinos as existing outside the supposed norm and as Other to the white middle-class, English-speaking audience to which she is catering her segment. As a Latina herself, Pérez is included in the status of Other that she constructs in her statements. However, the fact that she makes that statement identifies her with the audience to which she is catering because she labels Latinos as other for her viewer. Pérez therefore occupies a middle ground in which she

cannot be fully identified with either group but instead mediates between them. She occupies the role of a transcultural mediator, and lends a degree of legitimacy to her segment in the eyes of her audience precisely because she presents herself as being able to translate the situation, just as she translates Amparo's Spanish phrases. As a transcultural mediator, Pérez obscures dichotomous power boundaries by identifying with two groups that the audience sees as inhabiting antithetical positions.

Moraga displays Pérez's performance as mediator between Amparo and the audience through Pérez's immediate translation of actual language. In her work on child translators, Antonia I. Castañeda observes that translation happens across cultures and therefore that translating language is, in effect, translating culture. She further elaborates that "the act of translation is informed by unequal power relationships. Translation usually occurs under conditions of conflict and stress" (207). By translating Amparo's statements, Pérez reveals her own feelings of cultural conflict. She resolves those feelings by choosing to translate Amparo's Spanish words rather than English, thereby establishing the primacy of an English speaking audience. By inhabiting the role of translator, Pérez establishes herself as sympathetic to, yet distant from, Amparo's statements, while demonstrating some control over the scene.

Pérez inhabits the position of power to which Castañeda refers, and yet her obvious discomfort with her surroundings destabilizes this power. Neither woman completely controls the actions of the scene, but the camera intervenes in the two women's struggle for power by enabling Pérez to choose Amparo's audience and to shape her image into something that the audience can understand or digest. The camera, which must be owned and controlled in order to act, limits the object's agency with its gaze. Thus, the camera restricts the extent to which Amparo can enact agency as she attempts to break through the visual barrier that agriculture erects between McLaughlin and outside consumers.

Moraga gives the audience a "behind-the-scenes" look at the way that images are created for presentation and the ways in which this process of creation complicates ideas that representation is a useful tool for social change. Pérez does not broadcast her segment live, but rather records her story for later use. Thus, the camera allows Pérez to edit the exchange. The camera and nature of filming give Pérez power over the image that she will present later yet does nothing to alert the audience to the fact that the image has been edited. Gerald Vizenor, writing about the nature of photography,

observes that “the camera captures others, not the experience of the photographer; the presence of the other is discovered in a single shot, the material reduction of a pose” (129). Vizenor’s statement reflects the ways in which the process of creating an image is erased and forgotten in the final production of that image. The camera captures the image itself rather than the process that goes into creating that image, therefore fixing the image as reality and erasing the process altogether. Pérez’s final product, if it adheres to the general structure of news reports, may contain several cuts that reveal editing, but will erase the evidence of that manipulation. She therefore privileges a product that the audience will want and accept over the actual story in which she purports interest.

Because the camera allows Pérez to edit without drawing attention to the process, the image that she reveals to the audience appears to be a summary of the “truth” that she has discovered. To people who have never thought about pesticide poisoning or met a Chicano farmworker, Amparo, rather than Pérez, becomes a representative who is objectified and generalized. The image that she embodies will not even be of her own making since the camera puts the power to shape the interview in Pérez’s hands, as she states, “We’ll edit her out later” (94). In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag remarks that “in deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects” (6). These standards, especially in news reporting, are often based on ideas of believability and simplicity. Pérez must focus on what her audience wants to see and therefore shapes her segment to their standards of authenticity and reality. Moraga does not provide her audience with an image of the final product that Pérez creates but instead makes it clear that the actual interview is not the final image. Thus, film works within a cycle of the (in)visible in which a certain person holds power over the final constructed performative image; the power dynamics in the scene are enabled by the camera and therefore mediated through it. By employing the camera to speak to a previously unaware audience, Amparo does gain power. Yet while Pérez’s power over her message is limited, so is Amparo’s agency in producing the image and therefore controlling the story that her target audience will see. Thus, the camera acts as a tool through which concepts of hierarchical power structures are both disestablished and renegotiated.

Showing her audience the scene from which Pérez draws her report not only relates the actuality of the play and what obstacles the characters face, but also mimics scenes that are familiar to most



of Moraga's actual audience. The play premiered in San Francisco, a location very different from the one in which the play is set. With an urban audience, Moraga could expect that these types of news reports are the primary access that her audience has to images of farmworkers' lives. In the initial production, Moraga therefore acknowledged and challenged the filtered medium through which the theatrical audience had contact with the subject of the play. Moraga's purpose in writing and producing the play parallels Amparo's in that she seeks power and action through visibility. She accesses this power by presenting the medium that produces images with which most of the audience is familiar, and then shows the audiences the effects of and gaps in that medium, challenging their ability to see an issue presented in it. The flaws in the camera as a transmitter of agency highlight the agency that she has through the production of her own work. Moraga traces Amparo's progression as a political activist, spurred on by her television appearance, and illustrates the effects that this sort of media attention has through the conflicted reactions of multiple characters. By presenting the uncut version of Amparo's interview to the audience and showing a more complete picture of McLaughlin's situation, Moraga undoes the invisibility which the camera, in Pérez's hands, inflicts on Amparo by replacing it with a staged visibility. She furthermore disestablishes the audience's previous visions of the issues facing the farmworkers.

In her interview, Amparo articulates the ways that a forced invisibility makes social change difficult if not impossible. Pérez asks her about the crucifixions in which someone places the body of an already-dead child on a cross in the fields as a statement on the effects of pesticides. Amparo replies, "If you put the children in the ground, the world forgets about them. Who's going to see them, buried in the dirt" (94). Her statement incites the act of seeing as an acknowledgment of power as well as the way in which the invisible is forgotten. Forgetting becomes the fundamental barrier to McLaughlin's progress toward safe living conditions. The agricultural process effaces its harmful elements in order to maintain consumer interest. Therefore, agri-business makes consumers ignore or forget the extent to which it exploits its workers in order to create profit. The crucifixes (because of the shock that they induce) and the camera (as a visual recorder through which images can be reproduced and therefore remembered) are both necessary tools of visibility if Amparo wants to access the power that the consumers have over the growers. Talking to Pérez is therefore a way for Amparo to bring McLaughlin out of the dirt and make sure that the town and its dying children are not forgotten.

Amparo's attempt to make McLaughlin's struggle visible in a larger context is analogous to Cerezita's struggle to become visible in her own community. Yet, Cerezita desires not only to be seen but also to see. Her mother, Dolores, worries constantly about how people will react to Cerezita, and to her, if they are able to see her daughter's striking image for themselves. Dolores therefore keeps Cerezita in the house by controlling Cerezita's raite<sup>1</sup> and allows few people that come into the house to see her. In a plea to Dolores to let her out of the house, Cerezita asks, "if nobody ever sees me, how will I know how I look? How will I know if I scare them or make them mad or ... move them? If people could see me, 'amá, things would change" (113). Her statement reveals crucial factor of the gaze that the camera eliminates; if Cerezita allows people to see her she can also observe their reaction and use that reaction to gain agency and power. Thus the gaze, absent of tools of reproduction such as a camera, is inherently cyclical in that one must see and register a person at whom they are looking and that the object of the gaze has the power to witness the response to their image. Thus, Cerezita wants to be seen in order to reinforce her belief that her image is powerful and use that power for the town's benefit.

The camera threatens the power of a cyclical gaze because it does not allow the subject to witness, and therefore react to, the implications of what it shows. By using the camera to make herself visible, Amparo relinquishes the power that direct contact may give her. The camera makes her a visible target, giving her a degree of power while simultaneously making her vulnerable. She can gauge some reaction to her statements, because she is physically threatened by the growers when they shoot through her windows after her interview, but the fact that the camera makes her own image inaccessible to her increases the difficulty that she may have in protecting herself against retaliation. The fact that the camera transmits images to a location and situation to which she does not have access suggests that she can never gain the kind of knowledge that Cerezita seeks.

As Dolores' panic at the possibility of Cerezita entering the cycle of visibility and power increases, so does Pérez's actual participation in the struggle of McLaughlin residents. The "camera" next appears

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<sup>1</sup> The raite, or "ride," refers to the wheeled table-like structure that Cerezita uses to move. It is operated by a chin piece, which can be removed at any time by another character, eliminating Cerezita's mobility. In the "Notes on Cerezita" that Moraga includes, she states that, "Her mobility and its limits are critical aspects of her character"(90).

during a rally that Amparo leads to make the school board reverse its decision to decline free, clean drinking water (Act 1, Scene 9). Unlike the last meeting between Pérez and Amparo, in this scene the camera takes a much more passive role. Although Susan Sontag claims that “photography is essentially an act of non-intervention” (11), she continues, however, that “even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of participation” (12). Pérez’s decreased intervention in the creation of the scene that she records, however, indicates Amparo’s need to find a more direct outlet of power. Rather than lead Amparo through a conversation, Pérez simply introduces the scene and films Amparo’s speech, recording a protest created and performed in accordance with Amparo’s vision. Her increasing silence as the urgency of the play increases highlights the camera’s impotency, since, as the play gains momentum, the significance of the camera’s presence decreases. The action, thus, falls to Amparo who again enacts a performative stance in front of the camera and surrounding crowds. Pérez also leaves Amparo to use her own words and relinquishes her roles as translator. The shifting focus of the lens, from Pérez to Amparo, signifies the shifting focus and possession of power as Amparo obtains more strength and control in her fight.

Pérez abandons her passive role behind the camera during her coverage of the next McLaughlin protest and instead focuses on the actual events at hand. Unlike previous appearances, she does not comment on or judge the actions of the protestors; she simply states their demands to the audience. It is in her most inactive moment as a reporter that she begins to take active steps as an ally of McLaughlin residents. Amparo steps out of line to help her daughter Bonnie after she slips. The police begin to beat her with nightsticks and Pérez, witnessing the scene, begins to use her role as reporter to help her and cries, “She’s been struck! Amparo Manríquez ... oh my god! The policeman ...” Yet her cries have no consequences at the moment and Amparo continues to be beaten. Pérez therefore ceases her address to the audience to which she has no immediate connection and begins to address the people around her: “Stop him! Jesus! Somebody stop him!” (133). As Sontag observes, the camera does not allow Pérez to intervene directly, thus she abandons the type of participation the camera provides and acts directly in the scene. Pérez’s move toward action, transcending the passive observance of the camera mirrors Moraga’s expectations for her own audience. The political nature of the play implores its audience to transcend a role of passive observation, which Pérez embodies, and become active participants in the struggle for basic human rights.

The police reaction to Amparo's protest highlights the extent to which visibility as a tool of power can incite an increased reaction from those who believe that they benefit from the supposed hierarchy of domination. It also exemplifies the ease with which struggles of power can escalate to violence. Dolores' worry for Cerezita's safety escalates after Mario, her son, leaves the house. She fears that they are more vulnerable without a man to protect them. In the beginning of Act 2, the audience sees Dolores hiding in the bushes outside of her house attempting to see into the house. Juan, the local priest who becomes close to the Valle family, finds her there and asks why she is doing this:

DOLORES: To know what you can see inside the house at night. The peepo going by can see through the windows. ¿Qué vió, Padre, when you were coming up the street?

JUAN: No sé. I wasn't paying attention.

DOLORES: Next time, Father, you pay attention, eh? So you can tell me from how far away you can see wha's going on inside the house (127).

Dolores equates the act of seeing into the house with knowledge about Cerezita's physical reality, which, if seen, could have a tremendous effect on the viewers' involvement in McLaughlin's movement. In her own way, she attempts to gain the type of knowledge about which Cerezita speculates; the only way that Dolores can know what others see is to put herself in the position of the viewer whom she fears. Her action both legitimizes Cerezita's quest for visibility and acknowledges the way in which the cycle of the gaze is inescapable. Attempting to see Cerezita and formulate possible reactions to her image, Dolores becomes those whom she so fears will look at her daughter with cruelty. She perpetuates cycles of shame and surveillance that conform to the notion that power is delegated by social factors rather than possessed by the individuals that access it.

Both Cerezita's invisibility and immobility as well as the fact that she is female, Chicana and disabled in a culture that privileges male, white and able-bodied people implies, through the hegemonic conceptions of power, that Cerezita is severely limited in several areas of her life—that she is oppressed. Yet, while these combating forces give her seemingly insurmountable odds, Cerezita does find both power and agency. Who erected the crucifixions that prompted Pérez's interest in McLaughlin remains an enigma. The opening scene of the play shows Cerezita watching a child hanging on a cross, his clothing flowing in the breeze. This scene foreshadows a connection. It implies that Cerezita is involved in the child's crucifixion

but does not let the audience know definitely who is responsible. In Act 2, Scene 6, Moraga reveals that Cerezita and the children of McLaughlin construct the crosses. They are never suspected of the act and in fact, it is exactly their invisibility in the community that makes it possible for them to carry out their task. By conforming to the idea that power is inherently dichotomous, the growers are unable to see those whom they oppress as potentially and effectively powerful. Cerezita uses this blindness to her advantage and acts completely without suspicion until she reveals herself. She refuses to accept that any position, no matter how seemingly helpless, is absent of power just as Foucault asserts that power cannot be located ultimately in any one position but accessed by all positions. Thus, in contrast to Amparo's attempt to draw attention to McLaughlin, Moraga asserts that agency can also come from being unseen thus complicating binary constructions of power that place agency of action in only one category or the other.

Similarly, the way that Moraga chooses to stage the growers reflects the power that can be exercised from a position of invisibility. The growers are not represented by actors but by helicopters and crop duster that are suggested by lighting and sound. They are represented by the threat that they suggest (the helicopters that surveil McLaughlin and the crop dusters that poison it) rather than their actual physical forms. By using these objects to enact threat, the growers take advantage of the power that invisibility can afford them. The fact that these objects shield the growers' identity makes it more difficult for protestors to implicate any one person as performing the actions that threaten their health. It also physically removes the growers from the problems that infest McLaughlin thereby giving them the choice to ignore or address the protestors' concerns rather than having to deal with them on a daily basis. Yolanda, Cerezita's sister, expresses their seemingly unending power when telling Cerezita that "they" shot through Amparo's windows:

CEREZITA: Who?

YOLANDA: Who knows? The guys in the helicopters... God (96).

By invoking the image of God in relation to the helicopters, Yolanda equates them with an omnipotent and omnipresent power against which there is little hope. She furthermore states her frustration with knowing that pesticides killed her daughter, Evalina, but that she is unable to identify the people that caused her death. She cries to Dolores that she must, "... find her killer. Put a face to him, a name, track him down and make him suffer the way we suffer. I want to kill him, 'amá. I want to kill some... goddamn body!" (132). Yolanda

expresses her need to have a body present that she can blame for her daughter's death. The helicopters and crop dusters, however, make this sort of accountability impossible for her to enact.

In the final scene of the play, Moraga disestablishes the camera and the cycle of visibility in which the characters negotiate power as the ultimate tools of agency and replaces it with something that is much harder to manipulate—direct action. Cerezita finally leaves the Valle home and appears as a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Only in this form does Dolores allow and even encourage Cerezita to be seen. Pérez appears with the camera to cover Evalina's funeral, at which she was told there would be a crucifixion. The fact that Juan invites Pérez to the crucifixion signifies the extent to which McLaughlin continues to value the camera as a way to make their story heard in a broader context. Once Cerezita appears, however, Pérez does nothing but silently signals "Bob" to begin filming. As Cerezita and Juan exit to erect the cross, gunshots are heard. Led by Cerezita's brother Mario, El Pueblo<sup>2</sup> runs out and begins to burn the fields, yelling, "Asesinos!" (149). Pérez abandons her role as "objective" reporter and transcultural mediator and joins in the uprising. These actions directly break the cycle of visibility that dominates the play until that point. This fact is signified by the empty stage at the end of the play. All of the characters run off stage, leaving the audience to see the red glow of their flames, but their actions are invisible. El Pueblo no longer attempts to make its struggle known; it simply destroys the one thing that gives the growers power over them—the grapes that are valued more than their lives.

Moraga reveals intricacies in agency over (in)visibility that confront hegemonic conceptions of power and investigate the tools by which those concepts are negotiated and subverted. Using the camera to distribute image traverses enforced invisibility that complicates an attempt for social change. The camera also subjects the object of the image, however, to new power dynamics that complicate the object's agency in the use of that image. Furthermore, invisibility can produce power by overthrowing expectations of power and transcending a monitored existence. The production of the play also asserts agency and power by presenting an audience with a visual image of a political movement. It also allows the audience to react and formulate their own conclusions, thereby subverting a dichotomy of gaze and spectacle.

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<sup>2</sup> Moraga's collective term for the protestors of McLaughlin.

The last scene of the play removes the characters from a cycle of (in)visibility that constantly reproduces itself. Continuing to work within that cycle has limitations in that characters attempt to subvert it by participating in it. Moraga resolves this paradox in the last scene by reinforcing the importance of direct action in creating change. The play also reduces itself to direct action by ending with an absence of image. Rather than showing the burning of the fields, Moraga places the action off stage. In its production, however, it emphasizes the necessity of visionaries in bringing the characters, and the audience, to this point. It asserts that one must be aware of issues in order to act. Thus, while (in)visibility is constantly problematized and renegotiated, it remains a crucial part of the social change that Moraga, as a visionary, endeavors to inspire.

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## LAW(S) AND DISORDER(S): MALE TROUBLE IN FAULKNER'S SANCTUARY

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The present discussion is an attempt to move away from the generally accepted view that the centre of *Sanctuary's* plot, whence all emerges and into which all will finally converge is the violated body of woman, and to draw attention to what lies beyond female sexuality as presented in this perplexing novel: the construction of masculinity in a Victorian patriarchal system. As I propose to demonstrate in this reading, this is in fact the structure that frames and in the end explodes *Sanctuary's* narrative. As Robert Dale Parker has noted, "Faulkner feels queasier about the burdens on masculinity than about the more concretely threatening burdens on women. For women, he imagines or at least tries to imagine the dialectic between sex and gender in terms of individual women, whereas for men, he imagines sex and gender through a more frankly puzzled uneasiness about the broader possibilities for masculinity" (Parker 74).

Faulkner's interest in the workings of social codes is well documented throughout his work. One important experiment he developed in *Sanctuary* was establishing an explicit parallel between the workings of the legal system (Law) and those of other symbolic paradigms that prescribe unwritten (though equally or even more persuasive) guidelines, moral and behavioural codes that supposedly govern social existence (laws). In fact, the relation between power and sex, or law and desire in the text is presented explicitly as "juridico-discursive" (Foucault 82), whereby sex is defined through its relation to the law (as permitted or forbidden, licit or illicit). According to this traditional view revised by Foucault, the law, always expressed negatively in relation to sex, represses and controls it (though never to its full) in/through language (rules) (Foucault 82-85). For instance, when Popeye calls Temple a "whore" (41), he uses a term which not only establishes sex and gender, but also specifies a model of sexuality (female sexual predation) and its "illicitness" regarding this particular socio-sexual establishment. However,

through pervasive narrative gaps, which have made the novel a difficult one to fit a theoretical paradigm, the text does move beyond this model of power-as-law, allowing for a Foucauldian reading of power as a system of mutually creative and mutually sustaining struggle relations (of which repression can be an effect, but not the essence). As I intend to demonstrate, this textual play makes possible a relocation of terms in the novel's internal gender politics.

The concept of a fallible Law/law at the heart of the novel bears an intricate relation to the uneasy definition of manhood and has a crucial impact on the dramatic development of the plot. In this text Faulkner presents a community obsessed with normative patterns and challenges the deep-rooted Victorian assumption that it is not only possible but desirable to repress, somehow totally eradicate man's primal instincts from social life. This widespread concern reflected the cultural persistence in the Southern mind of a binary categorisation of life (primitive/civilised, or nature/culture, and so forth) whereby high levels of repression of irrational impulses—expressed in strong normative activity—were seen to reflect the civilisational superiority of the community. Scientific progress such as Darwinian theory in the nineteenth century or the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis in the twentieth century, which identified in human beings an intrinsic and inexpugnable element of animal irrationality did not easily permeate into the resisting mentality of the defeated Confederacy, in desperate need of a positive and sophisticated self-image. The Lost Cause served to galvanise the myth of the aristocratic cavalier as a heroic ideal of manhood, which was replaced in the New South by the temperate figure of the “Southern gentleman.” Like other of Faulkner's “sacred urns,” this ideal of masculinity, however, is beginning to show a few cracks.

By tracing a correspondence between manhood and norm (whether legal or behavioural), Faulkner casts a bunch of male characters on a doomed quest to determine on which side of the Law/law they stand. The very idea of Law is indeed questioned here as a futile and perverse instrument of social rationality. Instead of an accommodating frame to white masculinity, *Sanctuary* presents an almost apocalyptic view of the law which mirrors not only the contradictory nature of gender construction but also the precarious way that socially assigned gender identities hold up to the complexity of real life individuality. Underscoring the dramatic importance of this thematic component, Faulkner provides explicit indicators from the outset, aligning the male protagonists on opposing sides of the Law. At least five of the men directly involved in Temple Drake's fate are legalists:

Judge Drake, her two brothers, Gowan Stevens and Horace Benbow. Another five elements, diametrically opposed to this group but equally crucial to Temple's experience, form a gang of outlaws headed by Popeye. It should be noted, however, that this opposition is an artificial social arrangement, with much less separating the two groups than might be apparent on a superficial reading. As the story progresses it becomes evident that the contrasts are quite unstable, and the characters continually oscillate between one field of authority and another.

Gowan Stevens and Horace Benbow, for instance, are both lawyers who not only connive with but become accomplices to the illegal activity in Goodwin's still, as well as several members of the religious congregation who later participate in his conviction and lynching. In contrast, Tommy acts as Temple's protector against his own gang, when it is Gowan, the wannabe gentleman, who irresponsibly puts her at risk in the first place. Popeye, who cannot drink alcohol for health reasons, lives of bootlegging, and nevertheless protests, oblivious to the screaming paradox: "I told him about letting them sit around all night, swilling that goddam stuff. There ought to be a law." (Faulkner 59). Indeed, the fundamental crisis in the world of *Sanctuary* stems from this tight articulation of social models of authority and the concept of manhood. In the end, the construction of the latter merely seems to reflect the fluctuation and paradox of the former. Miss Reba, while harbouring a kidnapped adolescent who is subject to traumatic physical and psychological violations, brags of having as frequent guests at her brothel important figures of communal authority: "Anybody in Memphis can tell you who Reba Rivers is. Ask any man on the street, cop or not. I've had some of the biggest men in Memphis right here in this house, bankers, lawyers, doctors – all of them. I've had two police captains drinking beer in my dining-room and the commissioner himself upstairs with one of my girls" (114). Law enforcement representatives are the first to transgress the sexual codes they supposedly help to police.

This essay traces such correlations and paradoxes along the individual trajectories of the main male figures of the book in their search for a masculine ideal. In this context, Gowan Stevens is the clearest case of a dilemmatic search for a solid definition of manhood. In times of Prohibition, Gowan lives obsessed with the idea of becoming a true "gentleman." For this effect he drinks according to ritual codes introduced to him during the college years in Virginia. The first contradiction would be, of course, that an uncritical respect for the law is one the fundamental traits of the gentleman. On the

other hand, by insisting on drinking like a gentleman, Gowan ends up losing touch with himself as a gentleman, as a man, as a conscience, in a process of alienation with counterproductive and traumatic effects: "I passed out twice, he said. *I passed out twice*. 'Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,' he whispered, his body writhing inside his disreputable and bloody clothes in an agony of *rage and shame*" (69) (my emphasis).

Another issue he has not quite made up his mind about is the fluctuation between femininity as represented by Narcissa, i.e., defined by an asexual quality,<sup>1</sup> and the supposed sensuality of Temple, with whose social activity he associates a voracious sexual appetite: "Think you can play around all week with any badgertrimmed hick that owns a Ford, and fool me on a Saturday, don't you?" (32). The truth is that Temple's descriptions point to a somewhat anorectic childlike figure rather than the voluptuousness or *femme fatale* quality that is often associated with her. Gowan's difficulty in grasping either model of femininity most likely originates in his own problematic notions of masculinity. As Diane Roberts points out, "the chivalric code fails: the 'Virginia gentleman' Gowan, Temple's supposed 'protector,' savages her.... Gowan is jealous because a sexual commodity he feels he has the right to control has made herself available to other men, even if only for a car ride. It is possible that had he not been so stupefyingly drunk, he might have tried to rape Temple himself in the woods on the way to Starkeville" (Roberts 133). Exposing this ambiguity even further, Popeye, who "equivocally" addresses Gowan (and men in general) as "Jack," also calls him a pimp, grossly reversing the chivalric image the other is trying to project.

The equivocal motif is of axial importance to the book, affecting all the other male characters. Even in the rare, scattered moments of comic relief that Faulkner makes available (surely to rescue the readers from the swamp of scepticism in which they slowly drown) he merely adjusts the tone of the narrative, insisting on this thematic pattern. A good example is the episode where the two simpletons Virgil Snopes and Fonzo book into Miss Reba's brothel, which they mistake for a boarding house. After two whole weeks, and despite the ridiculously busy goings-on of the whorehouse, Snopes and Fonzo remain hilariously impermeable to the reality of it all, which is all the more preposterous because they are actually seeking one.

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<sup>1</sup> Though she is Bayard Sartoris' widow and Bory's mother, Narcissa does everything within her reach to "erase" any vestiges of her sexuality and fertility, dressing in perpetual white.

Upon returning from another Memphis brothel with a barber friend, Fonzo carefully warns: "We got to sneak in, now,' ... 'If [Miss Reba] was to find out where we been and what we been doing, she might not let us stay in the house with them ladies no more'" (156). They take the underdressed women for dressmakers. Goodwin also falls victim to misjudgement, but under rather more dramatic circumstances, by being convicted in Popeye's place, who in turn is also accused of committing a crime he could not physically have carried out. As a matter of fact, in a sort of grim burlesque Popeye is sentenced to death for killing a man at a time when he was killing another man some place else. Clarence Snopes approaches Horace for the first time asking "Don't I address Judge Benbow?" (139). Even after Horace's correction, Snopes keeps calling him by that erroneous epithet, imprecisely locating Horace's stand in communal authority. The same happens during his first "visit" to the Old Frenchman's Place, where Popeye introduces him to Ruby as "a professor" (9).

Gowan's fundamental mistake is that in his quest for self-definition as *man* he totally depends upon a number of symbols which he cannot consubstantiate. Drinking, the alleged prerogative of the gentleman, carries him to the exact opposite extreme of sophistication, into a kind of primitive stupor. His constant drunkenness is actually what most inhibits his performance as protector of feminine sexual 'purity', and that which constitutes him in his own (sober) eyes as a failed male. His words on the matter are wonderfully eloquent: "'Got proteck...'" Gowan muttered, "'... girl. 'Ginia gem... gemman got proteck...'" (60). Gowan's symbolic masculine code is so radically superimposed over the reality it supposedly describes that in the end it simply becomes detached from it. In addition to the fatal decision of dragging Temple along to Goodwin's place when he still has a chance to protect her, his actions at this point are so affected by his reckless drinking that afterwards he does not even dare show his face around Goodwin's place anymore, humbled by such an 'unmanly' demonstration. His utter lack of self-awareness does not allow for him to note that it is not merely his symbolic, ritual masculinity which is in danger, but rather Temple's very concrete physical body. The letter he later writes to Narcissa is enough evidence of this imbalance between the fiction of himself he has forged and his real self. It is also telling of an endemic misunderstanding of female sexuality, and specifically of the rape to which he has just doomed his date. This paranoiac condition is evidenced by both the tone and language of his writing. One would almost presume that Gowan, not Temple, had been the victim of rape: "*I cannot write it, for*

*I have gone through with an experience which I cannot face. I have but one rift in the darkness, that is that I have injured no one save myself by my folly ....*" (104). In agreement with the wider picture of *Sanctuary*, Gowan is autistically incapable to see beyond his individual sphere, and remains completely oblivious to the wrong he has brought upon Temple. So what is patently a dangerous obsession with the masculine ideal of southern gentility he dismisses as a mere *faux pas*, a slightly embarrassing "folly."

This is a key moment in the novel's presentation of gender-based tension. On the one hand, it makes evident the nefarious effects of this particular masculine agenda on women's experience. But at the same time it also brings forward a critique of one-model-fits-all fantasies of white masculinity. At this point it is important to note that feminisms have not exactly warmed up to Faulkner's portrayals of women over the decades, and to an important extent, this has been rightly so. Critics like Minrose C. Gwin, Doreen Fowler, Deborah Clarke, Judith Bryant Wittemberg, as well as a growing number of male critics, including David Williams and John Duvall, have in the last decades discussed the paradoxical representations of woman in Faulkner's texts and addressed issues such as the positioning of woman as peripheral, either as object or as absence, the association of femaleness to nature and the irrational, to decadence and death. Such narrative choices might be seen to cancel out much of the material that presents women in a more positive light, as autonomous and worthy subjects. The fact remains that a man of his time, Faulkner did reverberate, in work as well as in life, prejudiced attitudes in disfavour of "politically-challenged" groups, such as white women, Black men and Black women. A good part of the human complexity in his narratives stemmed from deep-rooted personal biases, however liberal or progressive he may have thought himself. As such, and let down by a notorious tendency for unfortunate public statements, he does make a pretty easy target for contemporary charges of sexism and racism. Still, and although the argument should not and cannot always totally exonerate people "of a time" of their social responsibilities, we must not yield to the temptation of reading history exclusively through our "wiser," anachronistic perspective.

In addition, regardless of historical contingency (and this certainly is a pervasive phenomenon in literature), in the multifaceted, sometimes paradoxical works that they produce, artists invariably give wider accounts and render more complex pictures than they themselves may acknowledge at the time, and even say or imply

things despite themselves. In this example Faulkner is clearly exploring the mechanisms involved in the oppression of women, a form of iniquity of which he as fiction writer has often, and often justifiably, been accused. Yet this concern is not exclusive. He is in fact addressing the oppression/alienation of both women *and* men whose lives are regulated by normative systems that ultimately aim to nullify individuality, whether feminine, masculine, black or white. Feminist scholarship is often weary of such perspectives, which may be seen as fomenting “unfair competition,” or as forms of trivialising women’s oppression. However, since this is not the place to elaborate those arguments in fitting depth, and being well aware of the implications such theoretical options may carry, let me simply state that in this analysis my main aim is to explore the ways in which the white patriarchal system that fails white and Black women also fails men, Black *and* white, and the latter group not always in ways as subtle as might be expected.

Indeed, a social system that oppresses its female members, white and Black, along with its Black men, surely is also letting down its white male members (albeit in different ways and though they might not be aware of it). On the one hand, white males become blind to the human essence of the alienated groups which is not being fully realised. And in this blindness they are joined by large numbers of the members of those same groups, who have assimilated and participate cyclically in the preservation of this *status quo*. On the other, white males too are oppressed, in the sense that a model of identity (hegemonic masculinity) is also forced upon them, leaving little or no space for individual development. In this sense, it is just as important to investigate why, how and how effectively dominant social groups (in this case, white men) maintain the hierarchical structures they assimilate during socialisation (which includes mothering most often by women) as it is to look into why and how the subaltern groups accept/endure/resist oppression in a given historical context. More comprehensive (as opposed to one-sided) research of gender relations is bound to find that different sections can be affected in similar ways by the subliminal cultural heritage of which the assignment of gender roles is one, non-isolatable aspect. Ultimately, I am interested in testing out the often stated or implied notion that since white manhood is the central reference for social participation within Yoknapatawpha and beyond, white males in general fare much better existentially than other sections of the fictional population; or rather, if the economically successful white male really always (if ever at all) comes out on top in meaningful ways where gender-based conflict is concerned.

Faulkner is exposing the contradictions and shortcomings of an idealised southern manhood defined by the setting of white womanhood on the proverbial pedestal of morality and the fierce protection of female sexual “purity.” As the District Attorney declares during Goodwin’s trial, in order to reinstate the ideological order shaken by Temple’s rape, first and foremost the usurpation of what he proclaims “that most sacred thing in life: womanhood” (226) must be avenged, in a sort of desperate institutional attempt to restore Temple’s virginity. In fact, giving a whole new meaning to the expression “trial and error,” the all-male jury he is addressing will take the exact same eight minutes of misjudgement to convict the wrong man as Popeye’s jury. Ironically, amidst the crowd which will lynch and presumably rape Goodwin<sup>2</sup> in a cruel retribution process, some voices betray an unconscious connivance with the crime they intend to punish. When Temple, thus far merely a name, an abstract idea of upper-class white femininity finally makes her appearance in court, the former consecration is immediately replaced by the sexualisation of her physical body and the discourse of protection gives way to the discourse of usurpation: “Good looking”; “She was some baby.” (234)—in the original version of the book, the drummer added: “Jeez. I wouldn’t have used no cob” (Polk 309); “We got to protect our girls. Might need them ourselves” (237). Indeed the District Attorney himself, supposedly representing the supreme and objective rationality of the Law, incites his listeners to a barbaric collective vindication: “this is no longer a matter for the hangman, but for a bonfire of gasoline—” (226).

Even the title Faulkner chose for the book serves as a kind of authorial clue to the misleading surface of the world here represented. The word “sanctuary,” as scholars have insistently pointed out, is open to several interpretations, most recurrently to that of female sexuality, Faulkner’s sacred urn, here embodied by a female protagonist aptly named Temple. However, all of *Sanctuary*’s sanctuaries invariably appear as inhospitable and dehumanizing, rather than the places of physical and spiritual refuge one might expect. Goodwin’s house, where Temple and Gowan seek help, in the end turns out to be the “dungeon” of the girl’s rape; the Baptist congregation ostracises and then expels a helpless mother and her sick child; in court, the sacred quarters of justice, two defendants are convicted of crimes they did not commit; even in Miss Reba’s brothel

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<sup>2</sup> When Horace arrives at the scene of the lynching, a voice shouts: “Do to the lawyer what we did to him. What he did to her.” (236).



there are no traces of female solidarity towards Temple in what is patently a violent hostage situation (even the extremely jealous Ruby had previously shown more support). The latter is a parody of the vestal temple, where the girl's sexuality is not only not protected but whose usurpation is actually consented to, trivialised, even encouraged (through Temple's demented alcoholism) by the not-so-virginal residents. In much the same way, characters who wish to assume socially constructed male roles sooner or later discover that they are by no means indisputable warrants for power.

Horace, for example, inherits from his aristocratic background and his father, Judge Benbow, a model of masculinity which is totally identified with the concept of order and authority. In more ways than one, Horace is a kind of nostalgic resurrection of a previous modern anti-hero much loved by Faulkner, young Quentin Compson. They are both descendants of men of Law, they both take Law degrees, and they both experience the crisis of masculinity brought on by the ideological hangover in the transition from the Old South to the New. Horace and Quentin share a common penchant for introspection and an intellectual sophistication that Gowan will never attain, but for that same reason, they both agonise in the impossibility of fulfilling the cavalier myth which they have inherited in a world where all kinds of social distinctions are being tested.

Only a couple of generations before, the upper-class white male could take for granted the general acknowledgment of both his social and his sexual supremacy. The model of masculinity was two-fold, with one side to the man as the husband and quite another as the lover/rapist. Since as husband a man must at all cost preserve the woman's chaste image (a token of the superior status not only of the family but of an entire social class), his sexual activity within wedlock was strongly restricted by social and religious morals. The gentleman himself must not compromise the gentility of the women in his own household. This was generally, however, a problem of easy and readily accessible solution. Contiguity with black servants and the availability of white women of an inferior class, prostitutes, allowed for a freer sexual fruition of the males behind the gentlemen. This rigid separation of social and sexual roles was severely shaken by the political consequences of the Civil War, and could no longer be taken for granted in the New South that hence originated. On the one hand, the class system as it was hitherto understood collapsed. The beginning of the twentieth century revealed a South that was no longer dominated by Compsons and Sartorises, but where a new upcoming bourgeois class, unhindered by the atrophying cult of the

ancestral, began claiming power on more materialistic grounds and instating new economic values, particularly after World War I. In the New South, business-minded Snopeses and Jason types are upwardly mobile in Southern society in ways never imagined before 1865.

Such a change would inevitably threaten the social standing of the upper-class white woman, whose essentially ornamental function—along with the sexual repression it implied—was rapidly becoming less and less justifiable. On the other hand, the abolition of slavery formally ended the sexual manipulation of the black woman by her white masters. The former sexual order, now in the process of disintegration, nevertheless left an indelible mark in the collective mind, and the patriarchal mentality remained virtually unchanged, which brought the younger generation of men to an ideological impasse. As Kevin Railey notes: “As the social structure changed... men found it more difficult to maintain this situation, both in personal and social terms, and had more and more to face both aspects of masculinity—their gentlemanly side and their manly side, so to speak” (Railey 86-7).

Horace's erratic entrance in the story is not merely coincidental. When we first meet this character, he is desperately, confusedly trying to reach what once was his father's house. Horace tells of a sort of epiphany triggered by the sight of a lipstick-stained handkerchief. This enigmatic moment of recognition sends him out of Kinston, his wife's town, and on a disoriented journey hitchhiking and walking back to Jefferson. Horace's wandering metaphorically recreates the personal identity crisis he is going through, for he is attempting to extricate himself from what he believes to be his greatest mistake: his marriage to Belle, a woman of pulsating sexual energy and the living negation of the “asexual” gentleman's wife. Incapable of ridding himself of his patriarchal, aristocratic complex, chivalric Horace passes on Belle's sexual advances, albeit self-castrating himself psychologically in the process. The image of an uninhibited female sexuality horrifies him, much because it is strongly associated with the lower classes and the Black community. To these othered sections of the population the same repressive sexual rules and standards did not, of course, apply. Dominant gender discourses about those social groups assumed their relative proximity to nature and instinctive animal behaviour.

The flee from white female sexuality in unsettling evidence leads him in the regressive direction of the abstract masculine ideal identified with the Benbow home in Jefferson, once headed by his father.

However, incidents along his journey already point to Horace's inescapable frustration: "I have been walking and bumming rides ever since. I slept one night in a sawdust pile at a mill, one night at a Negro cabin, one night in a freight car on a siding" (15). Obsessed with the idea of reaffirming a concept of manhood defined in terms of race and class, from the very beginning of his journey Horace chooses sites of refuge that quite ironically identify him with the lower working classes and, in the extreme, with blackness. His fervent search for a centre of masculinity lands him precisely in a place of self-marginalisation, "on a siding." Still, at this point Horace is still far from recognizing the pervasive signs of erosion of all social boundaries. His image and Popeye's simultaneously reflected on the water, however, do suggest a latent uncertainty of self.

In the opening encounter Faulkner delights in setting the two characters vis-à-vis, in a sort of "I'll-show-you mine-if-you-show-me-yours" game. Popeye carries a gun, Horace carries a book. The two objects symbolically encapsulate the essence of their very different approaches to life, one privileging the pragmatic, the other the theoretical. They also indicate opposing conceptions of womanhood. Popeye, as will subsequently be demonstrated, sees women merely as objects, liable to man's (in his case, brutal) touch. Unlike Horace or Goodwin, he does not distinguish between biological *females* and socially engendered *women*. Like Deacon in *The Sound and The Fury*, he "draws no petty social lines." Horace, on the other hand, following in the misogynistic and generally somatophobic platonic tradition, is repelled by the concreteness of the female body, and perceives the reality of female sexuality as monstrous and annihilating. He too prefers to indulge in the idea of a spiritual, asexual femininity, the middle- and upper-class model embodied by his sister Narcissa. On one side there is Popeye and woman as the captured signified, on the other, Horace and woman as the perpetually volatile signifier.

Indeed, Horace favours language and the abstract over reality and action. He posits unlimited faith in the structuring powers of language in a chaotically disorganised world. Holding the book, which is nothing if not a collection of symbols, he denounces his firm belief in the authority of language, the ultimate manifestation and vehicle of his existential ideal: "law, justice, civilization" (105). But though Horace is not yet aware of it, the world he is living in *is* the age of the concrete. In the world of *Sanctuary*, the power of symbols has worn out. Popeye's gun has the power to take at least two men's lives, while even Horace's highly specialised language in court proves totally ineffective in saving Goodwin's life.

Horace's fundamental delusion is indeed trying to equate his own ideal of masculinity with the supposedly stabilizing effect of symbolic systems such as language and the law, overlooking the fact that by their very nature, symbols do not necessarily maintain stable relations with their meanings. Despite Goodwin's lack of cooperation in the whole process, Horace never really ponders the possibility of losing his case, and a freak incident such as Temple's intervention is to him unthinkable. The reason for this stubborn and unfounded conviction is a dependence similar to Gowan's, an untested belief in the workings of codes that structure patriarchal masculinity. At one point, Horace even evokes the highest representative of universal authority to corroborate such certainties: "God is foolish at times, but at least He's a gentleman." The more mundane Ruby, whose life experience has not afforded her such chivalric notions of the divinity, sees otherwise: "I always thought of Him as a man" (223). It is also telling that the word "gentleman" is spoken only by men who, in one way or another, have extremely narrow views of masculinity: Horace, Gowan, and Clarence Snopes. Other than this, the term is only sardonically used by witty Miss Jenny Du Pre. Besides, even divine law is showing signs of obsolescence, judging by the symbolic manifestations of the believers, specifically the Baptist congregation in the novel. Though they cause Horace strong indignation, even their attitude does not sufficiently prepare him for the coming miscarriage of Justice. "This morning the minister took [Goodwin] for a text." (102), he tells Miss Jenny. As he himself puts it, the Baptist community appropriates Goodwin and transforms him into a symbol, in this case, a symbol of adultery. If Goodwin, then, is converted into "text," this means that interpretation of his meaning will not necessarily be univocal, according to the elements of instability and arbitrariness of language.

What follows (and even if Temple's perjury is not exactly self-explanatory) is that Justice, also a symbolic system founded on language, is liable to misinterpret Goodwin, or rather, to interpret Goodwin's case in a way different to Horace's. Unlike what he is prepared to admit, truth is necessarily a relative concept, for anything "readable" is also liable to the designation of plural meanings, and therefore, liable to what Horace understands as error. As Saussure initially pointed out, words are empty symbols; they exist only in opposition to other words, meaning things other words do not mean, and this meaning is arbitrarily fixed by social agreement, not determined by individuals, or by the referent's external language. Not God, nor Lacan's Real—that which is beyond language and therefore fatally escapes us (who are permanently trapped within the

symbolic order)—and certainly not Horace alone may be held as the sanctioning reference of the meaning he is trying to impose.

His inability to predict or at least comprehend the law's fatal 'error' reflects the inability to assess his own ambiguity regarding the male codes he wishes to embody. If the meeting with Popeye in the beginning at first appears to set them on opposing sides (Faulkner provides explicit indicators of that contrast: book/gun, speech/physical force, white/black...), their reflected spectres on the water clearly suggest Popeye as a sort of *alter ego* to Horace. In fact, Horace shares much more with Popeye than he certainly would like to admit, in a culture that may divide on racial and economic grounds but makes gender categories converge. Despite the horror he expresses while listening to Temple's report, on more than one occasion Horace has betrayed signs of illicit sexual desire for another young female figure, his teenage daughter-in-law Little Belle. This instance of forbidden desire, with clear oedipal resonance, is more explicitly developed in *Sanctuary – The Original Text* but, though comparably understated, is still detectable in the revised edition. Although like Quentin he never gets to consummating abstract desire, this situation ironically brings him closer to a man like Popeye, whom Temple occasionally addresses as "Daddy" (184).

It should be noted, however, that Temple only calls him by this name at critical moments, such as when she is trying to appease Popeye's growing animosity against her lover Red. If this form of address is meant to pacify Popeye, leading him to believe that his authority over her remains unquestioned, the subversion/disintegration of patriarchal power becomes even more conspicuous. A few pages before, in a rage fit and immediately after having called him "Daddy," Temple denies Popeye not only his patriarchal control, but also the very essence of his masculinity: "You're not even a man!" (184). Temple's personhood is invisible to the males of *Sanctuary*, who cannot detect any individual complexity beyond her white, female, upper-class embodiment. Her corpoReality, so to speak, is equated with an abstract model of femininity that social agreement posits under male dominance. Accordingly, what Temple does here is exactly playing that game against Popeye, throwing back at him a direct correspondence between his physical impotence and his "misgendered" self. In turn, Little Belle also contests Horace's patriarchal ascendancy, particularly when he (somewhat hesitantly) designates himself as the watchdog of her florescent sexuality: "What business is it of yours who comes to see me? You're not my father! You're just – just –" (14).

Faulkner frequently indulged in teasing his readers at interviews, and on one given occasion he said of Temple: "Women are impervious to evil.... How she sat there on a bench, so quiet and serene? And just as if none of those horrible things that happened to her in the old house and in the corn crib or in the whore house with Popeye and her lover, Red even occurred. She wasn't demoralized or touched by any of it. All of it was like water falling on a duck's back and sliding right off" (Blotner 294). Such statements about this and other novels had a morbid influence over readers and critics for decades, as can be attested by the extensive corpus of critical texts condemning Temple's erratic behaviour. However, these (no less patriarchal) diversion manoeuvres should not leave us blind to the fact that Faulkner used precisely female profiles such as Temple and Little Belle to trigger the fragmentation process of the masculine abstractions that Horace and Popeye, though in different ways, wish to incarnate. In fact, the daughters of *Sanctuary* (Temple, Ruby and Little Belle) manage not only to survive these men's physically and psychologically destructive impulses, but also to destitute them of their designating powers by figuratively emasculating them. In the traditional oedipal narrative the daughters see themselves in an expectant position of passivity and vulnerability between the protective/repressive figure of the father and the advances of a potential usurper of her sexuality. Yet these women's sexual pulse does not remain indefinitely contained by patriarchal repression, but rather is continually manifest in gestures of usurpation/substitution of male-identified authority.

Ruby's brother and father refuse to accept her sexual maturity and go to extraordinary lengths to preserve her virginity. The father shoots her lover in cold blood before her very eyes. The murder weapon ("a long cylindrical tube," as John N. Duvall suggestively calls it) is a classic phallic symbol of authoritarian and violent masculinity (Duvall 64). Ruby's sexual growth is not, however, arrested, and she does continue to seek some form of individual wholeness outside that repressive family circle. Doubly challenging the structures of this patriarchal microcosm, she later elopes with an outlaw and becomes his concubine, affronting all established conventions of sexual union.

Similarly, to prevent Temple from associating with men who drink, one of her brothers physically threatens her. However, Temple seems only too happy to jump into Gowan's car, even if half the time he presents himself as a staggering drunkard. Judge Drake, not only Temple's father but a man holding a prominent position of institutional

authority, would most certainly disapprove of his daughter's socially promiscuous behaviour, yet this does not stop her from freely enjoying the company of young men from the Ole Miss co-ed campus. Still, it has to be recognised that although men in her family are patently inefficient in their safekeeping of Temple's chastity, she does not escape other mechanisms of repressive sexual patrolling at the hands of a substitute father figure.

Popeye begins by violently defiling Temple's femininity, transgressing the established sexual order in the most radical way possible (through rape). To make up for his physical impotence, he uses a corn cob as a barbarous substitute phallus (here in the physical sense of the term). In this sense, Popeye initially consubstantiates to the highest degree the threat of the invading third in the Freudian triangle. Although in this case the father figure is physically absent, that same absence is compensated by Temple's insistent evocations, as she tries to shield herself behind her father's authoritative image: "My father's a judge" (44), "... 'if bad man hurts Temple, us'll tell the governors soldiers, won't us?" (46). Popeye is clearly affronting not only an abstract patriarchal order but also the authority of Temple's male relatives in particular.

At a later stage, however, Popeye comes to assume a purely voyeuristic role and he himself instates a new triangle at the brothel, summoning Red to penetrate Temple while he watches. Ironically, it seems that as soon as he gives up his physical phallus, the corn cob, he is automatically converted to the abstract order of the Phallus. In other words, he is the one who reassembles the patriarchal sexual order he had initially challenged by means of Temple's rapings. In this new role as *voyeur* he is immediately identified with the territorial figure of the Father in the oedipal triangle, where the latter is confronted with the possibility of a second male element, a sexual invader, accessing the daughter's hitherto exclusive chastity. After a while, Temple stops resisting Red's sexual advances, having developed a strange fascination for him. Suddenly Popeye starts acting as the patriarchal avenger of a femininity which is no longer vulnerable and victimised, but rather has become spontaneous and uninhibited. Dismissing Red from his sexual "duties," Popeye begins to monitor and control Temple's sexual agency, this "monster" which he himself apparently has unleashed. Revealingly, it is only at this stage that Temple addresses him as "Daddy." In agreement with other patriarchal denouements in the novel, Popeye too kills Red, who has become a threat to the other's masculine authority, with a couple more phallic gunshots.

With an image of the usurped female body at its centre, *Sanctuary* is the portrayal of a patriarchal system that seems to be consuming itself in an ideological spiral. The authority of the father figure, whether literal or figurative, private or public, is persistently questioned from beginning to end, under all pretexts. The enigmatic character of Pap at the Frenchman's place, who has been read as caricature of a God indifferent to the destiny of mankind, may in this sense also be viewed as an allegory of male dominance in crisis. His blindness and dumbness are metaphorical manifestations of the chasm between an artificial order of hegemonic white masculinity and the indomitable human reality it strives to discipline. The physical handicaps symbolically recreate the difficulty of acculturated white males in viewing the reality of his Other(s) beyond the gender-race-class screen. Ultimately, they may also be seen to represent the hypocrisy and evil of a male principle that claims brutal possession of the female body at the same time it punishes female sexual impulses through acts of violence and death.

This might for one account for the screams of anger and frustration that Temple directs at Pap, as though he were a witting, complicitous presence at the scene of her rape. Popeye is the male figure in the novel who most radically incarnates this oppressive model of masculinity, but at a more or less subliminal level male characters generally manifest some degree of complicity with it. Upon learning that Ruby has submitted herself to the sexual exploitation of a lawyer, Goodwin beats her, regardless of the fact that she only did it to bail him out and simply had no alternative means of paying for legal assistance. In turn, at the end of Temple's tragic report Horace himself concludes, apparently not out of empathy but of repugnance and shame: "Better for her if she were dead to-night..." (175). Even if only at a hypothetical level, he does take the male attack on Temple's integrity a dramatic step further.

This perspective may also illuminate other moments in the text that otherwise seem aberrant and inexplicable. Despite his admirable creative daring, it remains a fact that as a public literary figure, Faulkner was particularly insecure and contradictory. In this sense, the dismissive tone about this text (elsewhere he also disowned it on grounds that it had only been published to make quick money) and others should not go unquestioned. As a result of his public intromission explicitly identifying Temple with evil, critics of the novel (especially where Temple's intervention at the court is concerned) stood at an impasse for decades. In fact, extended discussion of this particular moment in the story is more often than not evaded by critics, for



the obvious reason that it seems a bizarre, almost Kafkaian denouement, and its motives difficult to fathom. Invariably, the readings are divided between perplexity and moral condemnation of Temple's perjury, but her true motives remain shrouded in mystery.

It is my belief, however, that the psychological framing I propose in this essay may offer a plausible reading of Temple's enigma. The following excerpt of Temple's troubling account of her rape experience should be considered before any further elaboration:

.... I'd think what I'd say to him, I'd talk to him like the teacher does in school, and then I was a teacher in school and it was a little black thing like a nigger boy, kind of, and I was the teacher. Because I'd say How old am I? And I'd say I'm forty-five years old. I had iron grey hair and spectacles and I was all big up here like women get. I had on a grey tailored suit, and I never could wear grey. And I was telling it what I'd do, and it kind of drawing up like it could already see the switch.

'Then I said *That won't do. I ought to be a man.* So I was an old man, with a long white beard, and then the little black man got littler and littler and I was saying Now. You see now. I'm a man now. Then I thought about being a man, and as soon as I thought it, it happened. I could feel it, and I lay right still to keep from laughing about how surprised he was going to be. (175, my emphasis)

In face of the rape threat, Temple slips into a kind of delirious trance and begins constructing compensatory mental images of the authority she is lacking at that moment, as a trapped and physically fragile woman. Initially she projects a role reversal situation whereby she assumes control over Popeye, changed into the authoritarian, punitive image of a middle-aged schoolteacher. Simultaneously, Popeye appears in her vision as a vulnerable figure, first shrinking magically and then transforming into an African-American (who in this social order is even more destitute of political power than the white woman), and a submissive one at that. Finally, Temple's makeshift self-image of invulnerability develops into one last temporary expedient, the transfiguration into an old man that may reasonably be related to Pap or even Judge Drake. This last instance of transformation seems to reassure her completely as to the elimination of Popeye's former sexual threat. The evolution of the metamorphic process in terms of age and profession to a field of (trans-)sexuality is a telltale sign of the concept of authority that Temple herself has assimilated from life in this community. It is basically penis-envy as metaphor for "phallus-envy." In this society, sex and gender are inextricably intertwined: maleness must signal masculinity, and masculinity commands authority. Reversibly, femaleness reads as femininity which signals inferior authority, and only for upper-and

middle-class white women at that. (Poor white women and black women utterly lack political weight, a condition dictated by the convergence and fusion of two or more social “handicaps”: femaleness, financial disadvantage, blackness). So at this particular point Temple does not even imagine herself merely as a transvestite, but as a transsexual, totally equipped with pop-up male genitalia (“I could feel it ....” [175]). Through this subconscious manoeuvring, Temple’s imagination is attempting to complete a reversal process, with a surprising but fitting response to the impotency affecting Popeye, to whom she protests: “You’re not even a man!” (184)

Yet for all the psychological power of these fascinating transformations, which serve to block out the idea of rape, they cannot preserve Temple’s physical integrity, and she is indeed brutally violated. Temple’s part in Goodwin’s conviction for this violation, otherwise perceived as yet another random, equivocal development in a modernist text with a typically loose plot, may in this frame be viewed as a symbolic gesture of retribution. Faulkner’s apparent authorial skidding should accordingly be reassessed:

[T]he crises of narrative authority that have come to be seen as endemic to modern fiction must ... be evaluated in light of the specifically sexual anxieties to which the fictional exploration of an interior consciousness and subconscious desire gives voice. Conversely, the representation of sexual authority within these texts—particularly in regard to female agency—frequently precipitates a degree of *textual* anxiety that has most often been viewed as symptomatic of the crisis-in-narrative brought about by the delegitimation of modernity’s masterplots (Boone 10).

By taking into her own hands the power of saving or condemning Goodwin, Temple moves beyond the merely circumstantial particulars of the crime of which she was a victim. Her perjury is aimed not at that specific criminal, but to a whole male principle which accommodated for the possibility of such violence against women (even if Temple is likely thinking only of young, privileged white women such as herself). Her unexpected intervention gives a new global meaning to the events at the Old Frenchman’s Place and at Miss Reba’s brothel, denouncing that her femininity has not been usurped by one individual alone, but by a whole male network which promotes woman’s sexual and social vulnerability to repressive and oppressive patriarchal designs. In other words, her appearance in court and its terrible effects are directed as much at Goodwin as at Popeye, Horace, Gowan, the Drakes and the jury, and at the “masculine male” population in general.

The irony lies in the fact that Temple uses the very instruments of

that hostile system (in this case, the court of law, one of the main institutional beams of patriarchal rule) against itself, undermining its purposes. Her testimony is not, after all, so inarticulate and illogical, as has been pointed out earlier. First of all, her report to Horace is enough evidence of unproblematic articulacy. What is at stake here isn't so much Temple's voice or lack of it, but the *loci* where it is allowed to be heard. Not the Frenchman's Place, except by Ruby, and a reluctant Ruby at that. Not the court, where the District Attorney appropriates her defence and "steals" her of her own words, committing her to almost utter silence. In fact, throughout the novel, almost no one ever listens to what Temple is saying, crying out, pleading for. Unless we also count the judgmental confessor-meets-sex-pathologist Foucauldian figure that is Horace at the moment of Temple's account of the rape. Minrose C. Gwin points out that "part of Temple's tragedy in *Sanctuary* may be that in trying to say her sexuality as a female adolescent (and so as a commodity) in a masculine sexual economy, she becomes *the said* – the bloody inscription on the phallic corn cob, the whore in the bed, the Father's daughter.... Women's own creativity, their beautiful shattering force which generates Faulkner's texts by pointing toward the unrepresentable ... finally entombs them in a vault of silence." (Gwin 65). So when she does testify, even then prompted only into monosyllabic responses and interrupted every time she tries to go beyond that, Temple grabs her only chance to get back at the hierarchy, by perverting it. This is a true Cixous moment: "For a long time ... within her body she has answered the harassment, ... domestication, the repeated attempts to castrate her. Woman, who has run her tongue ten thousand times seven times around her mouth before not speaking, either dies of it or knows her tongue and her mouth better than anyone. *Now, I-woman am going to blow up the Law*: a possible and inescapable explosion from now on; let it happen, right now, in language." (Cixous 113, my emphasis). And so she speaks Goodwin's death, as the desired liberation from male dominance.

Secondly, nor is Goodwin that innocent when compared to Popeye, as we have seen. Back at the still, Goodwin had not acknowledged Temple's individuality, either. His words and actions certainly made explicit his perception of Temple as an undistinguished representative of femaleness, which to his understanding (or rather lack of it) is naturally subjected to male supremacy. He also seemed to justify rape as a validating mechanism of that sexual hierarchy. When Tommy expresses concern for Temple's safety amongst the gang at the still, Goodwin stops him from intervening, adding in a blatantly misogynistic tone: "It's none of your business

... Let every damned one of them..." (56). Besides condoning the possibility of Temple's rape for no reason other than his own disdain of women, there is little reason to doubt that had the opportunity arisen at the Old Frenchman's Place, he would have abused Temple himself in one way or another. As Temple's strange fantasy seems to suggest, *Sanctuary* presents a fragile, but nevertheless emerging model of femininity based on the capacity for self-reinvention and on the claim of agency to counter the effects of oppression, as opposed to a concept of masculinity atrophying in its own entangled structure. The final image of Temple at the Gardens of Luxembourg is more often than not read in terms of defeat and loss, but that is a very circumscriptive view of the text. What must be highlighted, if anything at all is to be considered positive (i.e. dynamic) in the social interaction within the text, is that Temple's symbolic gesture at the court signals the possibility of transformation, and scratches indelibly the neat surface of patriarchy, revealing it as a transitory condition rather than a given state of things.

There are, of course, no explicit happy endings to Yoknapatawpha stories, nor are Faulkner's characters famous for their ecstatic exits. Temple may not come out of the story totally free from patriarchal influence yet, but nevertheless it must be said that like Ruby she is a survivor and a challenger of that asphyxiating force. They both overcome constrictive social entanglements and take action into their own hands to attain their individual goals. Temple is responsible for the conviction—not the lynching, mind—of a man who had formerly posed a threat to her femininity. Ruby survives Goodwin's tragedy in much the same way that she had for years survived his abuse and his cheating and that she used her body as currency to pay the price of her lover's freedom. Little Belle ignores Horace's feeble sexual censorship and takes responsibility for her sexual adventures. Even Belle refuses to retreat into the jilted woman's role, calmly and quite patronizingly awaiting her husband's predictable (inevitable?) return. The men in *Sanctuary*, on the other hand, despite the violent machismo that pervades the story, gravitate towards physical or psychological emasculation precisely because they choose codes or vicarious experience as a way of life. Frustrated in his quixotic legal adventure and in his inglorious excursion outside the limits of matrimony, Horace sheepishly returns to Belle's house. Feeling let down by "masculine reason," he unhappily succumbs to "female corporeality." In truth Horace learns nothing from his journey, because it is merely a geographical journey, while his mind set remains essentially the same throughout. Popeye's path of rape (with substitute phallic props) and murder ends in his own death by hanging. Finally,

Goodwin also meets death in an equivocal legal process. Inaccurate and wrongful as those judicial proceedings may be, his sentence works as a form of oblique retribution for the physical violence to which he had subjected Ruby and the man he once murdered, with corresponding elements of inequity and social excommunication.

As for the women's individual, relative accomplishments, though they fall short of immediate and generalised impact, it does not necessarily follow that their resistance is doomed to failure or to the reinscription of patriarchal hegemony. In the Foucauldian model, such disseminated, even erratic foci of struggle are not external to power but actually constitutive of power itself:

Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles...They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. Hence they too are distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities...[O]ne is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings....And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible (Foucault 96).

In other words, the hegemony of groups is only an effect, and a transitory effect at that, of the on-going confrontation of social forces. With this analytical frame and dispassionate historical contextualization *Sanctuary* may, after all, be appropriated for feminist readings beyond hopelessness and accusation.

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**FICCIÓN / *FICTION***



## NO EXIT

*Saikat Majumdar*

Every time a struggle.

Back in India I'd march up and down our dilapidated terrace, breathing in the moist tropical air from the potted roseplant and moss-layered precipices, indifferent to the darkness of the evening, the ghostly houses—trying like a drowning man to clutch at the head of the story from the moment, its history—cracking my fingers, sometimes. Funny how it remains the same in the sharplined apartment in the American Midwest. I'm wearing pajamas, as I usually did back in Calcutta. But the walk is the short stretch of carpeted floor of my bedroom from the door to the futon, and there is snow outside the window, no tropical air, for God's sake, but I'm a drowning man again. Drowning man, swimming man, clutching man—how shall the story bite? I can almost smell the moss-layered precipices again. But should it be surprising?

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Black jacket, black jeans. White skin. White blonde hair. Black sky, road. Blinding light.

Peter is a blinding black and white silhouette. The windows of our car are rolled down. The icy wind is blowing like the chilly waters of the Atlantic. Black ice, blinding white light, the revolving sun. They're asking him questions. They've made him turn around. They're searching his body. How is Peter taking it all?

Chris turned around from the passenger's seat and said, "I'm sure he wasn't going above the speed limit."

What could be wrong? Speed limit, the sharp exits, loudgreen, off I-75. Fog swirling ahead, two in the morning. Blinding light, the state troopers. Chilly air from Lake Erie. I wriggled around in my seat, stuck in the seatbelt, that alien artifact which couldn't be understood,

sweated and thought of dilapidated terraces and hot tropical air. The only time I'd driven a car in my life was in Matt's parking lot, running over a shrub at the speed of ten miles an hour as Matt snatched control of the steering wheel from me —“No, no, you've got to stop turning the wheel sooner.”

I've been in this country two months.

What happens when you miss an exit? You can't turn around on the highway, can you? You've got to keep going, going, till you come across another one—for half an hour, an hour, maybe? What happens if your car breaks down on the way? In the middle of an icy night? What happens if those mile long semi trucks give you a gentle nudge, a gentle deathkiss, or when you enter the wrong lane at seventy miles an hour, or forget how to stop a car, or feel deathsleepy at the wheels?

Or when the state trooper flashes psychedelic lights behind you and lets out the night-shattering, darkwaving yell? This is it. I've heard about it. It's for us. Us. Us.

Warm, lazy summer afternoons in central Calcutta movie theatres showing cop and gangster movies from Hollywood. Bruce Willis swearing fuckfuckfuck, dirtyharry Clint Eastwood and evening chips and pop before Star Channel pyrotechnics of *Chicago Hope* and *Miami Vice* seems kinder, airier, gentleposted in a frame. *That cop kicked ass, man!* Matinee show Houseful, buy it from the ticketblacker at a hundred and twenty rupees. I didn't care much for the *Die Hard* series and even *Pulp Fiction* was kind of disappointing, after starting out promising. I guess I have a problem with John Travolta, but who was that really cool black man who screamed the Bible every time he killed? Do you want to take the subway or have some *lassi* first? *Lassi, lassi*, movies make me thirsty.

Nightshattering darkwaving yell. Out here in the Midwest, accents grow thicker and stronger outside the polished precincts of the university English department—the cabbie stiffening at the sight of his foreign passenger, the slickpolite grocery store clerk asking me about my credit card or how I'm doing today, I'm not quite sure—bigburly statrooper means business, and why do you keep staring at him, you lump?

Black ice, blinding white light. Peter is walking back towards the car, his stiff steps caught in the pool of light and sound. Chris looks back from the passenger seat. We don't think it is over. The copcar is still there.

Unlocking the door next to the driver's seat, Peter thrusts his

upper body inside. “What’s up?” We ask in soft respect, mild fear, sorry-to-bother-you-Peter-when-the-cops-are-frisking-you. I, seven minute driver, shrubkiller, even Chris, smoother New Yorker who looks at the Midwest with mellowed disdain, who’s doubtless heard the yell behind his car as many times as he has smoked pot since his middle teens. “They want to see my papers.” He lurches back with a handful of papers from his glove compartment and slams the door shut. The whirl of cold highway air that had entered the car for a few moments melts away, and we become warm again.

Black ice, blinding white light, the nightshattering, darkwaving yell. Speed limit, the sharp exits.

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A nailbiting, crotchscratching kind of a hell, that was.

Though I think I got up only once in between, after having written one page (in longhand, tinyscrawl, at least two pages doublespace typescript?) and successfully suppressed the fleeting desire for a beer though giving in to a cream pie and a stroll around the living room. The ink is deeper from that sentence, I mean, the previous one, signifying a new day’s work. After an intervening Friday of conducting a two hundred level workshop and teaching the tenets of Marxist theory in the afternoon, the evening birthday party of the new Mexican wife of a friend from North Michigan, the new shy wife who spoke little English and could only smile politely through the dinner. ‘Intervening’ I call it, not ‘interrupting,’ because are we allowed ceaseless, relentless, monolithic time to write without all these businesses which confer rotundity to our lives, like cooking or teaching or attending dinner parties? And time passes fast too, only look at the clock it is already past one in the afternoon and I’ve been up only a couple of hours well what did you expect after going to bed late?

One o’clock already and not one full page down, longhand tinyscrawl, bigblob, whatever. And now I’m thinking they’re probably showing the Inauguration at the White House on TV and I would like to see it after all I’m curious to see what shape the Bush Administration takes and so much for ceaseless, relentless, monolithic time to write. Thoughts are cloudy, they break off, candyfloss like, whenever I try to get closer, poke them with my pen. How exactly did Peter (of course not his real name) walk up to the copcar when we were pulled over that night on our way back from Dayton—it’s been a year now—was there grainy hesitation in Chris’s (am I quite happy with

that name?) voice when he asked Peter, softly respectful, mildly fearful, with me, “What’s up?” I couldn’t have bungled Peter’s cool matter-of-fact “They want to see my papers,” in the dense deep south London accent. But I’m allowed to bungle, am I not? What’s the fun of longhand tinyscrawl then?

Power, for a pinch of power, a handful. Weak poor soul me, nailbiting crotchscratching beerthirsty cream pie caught writing time bereft. The bare tree is there everytime I look out of my window, but not so the night, black ice, blinding white light, the nightshattering darkwaving yell. The clock ticks along and I don’t even want to look at it, two-thirty quarter to three and just half a page wrenched out and three more episodes to go. Durgapuja at Dayton, Chris, and fog swirling ahead, two in the morning, blinding lights, the state troopers.

Time I got myself some lunch.

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The dhaks, these massive hollow cymbals from Bengal—crossed the Atlantic in KLM-Northwest, perhaps, or handcrafted by a Detroit diaspora of Bengali potters, beat that—those large dhaks were going crazy and the holy-festive smell of dhuno, the black knotty incense stones in clay pots, filled the spacious halls of the suburban Dayton school. Dhotis, the silksmooth ones, and those sheercotton, ornate, and what a colorful carnival of saris—wellpressed, freshly creasebroken in a regular year of skirts and trousers—saris encasing dainty, sugary steps and Bengali-American drawls—I haven’t seen such a collection of saris and dhotis since I left India, maybe not even before. The luminous banner said—Tri-State Durga Puja—Indiana-Ohio-Kentucky. Thin panjabi clad Bengali babus sat behind the registration table—software professionals from Columbus and Louisville, doctors from the Cleveland Clinic, surely, the solid no-nonsense diaspora of Bengali professionals who had missed the bus to the east coast or goldenworld California, now placated in the Midwest. “Student?” One of them ask. “All?”

Chris and Peter followed me, visibly overwhelmed by the chaos of color and smell and sound. “That’s Hinduism for you, or India, for that matter.” I’d often told Chris during our many talks on theology. “Colorful, messy, musical, erotic.” “Like the thali of curries,” he’d say, and I’d laugh. He was getting the picture.

I thought of Peter's face as it was ten minutes ago, the intent confidence of the machine-happy behind the steering wheel, the soft sunlight of the long fall day lighting up his golden blonde hair as if on fire. Chris holding forth on his loss of faith with the Democratic Party and his decision to vote for Ralph Nader now that he was certain that New York state was safely with Gore! Peter's car, not exactly the best of vehicles, a seventeen-hundred dollar investment shared with an Austrian girl, coming to a standstill on the highway, Peter getting advice on his cell phone, Greek talk about triple A and arcane motor parts, the engine kickstarting again, Chris passing Peter tips about driving on the American highway. What happens if you miss an exit?

"Where's this damn exit anyway?" Peter looks restless. "If we miss this Indian festival, Sagar will have to charm some snakes for us for the evening's entertainment."

"Provided you bait some bears first," I laughed.

Chris was rolling over with laughter. "Maybe I could hunt some coons."

Peter recites lines from *Monty Python* in an exaggerated accent, goes on driving, exitthirsty, till it is almost seven and we start discussing the possibility of ending up in Kentucky—far away from the Durga Puja, the cymbals and the incense and the raagas and the curry splashes. It was getting darker, and Chris had moved from fatchewing on *Monty Python* and *Seinfeld* to New England transcendentalists while Peter beamed on a promising exit.

A U-turn and a half-hour's drive later, we were where we were trying to get to.

Even when we parked the car outside Northmont high school in Englewood, Dayton, there was only the silence of a late fall evening in wide yards and gardens and school buildings, afterhours. Was this the right place? The fragility of information shared over a telephone conversation with a friend in Columbus and hours of precarious highway driving seemed to make this patch of magic unreal. And what a magicpatch! The faces of Chris and Peter, highways and sharp exits, loudgreen, the late fall evening in south Ohio—could it happen here? Could it?

Even the one building some distance away which sported a lone banner and had a large number of cars parked in front. TRI-STATE DURGA PUJA, the banner said. Even then the silence, the late fall evening of wide yards and gardens and the smell of highway air fresh behind.

But after a foyer of staid confetti and dry, mock-serious registration tables, the dhak and the dhoti-sari flooded over our senses, like ocean waves at a low tide lapping at the shore. A low tide, and then...

Wading through groups of saris and dhotis and perfume and jewelry and polished gaits and Bengali-American accents, we made our way towards the altar hall. The Puja pandals of Calcutta, with their swelling oceanwave of men and women and children, the rough jostles of warmth and zeal, a handful of pickpockets and riot police thrown in remained far away, of course. Even the smell was different, and the clean walls of the school building held a different chunk of space, sleeker gestures of Cleveland doctors and Louisville engineers who were also Bengalis, Indians, doing the native thing, content wives neck deep in fine clothes and jewelry ... but even that was difficult to believe, after the late fall evening of wide yards and gardens and the smell of the highway fresh behind, laughterpuffs over *Seinfeld* and *Monty Python* in the speeding car.

Fresh from the highway, waylost, jackets a little dusty, we who had ended up here almost by a pleasant accident, seemed a little out of place in the confident carnival of saris and dhotis, the established Puja-happy diaspora of professionals. "Hello, Tarunbabu, how's it going?" New and strange, the staidconfetti as much as the airy chatter. "Great. And the nephew's green card?" The chatter as much as the confetti. "These software companies can be terrible with sponsorships. Still dragging the H-1 visa." Dusty jackets we had, and had almost lost out way. "By the way, we're moving to Ann Arbor soon."

Chris and Peter seemed to be the only non-Indians, perhaps non-Bengalis around, which I thought was a little strange. Maybe it was our dusty oddity, maybe it was the racial component of our group, curious glances kept floating our way from time to time, curious but friendly and welcoming, accentuated when my explications became obvious as I told Chris and Peter the meaning of the sacred sweet and the need to take off one's shoes before entering the altar hall.

A smiling middle aged lady was moving around with the pradeep, the holy lamp with the blessing of the goddess. As she held it out to a puzzled Peter, I explained to him that one was supposed to cup the little flame of clarified butter with one's palms so as to soak up the warmth and then touch one's head with the palm—the worshipful acceptance of the blessing of the goddess.

As the dhaks were going crazy the fragrance of burning dhuno filled the spacious hall. The characteristic dhunuchi naach, the



frenzied dance with the clay pot of burning incense to the beat of the cymbals and the metallic kansar before the image of goddess Durga and her children, the lesser gods, Lakshmi Saraswati Kartikeya, elephanthead Ganesha, the cloud of smoke and the frolicking flames of the holy fire slowly sucked the differences away—the worry over the green card and the eight dollar registration by Columbus engineers, Cleveland doctors. “That’s kind of cool,” Chris hollered to make himself heard. “Church affairs are so silent usually.” The color and the smell and the sound and the mass. Like the thali of curries!

“But Peter, haven’t you been to a Puja festival before?” I asked him. “They’re much more common in England, I hear.”

“No I haven’t been.” Peter, curtsquare, was more reticent in the maelstrom of color and sound.

I felt somebody tap my shoulders. I turned around—and it was difficult to believe—standing next to a pillar in a sari was Priyanka Chatterjee, my classmate at the university in Calcutta, where I read for my MA. The last time I’d seen her was a year ago, just after our finals, just before she left for a Ph.D in Purdue.

This was incredible and exciting, not that I was ever close to Priyanka, much less to her boyfriend, standing next to her in a pajama and a silk panjabi, also a doctoral student at Purdue. Not that it mattered, the unexpected force of the face familiar to me from 12,000 miles away almost cutting through all that was alien and unsettling and exciting, the three hour drive on the I-75 and British-American accents around me, speed limits and sharp exits, road signs, loudgreen—the two monthlong strangeness of a new clime around. Wanting to share the impossible flavor of the moment, I beckoned Chris and Peter and introduced them to Priyanka and even Chris ruminated aloud on the remarkable nature of the meeting, as he would continue to do later. Priyanka was wearing a sari, and her boyfriend Sujit was in a silk panjabi and a pajama—a very Bengali festive-auspicious couple—dresses I had never seen them in Calcutta, its open sunny air, jeanshappy as they were. But now their dark, floridclothed bodies shone with sweat and light from the holy fire and the clangor of the cymbals, the eye-watering smoke of the dhuno—on their faces and the exposed skin of their arms, and the messy daub of sacred ash gave them a look of happy, intense occultism. They were tired too, as Priyanka said, they’d driven all the way from West Lafayette, Indiana, and were about to leave but expressed a creamy homesickness for India and exchanged e-mail addresses with me before leaving.

The lavish, richspicy dinner, fragrant with my proud satisfaction of introducing the subtle culinary nuances to Chris and Peter, was quasi-Indian in the manner of subcontinental restaurant fare in North America, anticipating, unbeknownst to me, the reverse déjà vu of my tastebuds in future moments in Jackson Heights, New York City, Little India in Toronto, *Tandoor* in Toledo. The artful barbarism of eating with one's bare fingers, tearing the chapati, the fluffywhite bread with the dichotomous positioning of the thumb and the index and dipping it into the mutton korma earned from Peter that respect one accords an alien juggler. "How do you tackle curry and chips," I asked him, foreboding the mellowed shock of the Asian invasion I'd enjoy pricking in Peter during our winter break in NYC a couple of months later, "the national food of Britain these days?"

Spiced chunks of paneer, flavoured cottage cheese had more than sated Chris's vegetarian appetite, but still on our way back through Dayton, just before leaping on to the highway, the sight of a Perkins restaurant brought him to the verge of euphoria, "Perkins have left New York state," bringing us around to chewing thoughts on postcoloniality and a couple of mammoth muffins.

Deathcold, longrolling highway. Fog swirling around, chilly air from Lake Erie. Speed limits, the sharp exits.

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It's not just the neatly wordprocessed lines on the pages, the computer monitor, the longhand, tinyscrawl, publicationquest. Not even the walk along the short stretch of the carpeted floor of my bedroom to the window side futon, brainpoking candyfloss Peterwalk, up to the copcar, lighting up the blinding white light, sounding out the nightshattering, darkwaving yell. Not the intervening years of cooking and teaching and attending dinner parties, traveling to New York and D.C. and Boston, Toronto and Montreal, with the framed silhouette simmering at the back of my mind—black jacket, black jeans, white skin, white blonde hair, black sky, road, blinding light.

I'd started growing in power much earlier, almost immediately after I lost it.

When after coming to town that night, Peter parked his car near the sorority row in campus, waiting for Chris to come back from the French House, I'd revealed the epiphany of black ice, white light, floating in the benumbing air, the holy ghost of my soul swimming

out of my nightfrozen body, growing in power by the moment, to create the perception that would contain the nightshattering yell, the dhotis and the saris of the evening, the cymbals and the burning incense, Peter's covert confidence before the cops ... and grow bigger, stronger than all of them. I was getting lost, breaking off like candyfloss within the enclosed space of the car, of my bedroom after Peter dropped me off at my apartment at around three.

Twelve word-processed pages, three and half more with long-hand and tinyscrawl. I've created four sections, well into the fifth. Going beyond the bewildering epiphany of black ice, white light, trying like a drowning man to clutch at the elusive head of the story, pop open the fizz of words, the sprinkling of desi phrases, the tortured expatriate diction. No more the framed silhouette, mindpricking, the epiphany of exactitude, candyfloss memory. What goes on into the making of the words. The placing of the ornate ivory frame around the slice of life.

It's four-thirty. Time for a cup of tea.

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"There's a pagan eroticism in Indian culture, it's thirty-four billion gods and goddesses, the tandoori and paneer curry, the fire and the cymbals," Chris stared out of the window as he spoke, "in many ways the polar opposite of an austere Calvinist religion," he looked at us, "that as a gay man I find deeply appealing."

No, there's no way we could get lost on the highway. I looked at Peter, his hands almost rigid on the steering wheel, a self-defeating promise of an intrigued comment later on—"I never thought Chris was gay. He certainly isn't much of a princess."

"I'm not." Chris would bring it up a couple of months later, in the smokehazy interior of Stonewall. "I'm a bear."

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Eleven-thirty already. I can never get an early start on my writing here as I could back in India. Loss of a couple of hours of earlymorning writerly time, along with the moist tropical air from the potted roseplant and moss-layered precipices, the chunky darkness of the evening, the ghostly houses. Life in the U.S. is more nocturnal

—writing papers, watching movies, blabbing, blabbing with people with body clocks way more screwed up than mine is now, people whom I wouldn't dream of calling before one in the afternoon. Heat, light, nooncloseness brew a corrosive guilt, like a bad taste in the mouth, puts teeth marks on the butt of pens, pushes thoughts back into little granules, powdery smoke rings. Gotta get down a coupla more pages. Eleven thirty already.

*Not today.*

No corrosive guilt like bad taste in the mouth, no suckbiting penbutts, only the occasional mindwavering. The meandering assortment of twelve pages doublespace typscript and seven more of longhand tinyscrawl is a live animal now—a liver-gray animal shaking off flakes of earth that had covered it, denied it existence—now readying itself for a sleek, feline prow into the world, life. The clawed catty paws will now hold the entire weight of the springy body, pulling it forth, flying, prowling through the air, beating the clock at eleven-thirty and a bad mouthtaste, bitesucking the tails of pens, stretching, stretching out on the dirty living room carpet as more antscribble pops up on paper, fast growing population.

And it's not just the time separating me from the experience—the intervening fourteen months of cooking and teaching and dinner parties, introductions to the fury of Malcolm X and the deep bass of Willie Nelson, New York DC Montreal. The liver-gray animal had started clawing its earthy burrow even as I'd let out epiphanic bewilderment to Peter, carparked near the sorority row in campus, waiting for Chris to fetch his stereo from the French House. Now readying itself for a sleek, feline prowl.

To you, reader, whoever you are. Whether you melt into the black ice, the blinding white light, the revolving sun or the cymbal or the burning dhuno, the holy fire that touches your gay paganism or itches your weakness for the mammoth muffins of Perkins.

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It was actually the white line on the highway. More about that in a minute, couple paragraphs.

In perspective, it seems a little funny that Chris whispered to Peter, as the police siren screamed through the night air behind us, through the dance of steelwhite lights—“You are being pulled over. Just park on the right.” As if that whisper was needed to annotate the

explosion of light and sound. Was he thinking Peter to be a sort of a greenhorn on the American highway, taking seriously the earlier banter about England and her former colonies driving on the “right” side of the road?

After we came to a standstill, the copcar behind us, the voice rang out through the speaker like apocalypse, faceless force echoing in a huge stadium—“Driver step out.”

Peter, Peter’s the driver. Daring to slice through the darkness of the I-75, fast and faster ... machinehappy, afternoonsun setting the blonde hair on fire, cellphonechatterer. “It’s probably a standard alcohol test.” Chris said. “You’ll be fine.” Smoother New Yorker who looks at the Midwest with mellowed disdain, who’s doubtless heard the yell behind his car as many times as he has smoked pot since his middle teens, gay paganism notwithstanding.

Peter unlocks the door, steps out.

Black cutting into white, white into black.

Two cops have come out of the car. The pool of lights dances on the chunk of the highway between our car and theirs. They walk towards the pool. Peter does the same, from our side. They meet. They stop. The whirlpool of light still churning, churning.

Machinehappy, fireblonde, blackclad Peter. The inexorable whitelight shrillsiren system.

They were speaking to him. The ray of light a steely rainbow in between, an intangible barrier through which a million insects and dust particles swam, danceflickered. Peter turned around. One officer stepped forward and searched his body, whisking, thumping him all over. In the car, I wriggled around uneasily in soul-strapping seatbelts, blinded by the steely rainbow and the foggy darkness it cut through, the endless stretch of the alien highway one had to speed through, sixty miles an hour. What happened if you missed an exit?

Almost ten minutes had passed. Peter and the officers were still there, frozen in the pool of light.

I’d looked at the watch six times.

One of the officers walked up to our car, leaving the dance ring of white light, his dark uniform blending into the darkness like a gliding night lizard. Chris, sharpfriendly, looked out of his open window, at the officer. The thick-necked head with short-cropped hair looked in, mouth creasing in a polite smile, “How’re you doing, sir?”

Chris, nighthappy, responded with reciprocal good humor. “Where you coming from?” The officer asked. The gliding night lizard creasing, creasing again in a sugary smile, elbow resting squarely on our window, the revolver holster a black, sleepy silhouette on his waist.

“We went to an Indian festival at Dayton. The Poo...oja festival, right?” Chris turned back and looked at me. I nodded shakily, dazed at the nearness of the polite smile and the thick neck and the sleepy silhouette of the revolver.

I thought of cops in India who spewed obscenities and hit you with a baton before asking you the first question—though you could get away if you wore a branded shirt and sprinkled your speech with upper-classy English.

“And how’re you doing today, sir?” The sturdy neck and the sparse hair had turned towards me at the back. “I...I’m fine, thank you.” My voice was a whisper under the shrill agony of the siren, still swirling, swirling.

Chris, nighthappy, sharpfriendly, said with dismissive peace, “It’s all right here, officer. All from the university.”

I was glad that I carried my university ID card in my wallet. Chris had his driver’s license, of course. The officer seemed to inspect these with amused interest. As I slid the card back into my wallet, my fingers were cold. Of course, cold air was streaming in through our open windows.

Peter carried more papers from the glove compartment. And answered more questions. Tautened minutes stretched further, further.

When he came back to the car, he locked the door but had to wait till the cop car had pulled out from behind us. Sweeping us in a blinding arc, the lights moved out and died away, along with the shrill yell, leaving us in a standstill in a darkness suddenly emptier, colder.

“I went back and forth over the white line a few times.” Peter said as the car gathered speed. “They thought I was drunk.”

“Did you get a ticket?” I leaned ahead. I’d learned about tickets recently.

“No. Just a warning. By the way, the cop said “Your friend at the back seem to be getting rather restless.” He grinned.

“Yes, Sagar, you’re not supposed to move when your car is pulled over by the cops.” Chris said.

Didn't know that. How I must have turned and wriggled. Perhaps that explained the sugary "And how're you doing today sir?"

Chris was back to laughter. Laughter he had never abandoned, really. "It kind of looks like an unholy bunch, really. An English, an Indian and an American guy fooling around with highway driving rules at two in the morning."

"I might have been taken for a Mexican, probably more disturbing for the cops." My laughter deep down was directed against myself, the ice granules in my joints still. In this country strangers often spoke to me in Spanish, my confused response to which had often been "Je suis desole; je ne parle pas espagnol," a chaotic attempt to suck warmth from the romance language I knew best, perhaps. My friend Dan, the one with a Mexican wife, once told me, "Too bad you have to get a visa to go to Mexico. Here's a suggestion. Walk up and down the Southern California highways, looking suspicious and grunting, 'No speak English.' The cops will deport you to Mexico and you'll save your visa fee. Then after you have established your legal status you can come back to the US, also for free."

Chris and Peter burst out laughing. "They wouldn't have spared the trunk, to fish out the heroin." Peter said.

"The dicky eh," Chris croaked in an exaggerated British accent. "And the bonnet too, right?"

My laughter was still a tribute to the ice granules creeping through my bones.

"I felt kind of confident, empowered. Because of who I was. As I faced the cops." Peter took up the chaotic strands of talk we'd left behind, colonialism and religion and gay culture, the American ethos. And the warmth that'd built up between us, though Chris and Peter had met only that afternoon at my apartment. The night too. Deathcold, lazyrolling highway.

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Did the British accent actually help Peter? I can't remember. I'm wondering because I distinctly remember Peter's curt report of the cop's half-respectful admission—"Never been to a foreign country, sir."

Did it so happen or was it a stewed up jest - "London, sir? Hey Jeff, isn't that down the Kentucky line? "And then looking at Peter

again, “Have you been in this country long, sir? You speak English very well, though I can’t follow your accent sometimes.”

What you will.

Pajamahappy, I just created the last sentence.

*Created.*

*Saikat Majumdar*  
Rutgers University  
United States of America



**POEMAS / *POEMS***



## HUGO RÍOS

### Iniciación

Dudaste del poema.  
Por un solo momento  
temiste que tu esfuerzo fuera en vano.  
Ahora se alza ante ti el muro del silencio  
y sabes que vadearlo es imposible.  
Te espera un largo camino de regreso  
si no pierdes la esperanza sobre la marcha.  
Pues siempre puede más el silencio  
que la palabra escrita.

### Calendario

Pasan los años.  
Ya siento el olor de la ceniza futura  
que espera en el fondo de la vida.  
Entonces la pregunta:  
¿Y la muerte, nos trae o nos lleva?  
¿Acaso nos cobija como hojas a la hierba  
dejándonos el color marrón  
de ese encierro misterioso?  
¿O acaso nos priva de memoria para soportar el cuerpo?  
Inútil preguntar qué nos arrastra  
hacia el inevitable borde del olvido.

### **En el principio:**

El niño jugaba solo en el patio.  
Solo en un espacio seco y vacío.  
De su curiosidad brotó una roca  
y su creación rompió el espejo.  
De ese incidente surgió el mundo,  
y luego dijo: “Sea la luz.”

### **Génesis**

Se nace.  
Se hace carne de carne,  
entre quejidos y silencios.  
Cuerpos que se rozan,  
se gesta la gesta;  
se dividen para juntarse.  
Dentro de la boca de la vida  
se va tallando la cuna de la muerte.  
Algunos prolongan su estadía,  
otros nadan a toda prisa.

### **Un atardecer de vacunas**

Corral de voces:  
Acorralados por el tedio,  
se teje una trama recóndita,  
un motín de niños  
ante el secreto de la aguja en espera;  
de blanco las torturas llueven,  
sobre los rostros de los siguientes,  
anticipando la fina caricia y el ardor.  
La piel de los infelices se abre  
mientras uno que otro cigarrillo arde.  
La voz de -“Próximo”- desata  
un mar de llantos  
mientras la tarde va cayendo  
ignorante,  
de la higiénica hecatombe.

## **Ciclos**

Soy el espejo que ya no refleja.  
Soy un todo inferior a sus partes.  
Soy el concepto del espacio vacío.  
Soy el emblema del tiempo muerto.  
Muerto al afecto del paso del tiempo;  
vacío del dios que ya no termina.  
Partes sin forma del cristal quebrado;  
reflejo del umbral y el juego de sombras,  
quebrado el velo que guardaba el templo.  
Terminan los minutos en un pozo oscuro,  
tiempo que se acumula bajo el plenilunio.

## **Espejos**

-I-

De tu forma  
al reflejo,  
de una sombra  
que refleja,  
el contorno de una sombra  
que se aleja.

-II-

Lo extraño de aquel rostro  
que devuelve mi mirada,  
que refleja en su mirada  
lo extraño de mi rostro.

## Camándulas

-I-

Si los fantasmas  
no se desaparecen,  
estamos muertos.

-II-

Vida serena,  
muéstranos el camino.  
Vuelta al principio.

-III-

La mariposa:  
de la naturaleza,  
el párpado.

-IV-

En el allá, lejos, la rosa.  
Aquí, sólo espinas.

-V-

Escribir:  
es dar voz al silencio;  
es dar forma al silencio;  
es sembrar las palabras de silencio.

-VI-

Nace entre sinónimos y espadas,  
la luz que quiebra el horizonte.

-VII-

El silencio de párpados pesados  
sucumbe ante la tarde.

-VIII-

Un abrazo vertical:  
unen sus manos  
a las doce campanadas.

-IX-

La noche es un paño de sombras  
con pequeñas manchas  
de luz.

## **Sala de espera**

Un reloj en algún lugar  
marca el paso de las horas.  
En los pálidos corredores llenos de amonio y malas noticias  
se pierden los suspiros.  
Un hombre espera soñoliento,  
acariciando un periódico viejo,  
dejando grises surcos en su rostro  
tras cada movimiento.  
Una mujer espera noticias de su hijo;  
los doctores echan suertes a ver quién le llevará la noticia.  
Junto a la señal de EXIT,  
justo al lado del almacén y la jeringa,  
un hombre que también espera  
escribe estas palabras.

## Ciudad en cinco voces y un suspiro

I

Mezquino silencio helado de la larga espera.  
Al fin quiebra la niebla la luz turbia de un fuego confuso.  
Se desnudan los edificios de la noche,  
sobre su gris rozan los curiosos destellos de la primera luz.

II

La fauna del bosque gris despierta,  
y de prisa amanecen. Entre el mármol  
y el cristal de miedo se cruzan, ciegos, van tropezando.  
Olvidan que siempre llegarán. Siempre.

III

Son, pero no lo saben.  
Respiran, pero no viven.  
De gris y sombras se pueblan,  
y van poblando las aceras. Grises.

IV

Rumor de lluvia. Las gotas caídas del cielo,  
se estrellan contra los techos y pronto se vuelven barro.  
Otras, forman en un abrazo húmedo,  
destellos de mar pequeña sobre la acera.

V

Muere la tarde,  
y se refugian los negocios en la sombra.  
Mientras otros van abriendo sus puertas,  
y el silencio cambia con la luz.

VI

El viento escaso se filtra por las rendijas,  
esparce los residuos del día sobre las aceras,  
que se llenan de otras formas de vida  
que brillan sin la luz del sol y viven su vida nocturna.  
Se augura un nuevo comienzo.



### **Sobre ojos y gatos**

Felinos:  
Transcurre la noche  
en un suspiro verde.  
Se escuchan sobre el tejado  
las pisadas,  
nocturnas y sigilosas,  
como secreto a voces.  
Se acerca.  
Entre ella y yo una mirada verde.

### **Sarajevo**

Del plomo al polvo,  
y de vuelta al plomo  
sólo para ser polvo de nuevo.  
En el muro salpican lágrimas donde hermanos dormían,  
a duras penas sobre el duro lecho de la historia.

### **La escala**

Calibrada entre sonoras perspicacias,  
sucumbe entre sombras inauditas  
y duerme ante todos los semblantes.  
Ardua labor. Levanta la mirada,  
andando por el camino estrecho.  
La morada se pierde sobre el lecho  
y la última sonrisa sombría del viajante,  
atónito y perplejo. Crece la hierba  
y la pintura fresca ya se seca.

### **El verbo inevitable**

Un verbo oscuro habita mi casa hoy.  
Entró temprano en la mañana,  
tal vez antes, mas no lo noté.  
Llegó en una llamada,  
de llanto contenido,  
suave, pero quebrado.  
Aquella voz que le dejó entrar,  
narraba de penas lejanas,  
que casi no me tocaban.  
Sin embargo, sentí su llegada.  
Se hizo espacio junto al polvo  
sobre toda la casa,  
y aún allí le veo, esperando.  
Al final es sólo un verbo:  
Morir.

*Hugo Ríos*  
Universidad de Puerto Rico en Mayagüez  
Puerto Rico

## **RESEÑAS / *REVIEWS***



*Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature*, Mary Beth Rose. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002, xxii + 117 pages.

Dan Mills

Mary Beth Rose's new book *Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature* offers a unique look at four sets of very diverse texts in the context of the much debated topic of gender. The four essays in this book attempt to deconstruct the typically male-oriented characteristic of heroism as it is exemplified in Renaissance drama, Queen Elizabeth's personal writings, seventeenth century female autobiography, and three works concerning slavery. While each of these essays can stand alone very well, there seems to be a lack of cohesiveness running through all of them, and a reader might wonder if Rose might have attempted to cover too much in writing this book.

As Rose points out in her preface, heroism is typically associated with masculinity, and masculinity is typically associated with action, thus the prevalence of literature that portrays protagonists who are conquerors, political figures, or maniacal murderers. Rose asserts, however, that heroism of endurance wins out over heroism of action, thus contradicting male-dominated narrative. For Rose, heroism of endurance stems from an originary position of subservience, and, while it is never invoked, the Hegelian master-slave dialectic waits in the wings to strengthen her argument. Rose also points out that the change in social structure allowed men the ability to gain a place in society through hard work and education rather than by birth or military conquest. The increasing influence of Protestant doctrine also contributes to this heroism of endurance by turning spiritual focus inward. Stating that "heroism is part of a process by which culture assigns meanings and determines values" (xviii), Rose concludes her preface with the assertion that by the end of the seventeenth century heroism of endurance has supplanted heroism of action through the portrayal of suffering embodied by female characters. This suffering, according to Rose, plants the seed for the prevalence of the novel in post Restoration English literature.

The first essay to apply Rose's theories of heroism addresses four early modern plays: *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Volpone*, and *Macbeth*. Early in the essay Rose states that Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare are all as "unconcerned with, disgusted by, and eager to marginalize, demonize, and exclude women and the female as it is possible to be and still write plays" (2). It is curious that Rose waits until the first essay to use such feminist language; it would have

been more appropriate in the preface. After laying the groundwork for a feminist critique of these four plays, Rose starts with *Tamburlaine* claiming Zenocrate's role to be that of an impediment to the progress of the title character. Labeling Tamburlaine's seduction of Zenocrate as rape, Rose concludes that Tamburlaine occupies both a male and female subject position, as his descriptions by other characters objectify him in the manner one might expect in the description of a female character. This simultaneous occupation of male and female space plays a recurring role in Rose's book, but she does not apply it to all of the plays discussed in the first essay. For instance, she uses Lacanian language to discuss the identity formation of Faustus, and she discusses Anthony and Cleopatra as much as she does Macbeth in the final section of the essay ostensibly reserved merely for a discussion of Macbeth. *Volpone*, on the other hand, portrays a character who seeks to occupy all subject positions, including male and female, master and slave, and prince and pauper.

While the first essay leaves a slight sense of organizational confusion, the next essay on Queen Elizabeth's personal writings and speeches hits closer to Rose's intended mark. According to Rose, all of Elizabeth's speeches were "concerned with establishing Elizabeth's royal authority [...] in gendered terms" (28). Citing Louis Montrose's assertion that Elizabeth's image resulted from English Renaissance culture, Rose convincingly demonstrates that Elizabeth cultivated this image as both mother and virgin, thus embracing traditional female roles while at the same time bending the rules of the gender hierarchy by being a female in power. Elizabeth used her unique male position as a source for power while at the same time refusing to emphasize her divine right to rule as was done by both her predecessor and successor. Toward the end of this well-structured chapter, Rose defines the essence of heroism as the need "To kill or die well" (38), setting up a gendered binary opposition.

The third essay in Rose's book discusses autobiographies by four women in the seventeenth century. These autobiographies demonstrate, for Rose, a common desire among the authors to find a spiritual identity through sexual relationships and social life. Rose lists several reasons for the advent of female autobiography, including an increased realm of privacy for women, the lack of formal constraints of the genre, the infrequency of publication, and the shared experience of living through the English Civil War, the chaos of which had a liberating effect on their gender positions. Margaret Cavendish, on the other hand, specifically wrote her autobiography to be published; the result is apparently a "run-on narrative" (64)

riddled with hyperbole and contradiction. It is unclear how Rose's discussion of this particular autobiography fits in with the rest of the book. Labeling her a hero of endurance, Alice Thornton lived through fire, revolution, smallpox, near-drowning, and rape to the age of eighty-one; this particular author appears to have more relevance in the context of the discussion of heroism. Ann Fanshaw similarly displays heroic characteristics as she stood beside her husband through a great deal of misfortune; Rose asserts that this gives her a male position of heroics, while her endurance of fourteen pregnancies and nine miscarriages gives her the trait of endurance.

The final essay is the most disjointed of the book; it discusses three works (Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Behn's *Oroonoko*, and Mary Astell's *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*) that Rose brings together by their portrayal of slave characters. The master-slave dialectic again looming large behind her argument, Rose demonstrates that Samson's phallic victories over his enemies leads to his fall from power to an enslaved female subject position; she writes, "the deconstruction of his [Samson's] hypermasculinity [...] represents a shift in the mode of conceptualizing heroic experience itself" (101). Oroonoko similarly occupies a female subject position as an enslaved individual. The essay breaks down, however, when Rose discusses Astell's work, stating that it is also about a slave (the married woman). Labeling her Milton's political opposite, Astell states in her work that marriage is unsuitable to any woman, thus undercutting the bases of male heroics of action and proposing an alternative female subject position of heroic endurance. All three works, according to Rose, begin with a failed heroics of action that proves ineffectual and proposes the female alternative. While the discussion of each text works in and of itself, the essay exhibits the lack of cohesion from which the entire book seems to suffer.

Rose has several other publications concerning the role of gender in early modern literature; she previously published one of the essays in *Gender and Heroism in Milton Studies* (1997). The University of Chicago Press typically puts out innovative work, and this one, although somewhat troubled, is no exception. Although lacking in an overall cohesiveness, her new book adds useful insight to the more recent directions of gender role studies; it is most likely a must read for anyone attempting to stay current in the field.

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*From Diggers to Drag Queens: Configurations of Australian National Identity.* By Fiona Nicoll. Annandale and London: Pluto Press, 2001. Pp xxiv + 268.

*Kathryn Ferguson*

Fiona Nicoll's study begins at the most visited museum in Australia; the recently renovated War Memorial in Canberra. It progresses, as the title promises, to the most visited event in Australia; the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras festival in Sydney. Between the two shibboleths of the ostensible extremes of Australian national identity lies, fortuitously, an examination of icons connected with Australia's ongoing process of reconciliation and multiculturalism. Following notions of the semiotic regime or a regime of signs laid out by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Nicoll questions the ways in which various icons and fetishes of Australian national identity are mutable and transformable to suit ever-changing cultural shifts, yet continuously function as exclusionary tropes. Engaged in questioning the sometimes occulted, but sociologically important, disparity between the metaphoric and metonymic potential of icons of national identity, Nicoll challenges her readers not only to consider what it means to be an Australian, but, more importantly, how exclusionary nationalist models of Australian identity actually are.

In his analyses of some of the political problems arising from modern absolutist appraisals of culture and nationality, Paul Gilroy points out that essential culture is often constructed as a specifically gendered ideality. Australian nationality, like most other national fictions, is based upon the masculine: Australia was 'discovered' 'settled' 'cultivated' 'defended' and legislated by men. Obviously, there are notable exceptions, but they remain notable exceptions that we recall for their peculiarity. Like many cultural or national fictions, the fiction of Australian national identity has been engendered as masculine. Although diggers and drag queens are both male, Nicoll's discussion reveals that the anxiety underlying the configurations of national identity is indeed a protracted crisis of masculinity not necessarily 'maleness.' This becomes especially evident in her discussions of the 'feminized' body of the shell-shocked digger, the infantilization of the Peoples of Australia's First Nations, Pauline Hanson's rather bizarre assertion that she represents the "White Anglo-Saxon Male"<sup>1</sup> and Pauline Pantsdown's drag parody of

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholl 197. Pauline Hanson founded the radically right-wing One Nation federal political party in Australia in 1996.

Hanson's professed representation of White Australian masculinity. Nicoll's inquiry reveals the subtle and not so subtle ways in which the semiotic regime which encompasses notions of national identity dictates that whoever is not 'masculine' is not Australian. Those who are not 'masculine' includes, women, Aboriginal Peoples, immigrants who are not of Anglo-Celtic origin, homosexuals, and men, who may meet all other 'masculine' criteria, but who have been 'feminized' by physical injury or psychological trauma.

Specifically written for "all citizens who, for one reason or another, find themselves expelled from the celebratory sphere of national identity" (Nicoll 215), Nicoll's book covers a range of foci that extend from the trenches of Gallipoli to the streets of Sydney. With such a broad base of analysis and readership, Nicoll's study cannot help but have elisions and exaggerations. Interestingly enough, Nicoll does not mention the Women's Land Army of the War years, or the drag kings of Mardi Gras, other than a quoting Ashley Gerber-Jones' comments on the 1996 Women's Cricket Team of Liechhardt (Nicoll 198-9). Her assertion that Violet Teague's 1921 painting, *Anzac Christmas*, rather than fostering a recognition of women's role in the formation and reproduction of national identity, the Christian iconography of virgin and child functions as a "sacred frame to support the homosocial trinity of Simpson, his mate, and the donkey" is, at best, something of a stretch.<sup>2</sup> Nicoll's argument that one of the ways in which modern cultural sites, as products and producers of the semiotic regime, compensate for the absence or even the willful exclusion of the historical subjects is to create an elaborate *mis-en-scene* is a point well made. However, her subsequent statement that "the period streets of Disneyland through to the entire Native American village placed within the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa" (Nicoll 30) exhibit such a technique subtly collapses Disneyland with Canada's national museum.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, the

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<sup>2</sup> Nicoll 86. This is a reference to the famous John Simpson Kirkpatrick who is celebrated for his short career as a stretcher bearer in the Monash Valley with the iCi section of the 3rd Field Ambulance of the First Australia Division of the Australian Imperial Force in WW I. In the twenty-four days of his service, Simpson, with the assistance of several donkeys, is credited with saving the lives of many men. The known names of his donkeys include Murphy, Abdul, Duffy, and Queen Elizabeth.

<sup>3</sup> Some early critics of the museum have referred to the Canadian Museum of Civilization as Disneyland North. During the early 1980s, when the Canadian Museum of Civilization's new home was in its planning stages, the Disney theme parks were indeed examined by the museum's staff; along with museums, galleries, heritage centres, world expositions, historic sites, pioneer villages, etc. The kind of environmental reconstruction featured in the Grand Hall has a long pedigree in both open air

statement goes on to misrepresent the museum's Great Hall exhibit as an "entire Native American village." There are only six houses in the Great Hall, certainly not enough to form an entire village and each house represents a different and distinctive culture not a collective singular 'Native American' or even 'Native Canadian' people. The architecture of the Tsimshian, Haida, Nuxalk (Bella Coola), Central Coast, Nuuchah-Nulth (Nootka), and Coast Salish peoples are quite distinctive and cannot be mistaken for a singular style. If, as Nicoll asserts, we must be vigilant against accepting a false homogeneity within the ideality and iconography of Australian nationalism, we must also be cautious of neglecting to recognize the disparate components that make up the cultures and peoples of *all* nations.

*From Diggers to Drag Queens* is a provocative book with a provocative title, and Nicoll's reading of icons of national identity is indeed a challenge to her readers to recognize the implicit exclusionary nature of the ways in which Australian national identity is fetishized. The breadth of Nicoll's study is sometimes frustrating as it prohibits her from the comprehensive analysis that her argument warrants. Although the reader is left with some lingering questions, Nicoll's book succeeds in its intention to challenge our complacent notions that Australian national identity is polysemic sign, rather than a very exclusive and well patrolled enclave of masculinity.

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and indoor museums, stretching back over a century, and has nothing to do with Disney. I am grateful to Stephen Alford of the Canadian Museum of Civilization for providing me with this information.



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