

Tirexia

Culture, Politics and Critical Theory



Issue 3 (April 2009)

*by other means:
the politics of sex and sexuality*

Department of Romance Languages and Literatures * University of Michigan

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editorial board

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Editorial

Transience & Permanence

This third issue of *Tiresias* has been longer in the making than the previous two, but we think it has been worth the wait. We not only received a record number of contributions from all across the continent, but we are also proud to count Prof. David M. Halperin as a contributor, to include an interview with the Uruguayan writer, singer and performer Dani Umpi, and to offer what we think is a very interesting, provocative and engaging array of articles (among them our first publication in Portuguese) on politics, sex and sexuality.

As we all know, if anything defines being a graduate student it is transience, not only because we all are, sooner or later, going to leave the place we have become familiar with and not often see friends and acquaintances we have grown used to interacting with, but more conspicuously because every project we start is or feels transitory: a seminar followed by another seminar, a paper by another paper, a chapter by another chapter. Overwhelmed by the increasing pressure of pursuing graduate studies and thinking about life thereafter, we turn to our graduate student colleagues to express our concern but, even if by sharing our similar experiences we find solace, support and inspiration, we mostly end up accepting that, given the working reality of the world, we are in a privileged position. And both—frustration and enthusiasm—are indeed valid.

As we were trying to think through the nature of this paradoxical situation, the experience of transience in graduate studies, an internal debate regarding our position and our role within academia came up. Are we considered workers and/or students? Are we being exploited or do we enjoy a privileged position? How do we reconcile our positions within academia? What is our role within academic

space and how does *Tiresias* develop such spirit as a force for change that, in turn, orients our work and relationships?

This year two seemingly unrelated events brought us face to face with just how transient life is for the non-tenured academic. One of the longest serving lecturers in our department was forced to leave our department after signing a three year contract because our same department refused to sponsor her for the green card necessary to fulfill that contract. As members of the department and co-workers with the Lecturers, we want to express our deep concern not only about a personal and labor problem but also about our goals as an academic institution. Second, our own graduate school, despite fierce opposition from its own graduate students, particularly our student instructor union, is still threatening to change enrollment policies. The proposed changes will be financially draining and generally detrimental to our community. We have to wonder who such policies serve, when clearly it is not us or the general educational standards of this university.

These incidents highlight our slippery position within academia. On the one hand, we enjoy an incredible privilege—the chance to study with brilliant professors and receive comprehensive healthcare at a time when so many find themselves unemployed and without their basic needs being met. On the other hand, this privilege does not always afford us a voice within university discourse and while we anticipate the material comforts of a middle class, tenured life, we don't have them yet. So while we see some benefits of the system, our ability to fully participate within the same system is less sure. Furthermore, while our current situation is only one of transience, we realize that the stability that we look forward to is not in the future of all of our colleagues and students.

Tiresias was partially created to reflect on this condition and experience of transience and has become, over the past two years, one space (out of many, hopefully) where we as

graduate students can share and discuss ideas, privileging thereby collective thinking over the individualistic nature of graduate research; privileging, that is, the *project* rather than the individuals, the permanent reflection rather than the transient condition. Moreover, we thought of *Tiresias* as a meeting place where “older” students could meet and work with “newer” ones, those who would then take over the project, rethink it, and modify it according to their interests, till they become the “older” students and “new” ones take over, so as to avoid *Tiresias* from ossifying: comfortableness and content are thought’s greatest threats.

Ultimately the job of the graduate student is to think and challenge. As *Tiresias* has shown us, there is no better way to do this than in community. While transient and not entirely sure of our position, we find that together, in solidarity with each other, students outside of our department and our many coworkers, lecturers and faculty alike, there is inspiration and strength to work towards a better academia.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the faculty and the administrative staff of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan for their help. In particular, we would like to thank Prof. Cristina Moreiras-Menor and Prof. Jarrod Hayes who generously serve as our faculty advisors. Our thanks to April Caldwell for uploading this third issue of *Tiresias* to the web and for her constant willingness to work with us throughout this process. We would also like to thank Prof. David Helperin for contributing his time and ideas to this issue and Dani Umpi for the interview. Likewise, we would like to thank those who submitted articles for this third issue. Last, but not least, we would like to thank all of our fellow graduate students in the Romance Language and Literatures Department who in one way or another participated in this collective effort. Thank you!

Call for Contributions for the present issue:

**By other means:
The politics of sex and sexuality**

Is sex politics by other means? Or perhaps politics, sex? This issue of *Tiresias* reflects on sex and sexuality from various critical and cultural perspectives related to aspects of power, technology, identity, love and desire.

Have sexual and reproductive rights, alternative family models and shifting sexual identities redefined the boundaries between the public and private? How do we resist regimes of control that are based in the biopolitical? Should the State play a role in the politics of love?

How can we further the proliferation of subjectivities beyond naturalized notions of sexual difference? What is the location of pleasure/displeasure in a body increasingly affected by the technological nature of the world surrounding it? How have prosthetic bodies intervened in sexual practice?

How can we critically reaffirm the subversive origin of love? What are the political ramifications of considering the question of sexuality?

Suggested topics concerning sex and sexuality:

Sexuality and love

Queer theory

Feminist theory

Identity politics

Biotechnology and
pleasure

War and nationalism

Religion and mysticism

Inheritance and ritual

Work and exploitation

Health and disease

Erotic mythology

Diaspora and exile

Borders and taboos

Body and order

Literature and love

Pornography

Ars erotica

guest contributions

Small Town Boy

Neil Bartlett Learns How to Be Gay

David M. Halperin¹

Is there such a thing as gay male subjectivity? How might such a thing be imagined, formulated, described?

The very idea is likely to occasion immediate protest, revulsion, horror. Wouldn't the effort to describe gay male subjectivity be unacceptably essentialist? Wouldn't it fly in the face of an intersectional analysis of sexuality with race, class, gender, nationality, ability, and other social variables? Wouldn't it snag us in the trap of identity politics?

Those are the kinds of objections you might expect to hear on university campuses. They may simply translate into an academic idiom the larger recoil from social identity characteristic of our time. Most gay men nowadays, especially younger gay men, along with women and the members of other minority groups, are forced to live in a state of denial about the social meaning of their difference and to disavow the identity they also cannot manage to do without. When it comes to sexuality in particular, a new consensus among the young and the hip allows anyone to claim a queer identity, so long as such a claim does not challenge the protocols of American social life, disrupt heterosexual privilege, or lead to a rejection of the norms of mainstream culture (love, family, social belonging). The first requirement is to declare one's objection to labels, to insist that one's sexuality is fluid, undefined, dynamic,

¹ University of Michigan (W. H. Auden Collegiate Professor of the History and Theory of Sexuality, Professor of English, Professor of Women's Studies, Professor of Comparative Literature, Adjunct Professor of Classical Studies)

hybrid, indeterminate (etc.), or, in the event that one is willing to admit to being gay, to say, "Well, on a list of the ten most important things about me, being gay would have to qualify as number ten."

We are told that this new consensus represents a long-sought-after liberation from oppressive and discriminatory social categories. Nowadays, thank heaven, there is no need to declare your identity. And you had better not. The high social costs of refusing to conform to this new dispensation can be measured by the multiplication of piteous protests evoked by the slightest invitation to defy it. *Why can't we simply all be treated as individuals? Or as human beings?*

The reason we can't is that to treat everyone as a unique individual is to exaggerate the differences among us to an outlandish degree, while to treat everyone as a human being is to invoke a sameness so universal as to be uninformative and meaningless. Human beings live in specific societies and belong to particular cultures. As a result, they share a lot of things with each other but not everything, and they differ a great deal from each other but only within certain limits. What it means to study the social life of human beings is to try and define the exact extent to which different groups of people share a common experience while also differing from one another as well as from other groups. In the case of gay men, this implies the need to inquire openly and non-judgmentally into the social processes that constitute us as a collectivity. Some of those social processes are historical.

Historically, in fact, the problem of gay male self-constitution has often been posed by history. We have looked to history to answer some of our most pressing questions about gay male identity. Who are we, where did we come from, who are our ancestors, have we always existed—and, if so, who were we? What should be our attitude to our past? Should we look to it for heroes? Or should we be ashamed of it? Is gay pride contingent on leaving behind the bad old days of oppression and self-hatred? Or does it consist in reclaiming the gay male past,

even or especially when that past appalls us? Do we owe our forebears anything? Do we share a community with the dead?

I want to know how to think about what history has to tell us about gay male subjectivity. And, in order to do so, I have chosen to subordinate my own reflections to the explication of one distinguished text—a text that has a lot to teach us about how to imagine and how to reconstitute the gay male past.

I

In the early summer of 1981 a young gay man by the name of Neil Bartlett moved from a small town to the big city. In his case, the big city happened to be London, and it was not altogether unfamiliar territory to him. “When I was sixteen I used to come up here on the train to go to the museums, to stand and look at the pictures, and also to be looked at, picked up, and then when I was twenty I would come up here to meet someone. It was always the place to be. I used to get an erection just waiting for the train.”¹ Exciting and terrifying as it was for Bartlett to embark at last on a new life in the big city, getting there was only the beginning. After all, it is one thing to visit a gay metropolis like London, and quite another thing to move there. “Coming to London . . . isn’t something you do just by stepping off the train; it takes years, believe me, it’s taken me years” (xx). That is because entering the metropolitan gay scene means—or, rather, it used to mean, at the time when that scene was still flourishing, when (before the age of the internet) there was no real alternative to it—it meant entering gay life, encountering the full width and breadth of gay culture, expanding one’s sexual literacy, discovering

1. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), xix. All further page references to this work will be incorporated in the text. Unless otherwise noted, all italics that appear in quoted extracts from this book are Bartlett’s own.

and making gay history, ceasing to be merely homosexual and learning how to be gay.

In order to find your way in the city, you need to lose yourself in it. The book in which Bartlett recorded his forays into gay culture begins with an epigraph from Walter Benjamin's *A Berlin Chronicle* (1932): "Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance — nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city ..." ² Losing oneself is not a mere figure of speech for Bartlett: it describes an entire project. Coming to London, learning how to be gay, entails losing yourself, the self you used to have, and becoming who you are. Which is one reason why it takes years.

Losing yourself is the best method of finding your way. Gradually you discover new patterns of existence amid the changed conditions of metropolitan queer life. Some of those patterns, Bartlett found, had already been laid down for him. He started to realize that the gay life he was learning to lead in London was in fact continuous with the life that had been led there by other gay men, going back a century or more. Not completely continuous, of course, but continuous to an astonishing degree.

Coming to London meant moving into a life that already existed — I started to talk to other people for the first time, to go to places that already had a style, a history if you like. What I've done, I suppose, is to connect my life to other lives, even buildings and streets, that had an existence prior to mine. This is in itself remarkable, because for the longest time imaginable I experienced my gayness in complete isolation, just like any other

2. For a commentary on this passage as well as a searching comparison of Bartlett's project to Benjamin's, see Dianne Chisholm, "The City of Collective Memory," *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 101-144, esp. 108-109. Chisholm provides the source of the quotation as Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927-1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone, et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 595-637 (quotation on p. 598).

gay child in a small town. And now, gradually, I've come to understand that I am connected with other men's lives, men living in London with me.

Or with other, dead Londoners (xx; boldface in original).

Learning how to be gay, becoming who you are, is not about realizing your authentic individual identity but about acceding to a new, relational identity by recognizing how you resemble and differ from other gay men.

It was by discovering the extent of his commonality with other gay men and by acknowledging a connection with them that Bartlett ultimately was able to come into his own gayness. As the critic Dianne Chisholm astutely puts it, Bartlett "senses, uncannily, that this connection has been prepared for him in advance, not by his contemporaries but by the first generation of 'gay' men to come out in the era of Oscar Wilde. Thus the man who comes out and into his own in the city of the 1980s is not original. He becomes who he is by making himself over in the character of a species of urban dweller that came into existence in the late 1800s. He owes his existential becoming to a historic production."³ "It's quite true," Bartlett admits, relishing the apparent paradox (and echoing his gay ancestor, Arthur Rimbaud), "I am other people."⁴

He explains, "When people ask me why I live in London, I say, I've made a life for myself. But I haven't invented a life; I have moved into, made a place for myself in a life that already existed" (205).

I didn't so much "come out" as "go in", since at the very moment at which we come out, declare our difference from the world, we immerse ourselves in

3. Chisholm, "City of Collective Memory," 113. Chisholm had pointed out that the "social existence [of lesbians and gay men] is a product of the city itself. . . . [They] owe their emergence to the industrial metropolis, where they were hailed as a new 'city type' in police reports and newspaper stories and, no less scandalously, in the first urban poetry (Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*). . ." (101).

4. Rimbaud, in a letter, famously declared, *Je est un autre* ("I is another").

a highly stylized, pressured, conventional society; gay society. Although the society I am part of is no more mixed than is any other part of British life (we may sleep together, but that does not mean that we share a life), I still feel, obscurely, that we are all the same, that we have a common identity, common interests. I have found that it is when we are most like each other, when we enter an economy based on the exchange of shared signs, that we have found our greatest strength (206-207).

Bartlett was not upset or threatened by the possibility that the modern individual, especially the modern gay male individual, might be generic. He found a source of affirmation in the imagined experience of commonality with gay men as a group. "Originality," after all, "is not a virtue in our culture; the most beautiful and successful men model themselves on other men" (201).

We may be constantly inventing and reinventing ourselves, making our lives up as we go along (as Bartlett believed [30, 171]), but we never start from scratch. On the contrary, "we . . . are profoundly unoriginal," he declares, with a certain satisfaction. "It's not only in pornography that all men are the same. We grow up invisible and alone, but then we characteristically move from complete isolation into what feels like a complete culture in a very short space of time." What we sacrifice in individual uniqueness we make up for in an escape from solitude. "Being predictable is a small price to pay for sharing something, being able to talk" (204-205).

Far from needing "to reject any stereotypes, roles or fictions," Bartlett tried to find meaning in them (206). He experimented with the possibility of recognizing himself in contemporary forms of gay life—even in gay clichés. "I matched my life with the patterns of other men around me. I taught myself the pleasure of being like other people. I went to the same places, I had the same sort of sex life, I talked about roughly the same things and in roughly the same language. I didn't either need or want to know

anybody's name. More recently I've started experimenting with the other extreme, matching the patterns of my life with those of just one other man. It feels like another variation on the same strategy, just as necessary and just as pleasurable. All the time, I think, we want to find out about each other, to know if we really belong to each other, belong together" (xx). Is there, in the end, such a thing as gay identity, gay society, gay culture, gay subjectivity? Is there a collective gay subject who can say "we"? Are we really all the same? How far does that gay commonality extend from one person to the next, from one moment in time to the next?

For all his talk of sameness and commonality, Bartlett was no naive or happy-go-lucky essentialist. He knew that gay men are not all the same, that we do not necessarily share a life. He was in fact uneasy speaking about gay men as a group, about using the first person plural. "When I say 'we' for instance, I mean we gay men. I flinch and want to explain. This word would make perfect sense in a bar, but here I am using it in a book, and I have no way of knowing if the reader is gay, or a man, or has any investment in or commitment to understanding this language. . . . Nonetheless, I think that we do have to speak to one another, in our own language" (xxii). And, in a note, Bartlett adds, somewhat defensively,

This book was written by a gay man, born in 1958, living in London from 1982-1987. I hope it is clear that it is not about any other time or place, and is in no sense a "representative" gay text, a text about "being gay". The geography and obsessions of this particular male are peculiar, not typical. The word *gay*, throughout the book, is not meant to be equivalent in meaning to *homosexual*, any more than it is meant to be equivalent to *Uranian* or *invert* or any of the other words used (241).

So much, then, for essentialism. Bartlett claims to be writing only about his own experience, in a particular time and place, not about gay life as such. He knows that he is not representative, that he cannot presume to speak for all

gay men. "Gay" is not equivalent to "homosexual," because every such label is produced by a specific historical formation which is necessarily unique, and so no sexual identity-term should be abstracted from its context and universalized. "Gay" refers to the experience of a collective, modern, politicized sexual subject, constituted publicly and visibly through an informal network of commercial and community organizations in metropolitan centers. Nonetheless, peculiar and untypical as he might be, Bartlett was trying to capture his own experience of gay life in London at a particular moment, and that very experience was, in his experience of it, a communal one. To be gay, at the time, was to learn to see oneself in the gay other—to learn, among other things, how to say "we." It was an attempt by gay men to dream themselves into existence as a community, as a political force, as a thriving, resilient, and inclusive sexual culture. It was an experiment in relatedness, an effort to construct a new identity defined by reference to membership in a group—an effort to harness the full force of identification. To be gay was therefore to take up a collective subject position that was supposed to represent gay men one did not know, had never met, gay men who had died before one was born. What Bartlett manages to tell us about his peculiar experience of being gay in a particular time and place turns out, if only for that very reason, to have considerably wider resonances. For central to it is the passionate conviction of being related to gay men as a group.

*

If Neil Bartlett had been an American, without a sense of history, he would have written a coming-out story—a story about an individual, not a culture. He would have written not about the process of losing himself but about the process of finding himself (206). He would have told the story of discovering his true self—and achieving self-acceptance, pride, and love along the way. In which case his book, however moving or informative, would simply

have joined the crowd of similar stories that gay people have been writing for decades, and not only in the United States. But, as it happened, Bartlett was not interested in telling a purely personal story. In fact, he did not think he had a purely personal story to tell. "Perhaps my life in this city is not so much individual and natural as collective and determined," he remarked (206). He therefore wished to speak not in an individual voice but in as many different gay male voices as he could muster. And he did his best to hear in those voices—to learn to recognize in them—echoes of his own.

It was not always easy for Bartlett to locate and to identify the gay men whose earlier lives had "determined" his "life in this city." If, in the end, he was able to forge a connection between his individual subjectivity and that of "other, dead Londoners," it was only by dint of considerable ingenuity and persistent effort.

I suppose I realize how ignorant I am. If we don't learn anything from history then it is because we don't know any history.

So I began to try and learn my own history, and I did it in exactly the same way as I learnt my way around contemporary London. You hear a man talking about a pub, or you read an address in a paper, or sometimes you simply follow someone you fancy and discover a whole new part of town. You know that your knowledge is quite arbitrary. Your knowledge of the city is shaped by the way ex-lovers introduce you to their friends, by the way you hear someone's story simply because he happened to be in the same place as you at the same time. And eventually you build up a network of places and people, perhaps you discover a particular group of people, or you look for, or accidentally find, one man who focuses your life. I moved from clue to clue, from name to name and from book to book. I started collecting pictures and anecdotes. I bought four big scrapbooks and filled them with whatever texts or images I could

find from the London of a hundred years ago. I went back to the picture galleries and museums I used to haunt when I was sixteen. Gradually I began to learn the geography and language of 1895 or 1881, to redraw my map of the city, to recognize certain signs, certain words. I began to see this other London as the beginning of my own story — and up till then, like a lot of other men, I'd seen America and 1970 as the start of everything (xxi).

The book that resulted from Bartlett's practice of cruising the archive retains the form of a collage, mingling fragments of a personal diary with historical documents, reflections on gay life, social and literary analysis, letters, and an insistently, disturbingly complicitous address to the reader.⁵ Indeed, "the scrapbook," Bartlett tells us, "is the true form of our history, since it records what we remember, and embodies in its omissions both how we remember and how we forget our lives. We are always held between ignorance and exposure" (99).

*

Just as Bartlett taught himself how to be gay first by matching his life with the patterns of other gay men around him and, then, in "another variation on the same strategy," began to match the patterns of his life with those of just one other gay man, so in his archival research did he shift from building up "a network of places and people" to finding one historical figure in particular who came to focus his sense of what it meant to be gay. "If a stranger asked you to name a homosexual, would you give your own name in reply?" he inquired. "Or if you asked someone else, your sister, for instance, or your father, to name a homosexual, what would their response be? There is one, just one, whose name everyone knows. In fact he is famous above

5. See Chisholm, "City of Collective Memory," esp. 126-27, from whom I have adapted the formula, "cruising the archive."

all else for being a homosexual" (26). In London, in the 1980s, that person was Oscar Wilde. Wilde's trial in 1895 and his subsequent conviction for the crime of "gross indecency" had sensationally and indelibly branded him with the mark of homosexual identity, making him for years to come the known and public face of that otherwise secret and unmentionable vice. Like Gertrude Stein, whose name functioned in US popular culture during the 1950s as a codeword for lesbianism (which it would have been indecorous to pronounce outright), Oscar Wilde, once he had been so spectacularly—if tragically—outed by the British courts, lent his name to an entire sexual species.

Bartlett was aware of the many ways that Wilde did not fit the model of gay identity that was being invented on the streets and in the clubs and among the members of the activist groups around London in the wake of gay liberation. But Bartlett was not trying to identify a "representative" gay man. Much less was he looking for a role model—let alone a "positive image" of male homosexuality. He was trying to learn his own history. And you cannot always choose your history.

Bartlett already knew he was homosexual. But, as Edmund White would say, he was unsure of the implications.⁶ He had begun to realize that being gay is not just an involuntary condition but an entire way of life with its own traditions, its own history, but he didn't understand exactly how his own life related to them. Or whether he was living it right.⁷ What *a homosexual is*, what a gay life is

6. I allude to the opening sentence of Edmund White's first novel, *Forgetting Elena* (1973; New York: Vintage, 1994), 3: "I am the first person in the house to awaken, but I am unsure of the implications."

7. I am reminded of a recent rock song by Jimmy Street called "Gay Sex Guru" (available on a compilation by Seymour Butz—if that is his real name—and Nick Wales entitled *Gay in the Life: Adventures in Queer Underground* [Melbourne: Odd Man Out Records/Mushroom Records Pty. Ltd., 2000]) which contains the following verses:

I have never ever kissed a boy before
I have never entered via the back door
But I want to know, when I do it, will I do it right?

like: that had already been defined—historically, popularly, flamboyantly, authoritatively, canonically, for better or for worse—by the personage of Oscar Wilde.

And so Bartlett attempted to figure out if there was anything in Wilde's life or work that might correspond to his own experience, anything that he could recognize as his own. Did he and Wilde share something? If they could meet, would they be able to talk? Bartlett tried to grasp the connection. In order to understand what it meant to be gay, he set out to discover what, if anything, he might have in common with the most famous gay man of all, with the man whose example had set a permanent precedent for British gay men ever since.

So when he wasn't hanging out in the bars and clubs, Bartlett began to spend his free time in the library, hanging out with the dead. He dug up everything he could find about Wilde, about how Wilde and other gay men had lived in the past, and in that way he tried to capture the subjective experience of being gay, both in Wilde's day and his own. For to ask, as he did repeatedly, "What kind of man was he?" (xxii, 223-25), was to undertake a labor of gay specification no different in its challenges and ramifications from the attempt to define what it meant to be gay in Bartlett's own time and place: "That is, what kind

I have never been to no Mardi Gras
I've never had the action from near or far
But I want to know, when I go there, will I party right?

Won't you be my gay sex guru?
Don't you know there's a lot I want to learn from you?

I have never boogied with a man before
I've never sniffed amyl on the dance floor
But I want to know, when I do it, will I do it right?

I have never dated no leatherman
I've never had the pleasure of his leather hand
But I want to know, when I feel it, will I feel it right?

Gay initiation still takes time, evidently, and requires expert guidance.
(My thanks to Annamarie Jagose for bringing this song to my attention.)

of men were we?" (223). Note that Bartlett was careful to use the past tense in speaking about his own generation, in order to emphasize that the world he was describing was already passing out of existence, was already *part of history*, even as he was writing about it. The result of Bartlett's dogged inquiries was a remarkably poetic, subtle, and original work, published in 1988, and punningly entitled *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*.

In the course of trying to tell us what kind of man Oscar Wilde was, so as to describe what kind of men "we" were, Bartlett touched on some aspects of what I have been calling gay male subjectivity. Which is my reason for devoting so much attention to his deceptively forthright and accessible book. As Bartlett, or one of his *personae*, says at the outset, brilliantly refusing to supply an antecedent for what thereby remains a strategically unspecified and impersonal neuter pronoun, "I wanted to write a book about what it feels like, because I think that's what people always want to know, really, what does it feel like..." (xix; also 100, 126). Bartlett's project is nothing less than an attempt to describe gay male subjectivity, to specify what it feels like—I will spell it out—to be gay, to live a gay life, to be different from straight people, to share a queer existence, to be part of a gay culture.⁸

8. Cf. Michel Foucault: "How is it possible for men to be together? to live together, to share their time, their meals, their bedroom, their pastimes, their sorrows, their knowledge, their confidences? What is it like for men to be among men—'stripped naked,' outside of institutionalized social relations, family, job, obligatory social life?" (*Comment est-il possible pour les hommes d'être ensemble ? de vivre ensemble, de partager leur temps, leur repas, leur chambre, leurs loisirs, leur chagrins, leur savoir, leurs confidences ? Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça, être entre hommes, « à nu », hors de relations institutionnelles, de famille, de profession, de camaraderie obligée ?*): Jean Le Bitoux, et al., "De l'amitié comme mode de vie. Un entretien avec un lecteur quinquagénaire," *Le gai pied*, 25 (April 1981), 38-39 (quotation on p. 38); my translation. The French text has been reprinted in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), IV, 163-64. An English translation by John Johnston can be found in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 203-11, and in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity*

II

To describe gay male subjectivity by matching your experiences against the patterns of feeling revealed by other gay men, past and present, means observing both correspondences and differences. It is not a question of deriving an authoritative knowledge of what it means to be gay from one model or set of models but of situating one's own experience uneasily in relation to other lives that both do and do not mirror it. Bartlett's relation to Wilde, for example, turned out to be very much like his relation to other gay men in his own day. It was a study in ambivalence. That much is evident from a chapter entitled "Messages," which consists of two unsigned letters to Wilde, very different from each other in emotion and tone.

The first letter begins, "Dear Oscar." It presents itself as having been composed on the evening of the letter writer's return from Paris, where he had placed flowers on Wilde's grave. The writer is still flush with the emotion of the day, and not a little drunk. He makes it clear how close he feels to Wilde, how much he identifies with him:

I got dressed up. I made myself just as handsome as I could, so handsome that the men would look at me on the journey. I made a point of buying the roses from the florist in the Burlington Arcade (remember?) and then when I got to Paris I walked straight to the grave and laid them down with all the other flowers looking just as strong as I could, stood there with a smile on my face and I didn't cry once. I smoked a whole cigarette for you and then turned and went (211).

The reader is allowed to smile at the writer's sincerity, transparent love of drama, and high-pitched sensibility, even while being touched by his passionate tribute.

The writer of this letter, though tenderly devoted to the memory of Wilde, "martyr and hero" (34), does not ignore

the changes that have taken place in British society and in gay male life in the hundred years that separate the two of them. On the contrary, part of the writer's pleasure in honoring Wilde derives from the satisfaction of knowing that things have improved, that he can now live the life that Wilde would have wanted for himself.

That smug but guilty sensation of coming into Wilde's legacy while going well beyond him, living out his aspirations while escaping his fate and transcending his pathos, intensifies the writer's sentimentality.

Darling, it's all for you. We're doing all this for you. I wish you could be here to see us. The streets are not all that different — you wouldn't get lost — but we are very different these days. Can you imagine, tonight I walked down the Strand with my lover, and we talked about which pub we would go and drink in; we have a choice of places to go now, and the chances are that when we get there no one will know us. And then he put his arm around my shoulder. I suppose it's gestures like that, public and unremarkable, that you could never enjoy. . . . The weight of a lover's arm on your shoulder is not a sensation you can ever enjoy now, nothing can ever be worth what was done to you, nothing can change that, but oh it almost does (211-12).

The writer's identification with Wilde is not founded on a denial of difference. If the writer identifies with Wilde, it's not because he considers that as gay men they are exactly the same. His sentimentality is not the expression of a blind essentialism. On the contrary, he insists on behalf of his generation of gay men that "we are very different these days." His identification with Wilde arcs across the gap of historical and social difference, finding points of commonality that allow him to imagine himself as fulfilling Wilde's ambitions for himself and for gay life, even surpassing them.

Here a little condescension creeps in, a bit of self-congratulation at Wilde's expense. Wilde serves as a yardstick by which the writer measures his own

generation's triumphant progress, the vast distance gay life has traveled in the intervening century. (He even thinks his own happiness "almost" makes up for Wilde's suffering!) At the very heart, then, of this homage to Wilde lurks an impulse to disidentification already implicit in the writer's complacent celebration of the modern possibilities for gay existence that Wilde himself could not enjoy ("Can you imagine. . ."). The writer nonetheless persists in defining his own identity in complex relation to Wilde, figuring himself as Wilde's inheritor, successor, champion, redeemer—and as embodying the fulfillment of Wilde's historical potential.

*

The second letter sounds rather different. "*Oscar, you fat bitch,*" it begins. "Last night I dreamed your hand was on my face. You were there in the bed, big and fat like I've been told you were, lying in bed smoking and taking up all the room" (212). It concludes, "I don't pity you. I don't even want to ask your advice. . . . You old queen, you've got your hand on my face, I can't talk now" (213).

It turns out once again, though, that the letter writer's relation to Wilde is more complicated than his tone might at first lead one to expect. The writer is disgusted by Wilde, but also moved by him, and desirous of a connection with him. His complaint is not only that Wilde takes up too much space; it is also that, having left the writer scant room of his own, Wilde yields so little of himself.

You said nothing but kept on smoking. . . . So I got up and put on the light and fetched you an ashtray and waited for you to talk. . . . Once the light was on I wasn't embarrassed, really, by your body. You didn't try to cover yourself. You are old, and fat, and white, and you sweat slightly. You're an old queen; you are quite beyond being embarrassed by a younger man, quite capable of taking in the details of my body (I had half an erection swinging when I went to get the ashtray

from the kitchen) without desire or inhibition. So I came back into the bed and sat close. I thought, having read about you, that you might want to run your fingers through my hair. I know I'm not blonde [like Lord Alfred Douglas, the love of Wilde's life], and that I don't look like a boy any more now that I've made myself look like a man, but I still thought that you might want to touch me. I thought you might want something from me. I thought I might have something to give you. I leaned against your shoulder and waited.

I wanted you to talk; I would have listened to anything you might have said. I would have held you if you'd wanted me to. I would have talked or listened all night. After all, I've done that for a lot of other men. I would have done anything; masturbated in front of you, or let you do anything you wanted.

And you said nothing, you didn't even look at me half the time. You smoked. Your eyes were dead, your fat white flesh was sweating slightly and quite dead. . . . I supposed that they had finally managed to kill you. To reduce you to this. . . .

Please, say anything at all to me, and I can use it (212-13).

If this fantasized relationship with Wilde seems less edifying than the previous one, that is partly because it is more intimate. The writer finds himself in physical contact with Wilde, imagines him as a palpable presence and not just as a historical precursor or political forerunner or sainted martyr. To be sure, Wilde remains an enigma, baffling in his strangeness and distance: "I realized that I had no idea what your voice would sound like" (212). But Wilde's stubborn remoteness is also an effect of the letter writer's yearning to enter into a relation of reciprocal exchange with him, for which purpose the writer would even be willing overcome his sexual repugnance—indeed, he would do anything for a response.

Wilde's most repulsive feature is not his bloated body but his deadness, his indifference, his refusal either to give or to receive. This Wilde has no interest in being rescued by the younger generation, but neither will he get out of its way.⁹ He remains a massive presence, and he allows the writer no complacency, no sense of triumph. Maybe "we" don't belong together, after all. Maybe there is nothing to say. Wilde's silence threatens to become the writer's own.

*

The contrast between the two letters, then, consists in nothing so simple as the difference between identification and disidentification, desire and disgust, continuity and discontinuity with the gay male past. It has to do at least as much with "what it feels like" to touch the past, to bring oneself into contact with a queer history that both is and is not one's own.¹⁰ Bartlett never "abjects" Wilde in Julia Kristeva's sense of recoiling in horror from a part of himself that he can never successfully jettison.¹¹ The play of identification and disidentification intricately structures each of his letters to Wilde. In each Bartlett transacts his own negotiation of historical sameness and difference in a variety of idioms and tones. In this demonstration of the many emotional registers in which gay men might "speak to one another, in our own language," Bartlett evokes a gay male commonality in which identification does not require the erasure of difference and disidentification stops far short of rejection.

9. On rescue fantasies in gay history and historiography, see Heather Love, "Emotional Rescue: The Demands of Queer History," *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 31-52, 172-76.

10. On the phenomenology of this queer touch between present and past, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), and "History's Queer Touch: A Forum on Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10.2 (2001), 165-211.

11. Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

After all, both letters to Wilde close with "Love." Both are to be understood in their own ways as love letters. Our quests for gay origins may proceed from various needs and aim at various goals, but they are all, equally, acts of love. This love which need not and does not exclude ambivalence corresponds to Bartlett's queer model of a collective gay identity that cannot and need not exclude difference.

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The complexly ambivalent attitude to Wilde expressed by the juxtaposition of those two letters extends to Bartlett's entire relation to Wilde throughout the rest of his book as well as to his relation to gay history, to gay society in the present, and to gay male subjectivity. (The literary technique of collage is the perfect vehicle for creating and expressing ambivalence.) At one point, for example, Bartlett imagines Wilde as his alter ego, with Wilde's initiation into metropolitan queer culture anticipating and exactly replicating his own. "Like me, he didn't always live in London. He moved there in 1879, and then he too had to learn how to live here, he had to learn the signs. So it's the same story" (57). Wilde's experience, it appears, speaks directly to gay men of Bartlett's generation: his works "were written for us and for us alone, and only we can truly understand them. We belong together, don't you think?" (36).

At other moments, Bartlett discerns in Wilde's entry into the sexual underworld of Victorian London "merely the overweight cynical ease with which an economically privileged man can and does lead a homosexual life in London without having to pay more than money for it. . . . [H]e was no heroic victim, but a man lying and laughing his way out of acknowledging the realities of this city" (33). So it's not the same story at all—or, at least, it's not the story that Bartlett likes to think of himself as repeating, even if he sometimes finds it to be rather too close to his own experience for comfort.

Any and all identification with Wilde expresses “a peculiarly gay vanity” in any case, according to Bartlett. It is a wishful fantasy, an illusion that Bartlett likes to entertain despite knowing better, “just as I go out to drink in order to forget my differences with the other men in the bar and to enjoy the simple fact of our shared experience, to enjoy the pleasure of crossing eyes in a mirror, the great pleasure to be found in the way we look standing side by side” (35).

Even so, Bartlett is perfectly well aware that Wilde can hardly represent all gay men, any more than Bartlett himself can. “Why should I canonize only one man, anathemize him, record only one biography as ‘typical’? No one man can guide me around this city. . . . I’d rather talk about some ordinary queen I know, I’d rather relate the story of some man I’ve met, describe the face of some dancer or beauty. A book which gives a picture of that part of my history which is called ‘Oscar Wilde’ would have to include all these stories and others besides” (30). And so Bartlett tried to include them. Yet he kept coming back to Oscar Wilde.

*

Bartlett’s attitude to gay history is similarly conflicted. On the one hand, he wants his gay history to be inclusive. “I am fascinated by everyone. I suppose I treat past lives with this curious and indiscriminate respect because I want to know everyone’s story” (99). On the other hand, each new discovery indicates to Bartlett how little he knows, how much of the gay past has been irretrievably lost, how invisible our history has always been. Speaking of one informant, he writes, “When I find traces of his life, and of other lives, I’m not sure how to react, whether to celebrate, or turn away and look out of the window like he did, angry, angry that all these stories have been forgotten” (129).

Bartlett’s ambivalence is especially pronounced whenever he uncovers traces of gay existence in official documents that were drawn up by the authorities in order

to be used against us. He is thrilled to find proof of the gay past, but he warns his reader not to “get excited. These records aren’t meant for you. They are *evidence*. They aren’t meant to inform us of anything; they are there to help form a verdict. They weren’t written so that we could identify ourselves, imagine ourselves, remember ourselves, understand the contradictions or pleasures of Wilde’s life” (158).

Many of the historical documents Bartlett quotes were composed in order to establish the truth of our nature, according to the homophobic standards of the time. In that sense, they were intended to silence us and to suppress the details of our lives, the kind of details that really matter to us now. “What I want are the details,” Bartlett laments. “Details are the only things of interest” (159).

Moreover, “this ‘evidence’ raises important questions about our own attitude to our own history. Do we view it with dismay, since it is a record of sorrow, of powerlessness, a record of lives wrecked? Or is it possible to read even these texts, written as they were by journalists, policemen and court clerks, with delight, as precious traces of dangerous, pleasurable, complicated gay lives?” (129). Bartlett does not presume it will ever be possible to resolve our ambivalence and give a definitive answer to that question. Which is why he left it open.

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I have wanted to convey Bartlett’s ambivalence to Wilde and the gay past in general, to illustrate the delicate suspension with which his attitude hovers between dismay and delight, because that indeterminacy in his outlook is the key to understanding how he uses gay history to approach the problem of gay male subjectivity.

If Bartlett was able—despite his insistence on how untypical he was, how unrepresentative Wilde had been, how different gay men are from each other—to find some points of convergence between his own life and Wilde’s, between his life and the lives of other gay men past and

present, that is precisely because all he set out to do was to “match [his] life with the patterns of other men around [him],” to enjoy “the way we look standing side by side.” He did not presume that we are all the same, that there is some intrinsic or organic connection among us. He did not try to resolve the question of whether “we really belong to each other, belong together.” He noted the similarities that *happened* to appear, and to form consistent, coherent pictures, when he matched his life with the patterns of other men that he discerned in the historical record. But he did not attempt to consolidate the resulting configurations into essences. The patterns he discovered are not necessary. But neither are they purely accidental. They are contingent—contingent on certain social forms, certain regularities, grounded in both an enduring and a shifting cultural logic.

Here we see the crucial role that history plays in Bartlett’s effort to capture “what it feels like,” to bring into precise but provisory focus the cloudy constellations of gay identity, gay culture, and gay subjectivity. By looking to history for a definition of gay male existence, Bartlett was relying not on theoretical propositions but on social processes. He was able in this way to identify certain correspondences and similitudes, yet without having to endorse them. And then, on the basis of the regularities he observed, he could make certain generalizations, without turning them into laws, requirements, obligatory standards that all gay men have to meet in order to be gay.

To draw out patterns, after all, is not to describe a singular, unitary identity or subjectivity, much less to insist that all gay men manifest it. “The next time some man asks me what it feels like, I’ll bind all these fragments together and lend them to him for a night, and then ask him if he felt the same way reading them as I did” (100). That is the offer Bartlett’s completed book still holds out to its readers. The book is not an effort to promulgate and enforce a single definition of gay identity, gay subjectivity, or gay culture. It is not an imposition but an invitation. What enables Bartlett to generalize about gay experience without

legislating it is the contingent nature of gay history itself, which also allows him the freedom both to be ambivalent about the gay past and to love it despite its heartbreak and its horrors.

III

“For us,” Bartlett writes, “the past holds no terrors, if we are not afraid of joining, of being seen in the company of our ‘doomed’, our condemned ancestors. For we may pick and choose from the riches of our history and of the city. Which tradition(s) do you place yourself in — by which I mean which style suits you best?” (208). It is because we may pick and choose from the past that we can draw upon history to establish the coordinates of a gay identity and culture, coordinates that are not constraining because they are not fixed. They remain mobile, insofar as we can always reassemble and rearrange them when we want to redefine who we are.

In this way, we can turn to history in order to describe gay identity or gay culture without embalming it. All we have to do is look at ourselves closely, and we will then see that we are in fact constantly keeping company with our gay ancestors, although we may not realize it. “Watching that man in the high-heeled shoes, the black dress falling off one shoulder (it is late in the evening), I remember that he and his sisters have been making their own way as ladies of the night since 1870, when Fanny and Stella [Frederick William Park and Ernest Boulton, Victorian drag queens arrested on April 28, 1870] were doing the Strand. His frock is handed down, second-hand, part of a story, part of a tradition” (223; cf. 129-44). What is crucial for us to recognize about such traditions is that whereas our practices may mimic those of our ancestors, the meaning of our practices has not been determined once and for all by them.

That tradition of the black dress falling off one shoulder is a style that suits some men better than others. Not everyone looks good in black, not everyone does drag, no

single tradition embraces all gay men. And not every tradition is especially edifying. But if the meanings of our social practices are constantly changing with the times, we need not be afraid of acknowledging their historical continuity, since the mere existence of a tradition does not in itself determine its current meaning or condemn us to recapitulate the past, to repeat it in all of its ramifications. On the contrary, if we examine our actual practices, we will see that we keep adapting our traditions so as to make them do a different kind of social and cultural work from the work they did in the past.

And that man buying his younger boyfriend (slightly embarrassed, but happily drunk) another drink — I remember the bizarre twisting of mythologies that Wilde used to justify his adoration of young men, the mixing of a pastiche of Classical paederasty with a missionary zeal for “the criminal classes”, the sense that they, not the boys he left sleeping in [his home in] Chelsea, were his true sons—should I forget all that, should I be embarrassed myself? Should I look the other way? Should I dismiss all that simply because now, as then, one man is paying for another? Isn’t there an attempt to create a new kind of relationship, an affair of the heart somehow appropriate to the meeting of two very different men? That’s our real history, the one we’re still writing (223).

To place ourselves in historical traditions, which we do all the time without knowing it (according to Bartlett), is not necessarily to fix forever the meaning of our actions or to replay in their entirety the social forms of the past. It is therefore not incompatible with continuing to invent ourselves.

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It all depends on how you look at history. Is it a record of dynamic change, or does it tell us who we are? Does history serve to confirm us in our present identity by

reflecting back to us our current image of ourselves, or does it allow us to imagine forms of existence undreamt of in our own day? "There is a very specific gay sense of history," writes Bartlett disapprovingly, "in which nothing really happens until such time as you identify yourself as a gay man" (221). Such an attitude to history is understandable, but not very helpful, because it effectively abolishes history itself, making the past nothing but a back-formation of our present identity, a projection into the past of who we are now, which then has the effect of fixing us in our current definition of ourselves and determining once and for all who we are.

Bartlett ventriloquizes that attitude as follows:

Since I have my pleasures now, they must be enough, I must be exhausted by them and sleep contentedly at night. And more than that, how could we change? How could we ever change, now that we have become, at last, *homosexual*. We have invested everything not in doing something, but in being something. . . . Having worked so long and so hard to achieve this identity, there is little reason to scrutinize it, to poke around in it for possible sites of adjustment and alteration. We remake history in our image, rather than looking to our history as a source of doubts and hopes (218).

Even as he allows for the attractions of this kind of history, Bartlett lobbies for a more dynamic sense of the gay past, for a vision of history as a site of difference, a record of change, a ground of future transformation.¹²

Entering history like this can feel like entering a bar for the first time; it takes your breath away. Breathless, we could assemble a whole cast of new acquaintances, a whole library of costume dramas moving from, say, a drag party in 1725 to a

12. Here Bartlett's outlook approximates closely to Michel Foucault's vision of homosexuality as a strategic opportunity for ongoing self-transformation: for the details, see David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67-106.

uniformed wartime romance put into impressive chiaroscuro by the fires of the Blitz, finding in each place glamorous evidence of gay lives to make us feel that others have been here before us, that others have been oppressed, others have been as brilliant or inventive as us. If we were all ever to meet, surely it would be a wonderful party. But this history is not a record of change; the sensation it creates matches that of moving from one bar to another, one night to another. We abolish time and distance, difference, in exclaiming, *Oh! he's just like us*. We refuse the task (and pleasure) of identifying where he is like us, where he differs. We admire his face, but we don't want to talk to him in case he has the wrong accent (217).

Fortunately, though, that kind of history—ostensibly all-inclusive but really predicated on exclusionary principles, on very strict criteria for who should be allowed to pass through the turnstile and enter the club—is not the only option.

Bartlett's own example demonstrates that it is possible to write a gay history "in our own language," all the while highlighting both its correspondences with and its differences from present-day gay lives. Bartlett demonstrates this, in particular, by comparing gay history to a gay bar. Without requiring any background in post-modernism on the part of his reader, Bartlett manages to convey to gay men of his generation, by means of that comparison, his basic point about identity and difference, his critique of essentialism, his objection to a naive version of identity politics and his refusal to view gay history through the lens of a stabilized gay identity.

Not all history has to have the form of a coming-out story, "which ends with the statement, 'I am gay.'" (23)—a story in which the acquisition of a fully fledged gay identity constitutes the culmination of the plot and puts a complete

stop to the forward movement of the narrative.¹³ Even “Wilde seems to have realized that an individual admission that a man is a homosexual, that he is guilty (*Are you gay then?*), does not conclude his history, but begins it” (161). In the changed social conditions of the late 1980s, in the midst of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the triumph of the New Right, it was no longer possible to believe that gay history came to a stop with the post-Stonewall generation. “Our history now becomes a way of understanding and exploring the change in our culture, not simply of reading it as an ‘end’” (221).

From this perspective, a man buying his younger boyfriend another drink is not necessarily a mere recapitulation of archaic and unchanging forms of social hierarchy, of upper-class sexual privilege and working-class semi-prostitution. The meanings are not the same, just because the procedure involves one man paying for another. Differences in age and wealth may actually be serving new, dynamic social functions, creating possibilities for novel kinds of relationships among men who are asymmetrically situated according to conventional class hierarchies but are being brought into approximate equality by the reciprocal exchanges of contemporary gay life.¹⁴

Money, after all, does not possess a single meaning in each and every transaction. In this case, it may be an element that serves to further the leveling of class barriers rather than simply consolidating them and enforcing inequality. In that sense, Bartlett could claim that the man and his boyfriend, though they might recall Wilde and his “bizarre twisting of mythologies” to justify and ennoble his own exercise of social power, need not be seen as embarrassing throwbacks to the bad old days of Victorian

13. See Paul Morrison, “End Pleasure,” *The Explanation for Everything: Essays on Sexual Subjectivity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 54-81, 181-84.

14. For a similar argument along feminist lines, see Teresa de Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain,” *differences*, 1.2 (Summer 1989), 3-37.

class exploitation. They might be contributing a new chapter to the ongoing, evolving saga of gay history by devising new ways for men to meet and to relate to each other across the gulf of social difference—drawing strategically on the very category of “gay identity” and its stubborn essentialism in order to level social hierarchies and replace them with novel opportunities for social solidarity.

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From the right perspective, then, gay history does not fix the current form of our identity and project it back into the past. Instead, it is “a source of doubts and hopes,” a site of possible “adjustments” and “alterations.” It enables the ongoing work of gay self-invention. Much as we resemble our nineteenth-century ancestors, who also “wanted to believe that they had existed before, . . . we now stand in a very different relation both to our own gay past and to the history of the dominant culture around us. Our lives, simply, have never been like this before. Our characteristic activity is not the consumption and recycling of the past; we are actively engaged in the production of our own culture on a large scale” (226-27).

To be sure, “all this does not mean that we have left behind the older city in which we were created. Many of its structures and languages remain just as surely as its streets and façades. We have not passed from a darkness, the darkness in which a fantasy of our future was bred, the fiction of our existence conjured, into the clear light of that future — our present — in which administration and politics replace history and artistry. We remain unlikely, fictional; we continue to produce and reproduce ourselves. Now, however, our power to imagine ourselves is of a different order. How shall we rewrite our history, our lives?” (228)

One way to rewrite them is to turn to history itself, but with the sense of freedom and choice that Bartlett urged on us. In that way, we can use history, as Bartlett did, to define gay subjectivity without essentializing it.

You'll never know what kind of man he was, or is, if he remains a picture on the wall, an icon. Apply to these men, to the attractions of history, the same practical methods that you would use in a variously populated bar. Admit your interest, your position, your hunger. Look at them carefully ... history, too, is crowded; once you begin to look, the streets of London are busy, distracting, crowded with anecdotes and incidents. This room contains extraordinarily different men. You know that you are under no obligation to choose just one lover, or to compose one ideal body, or shape yourself in the embrace of a single role-model. Select, edit, rewrite, recompose; juggle your allegiances until you get what you want. Who catches your eye? Who are you standing next to? What attracts you and what repels you? Whose story intrigues you? (225)

This is gay history as a source of queer pleasure and freedom, history open to the play of desire, history as an invitation and opportunity to do whatever feels good. Such a model of history cannot generate a system of norms, because it is constituted from the outset not by generally applicable standards but by individual kinks. It is alien in its very structure and spirit to considerations of the normal and the pathological. As an approach to gay male subjectivity, it stands utterly apart from psychology.

Bartlett's historical project is descriptive, not prescriptive or normative. It is too late to prescribe codes of conduct and healthy functioning to the dead. They are beyond the reach of our ability to dictate to them, to edify them, to console them, to improve them, to therapize them, to get them to butch up. They are what they were. They may have been benighted, selfish, disgusting, immoral, misguided; we may be embarrassed by them, dismayed by their politics, envious of their social position—or of their clothes. Bartlett made it clear that he often felt a number of those emotions. He unblinkingly and deliberately brought forward pitiable, disappointing, shocking (if

sometimes exciting) incidents from the gay past. We may not approve of them, but our approval is no longer required, nor is it relevant. We cannot change the past, and since we are not forever determined by it, we don't need to resent it or to feel imprisoned by it, which means we don't need to reject, disclaim, or deny it. We can afford, rather, to live with it, to take it on as part of our history, and as part of ourselves, even to love it, precisely because we have our own lives, which are not ineluctably defined by it. Rather, we have the choice, the freedom to "pick and choose from the riches of our history" whatever may serve to bring into focus the particularity of our existence in the present or to help us invent our future.

Gay history, according to Bartlett's conception of it, offers us reference points we can use to orient ourselves and to refine our sense of who we are. It also allows us to differentiate ourselves from one another and from the past, to compare our own ways of life with how people lived before us without having to confound the two. The historical record allows us the possibility of describing and defining specific practices of queer subjectivity by matching our own practices with those of the men we decide to pick out, pick up from that crowd at the bar of the gay past. We don't have to select just one historical antecedent, after all, or to devise an ideal, a standard for everyone, or to promote a single model, or to posit a unitary, integrated practice of gay male subjectivity.

I emphasize *practices* of subjectivity, because Bartlett's portrait of the kind of men we were, and are, is composed by observing patterns of social behavior. The account he offers is, as we might expect, entirely inductive, nominalistic, tentative, and untheoretical. Bartlett pieces together "what it feels like" by looking at some specific, distinctive cultural practices that shaped the concrete activities and recorded self-expressions of some gay men. If learning how to be gay is something you do in relation to others, as Bartlett discovered, then the particular subjective condition of being gay must be something you acquire through what you and other gay men do together, through

the life that you share with them. Gay subjectivity is not a fixed structure but the effect of specific and contingent communal practices. It emerges collectively as the result of social activity. Anyone may happen to be homosexual, but being gay is not something you can do all by yourself. It is a social act.

*

The gay practices of subjectivity that Bartlett's historical meditation disclosed do not yield positive values by which gay male life should be lived or an ethical foundation on which it can be justified. They reflect some of the historical forms that gay existence has taken. They are contingent, not necessary. They are grounded in the vagaries of history, not in the truth of psychology or identity. They are neither good nor bad. You don't have to like them. They weren't designed to elicit your approval. They are simply what they are.

Bartlett's achievement is to describe gay subjectivity in a language consistently free of normative thinking. History records how we have lived, it does not tell us how we should live. It takes us out of the realm of norms. Bartlett is careful to select for exploration particular practices of gay male subjectivity that are signally lacking in obvious moral attraction: he examines forgery, inauthenticity, inconsistency, repetition, collecting, consumerism, fantasy, hedonism, and identification with the upper echelons of society. There is little danger that Bartlett's reader will mistake those practices for virtues—or will mistake Bartlett's description of them for propaganda on behalf of some superior gay morality. Bartlett is not defining gay male existence as it should be, or as it usually is, or as it would be if it weren't deformed by oppression, disfigured by pathology, distorted by deviance. He is describing some forms it has taken in the past and he is trying to uncover their underlying logic.

Bartlett goes to great lengths to escape mandatory membership in the gay culture he so lovingly describes.

Despite his careful and passionate evocation of other gay lives, he is almost phobically determined to avoid having his own life compulsorily assimilated to them. His ambivalence leads him even to deny the existence of the very group he spends his entire book trying to imagine, to evoke, and to define. As far as he is concerned, he insists, "there is no 'real' us" (169).

Bartlett refuses, then, to traffic in speculation about the true nature of gay male subjectivity. There is no such thing for Bartlett as gay existence as it truly is or should be. There is only gay existence as it has existed. *The values gay men have cherished are not "gay values" in themselves.* That is why no gay man who reads Bartlett's book feels called upon to endorse or to embrace the values rehearsed in it. We do not have to value them just because other gay men have valued them. After all, not all gay men are the same. Gay men today can assume a freedom in relation to the values that some gay men have cherished in the past. That is something we can do, however, only when those values are presented as historically and socially specific, as values that some gay men have cherished, and that gay men nowadays are free to choose or to reject, and not as *gay values* in and of themselves.¹⁵

*

What Bartlett offers us in his book on Wilde, then, is an extraordinarily subtle and refined demonstration of how to describe gay male culture through exploring one's identification with other gay men while disidentifying from them at the same time. Bartlett constructs and elaborates a version of identification that has a kind of disidentification built into it, insofar as the kind of gay identification he

15. That is why Bartlett's approach is preferable to the remarkable and otherwise admirable studies of gay male values and gay male spirituality by David Nimmons, *The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002) and Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

practices does not depend on the existence of an already established and perfected gay identity, but neither does it require the erasure of difference. It is a model that does not fear but rather embraces ambivalence in the relations of gay men, both past and present, to one another, and that teaches us how to love each other despite our stubborn, inveterate impulses to disidentification, to gay shame—despite our tendencies to want to have nothing to do with most gay men or to insist on showing them that we are better than they are.

In this way, Bartlett provides a vivid portrait of the volatile, emotionally fraught, and difficult vicissitudes of gay male identification, a portrait of the obstacles that gay men have to overcome in order to create a common culture grounded in a sense of collective identity—or to recognize and accept the existence of the culture they already share.

What kinds of men, indeed, were we?

Happy Funerals! Twenty Years of Queer Theory

A response to David Halperin's
Small Town Boy: Neil Bartlett Learns How To Be Gay
Maxime Foerster¹

Morte et enterrée, la pensée Queer?

Il n'y a pas si longtemps, c'était une théorie tendance, l'enfant terrible des cultural studies, véritable grippe intellectuelle qui a permis de saucer bien des salades académiques. On était queer comme on portait du D&G, c'était le moment opportun, l'euphorique école buissonnière vis-à-vis des injonctions collectives et autres assignations identitaires. Une fois canonisée et institutionnalisée, la pensée Queer, qui va bientôt souffler ses vingt bougies depuis la parution de *Cent ans d'homosexualité*, de *L'épistémologie du placard* et de *Trouble dans le genre*, ne pouvait qu'amorcer un irrémédiable déclin en devenant le catéchisme du tout venant académique. Trop branchée, rattrapée par le *mainstream*, diluée dans ses simplifications ou contre-façons, la pensée Queer marque le pas et reçoit d'importantes critiques de la part... des théoriciens queers. David Halperin, dans son essai *The Normalization of Queer Theory*, avait donné le ton d'un changement de cap, d'une remise en question de la pensée Queer à partir d'une double castration : sa récupération par et pour une audience hétérosexuelle, sa croissante indifférence vis-à-vis des enjeux politiques et du vécu subjectif des minorités sexuelles dont elle était censée être un oripeau. Pourtant, en lisant un récent essai de David Halperin, *Small Town*

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Boy, Neil Barlett Learns How to be Gay, il m'est paru évident que la pensée Queer restait d'actualité.

S'il est vrai que le fait de poser la question d'une subjectivité gay semble blasphématoire d'un point de vue queer, c'est parce qu'on associe volontiers la subjectivité à l'identité, et l'identité à l'essence, de telle sorte qu'écrire sur la subjectivité gay semble sonner l'éternel retour du spectre identitaire à travers le destin d'une collectivité, et la palette diverse mais réduite des couleurs de l'arc-en-ciel comme emblème et injonction. Or, une identité sans essence reste une identité, et cette identité, analysée et mise à l'honneur par la pensée Queer (notamment dans *Saint Foucault*), est précisément la source d'un immense chantier intellectuel : solliciter sciences sociales et sciences humaines pour esquisser les articulations d'un mode d'être gay (par gay l'on entendra un homosexuel qui s'assume comme tel, à la différence par exemple des hommes qui s'adonnent à des actes homosexuels sans désirer se reconnaître comme gays, sans rechercher une identité associée à leur sexualité). Dans le cas de *Small Town Boy*, Halperin sollicite littérature et histoire puisqu'il est question d'étudier concurremment une œuvre littéraire (*Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, de Neil Bartlett) et une figure cardinale de l'homosexualité prise dans son contexte historique (Oscar Wilde), mais le projet d'ébaucher les signes d'une subjectivité gay peut tout aussi bien s'appuyer sur l'anthropologie (on songe ici au légendaire *Mother Camp* d'Esther Newton), la sociologie, les études post-coloniales, les études de cinéma, etc. C'est en ce sens que le chantier nous apparaît délicieusement vertigineux et queer : d'une part parce qu'il postule de travailler à partir d'une identité sans essence, et d'autre part parce qu'il s'agit d'une entreprise multidisciplinaire ayant pour fondement l'expression de subjectivités gays dans leur irréductible singularité. Sans imposer l'histoire comme voie royale d'accès à la subjectivité gay, l'essai de Halperin place toutefois cette discipline comme particulièrement adéquate pour mener l'enquête. J'ai plutôt pensé, en lisant *Small Town Boy* (dont le titre a fait éclore le flamboyant Jimmy

Somerville) que la culture populaire était, en raison précisément de son statut populaire, plus apte que l'histoire, discipline académique attirant un public restreint, à nous rapprocher des réalités et des représentations d'un vécu gay. À tort ou à raison, il me semble que si, dans les années 80, à Londres, on avait demandé aux passants le nom d'un homosexuel célèbre, ce n'est pas Oscar Wilde mais Boy George, ou Jimmy Somerville, voire David Bowie, qui auraient été le plus souvent cités. David Halperin ayant déjà écrit sur la passion des gays pour certaines divas, actrices ou chanteuses (dans son essai *L'amour folle*, par exemple) nul ne semble plus conscient que lui de l'importance de la culture populaire pour aborder le plus largement possible la question de la subjectivité gay.

Loin d'embrasser la diversité homosexuelle pour l'uniformiser à travers des structures supposées unifier et codifier la vérité de cette multitude de sens, il s'agit au contraire de représenter des contingences culturelles dont la relative récurrence au niveau collectif permettra de mieux appréhender ce qu'être gay veut dire pour certaines personnes dans un certain contexte. Sans prescrire ni normaliser ces contingences sociales, on obtiendra en les décrivant et en les accumulant des tendances qui contrasteront entre elles et sembleront animées de forces antagonistes ou du moins centripètes, et finiront en même temps par donner une consistance à la notion de « vécu gay » tout en soulignant l'aspect kaléidoscopique (rhizomatique) de cette subjectivité collective soumise à aucun impératif de clonage identitaire. C'est ainsi qu'on a le beurre (le sujet reste irréductible à la norme), l'argent du beurre (la culture gay redevient académiquement désirable) et – Dieu merci – le cul du crémier (la pensée queer bande encore).

situations

“Yo trabajo desde la ignorancia”

Entrevista con Dani Umpi¹

Pasó un mes y medio donde el rastro de la serenidad uruguaya caló hondo en el frío insurgente de Ann Arbor. Ávido de conocer las rarezas de la cotidianidad de una ciudad sitiada en una universidad, Dani Umpi sacaba su cámara de fotos en los suburbios de Detroit, en el *Necto*, en las fiestas, en las charlas y performances que dio, en las clases a las que asistió. “A mi me gusta registrar todo” –argüía- mientras le pedía a un estudiante para sacarse una foto. Pero en realidad, dice, vino a los Estados Unidos “para escribir”, para avanzar en su cuarta novela; y se encontró con un mundo que no esperaba, mucho más cálido y amistoso del que había pergeñado en su Tacuarembó natal. Por suerte encontramos un momento para presentarle, con grabador en mano, a Tiresias y la impronta de su nuevo número sobre la política de la sexualidad.

La llamada del Queer²

Tiresias: ¿Cómo vez la cultura *queer* en el Río de la Plata?

Dani: Bueno, lo *queer* en mi caso nunca fue muy consciente. Tampoco nunca me ha despertado mucho interés para investigar. Pero por mi experiencia personal sobre todo como cantor y mi trabajo musical en Uruguay, formo parte de una escena donde no hay muchos personajes o artistas que admitan públicamente la homosexualidad. El contexto me ha llevado a veces a situaciones en las que tengo que hablar desde un punto de

¹ Ficha personal: Dani Umpi. 33 años. Uruguayo impecable. Escritor, cantante, Performer. Autor de los libros, *Aún Soltera* (Eloisa Cartonera y Mansalva), *Miss Tacuarembó* y *Solo te quiero como amigo* (Interzona). Como Performer se presenta todos los viernes (que puede) en Buenos Aires y está produciendo el disco “Dramática”.

² Transcripción por Ofelia Ros; Edición por Federico Pous y Marcelino Viera
Tiresias 3 (Abril 2009)

vista *queer* o dar incluso ciertas opiniones que yo siento como si representara un grupo, porque ocurre que a veces en la tele hablan de los gay o de alguna temática *queer* y me preguntan que opino yo sobre el tema. Pero en realidad lo hacen porque yo soy de las pocas personas de los medios que admite que es gay.

De repente me encuentro en un lugar de representante de un colectivo en el que me pone el contexto; y bueno, yo también me he puesto ahí. Yo no tengo mucha opinión formada y desconozco muchas cosas. Por ejemplo, una vez me entrevistaron y me preguntaron que opinaba de los boliches gays y yo dije que eran horribles, que me parecía que eran muy re-cerrados. Y recibí un montón de mails de gays enojados, diciendo que si siempre voy a bailar a boliches gay, ¿cómo voy a decir eso? Es que de repente vivo una situación que yo no quiero vivir, no me interesa, porque en realidad no siento que tengo que responder al interés de un grupo. Y a la vez porque yo no estoy al tanto. Por ejemplo, allá se discute lo del matrimonio gay, lo de la adopción... Son temas que a mí no me interesan si bien me parece que los gays tienen derecho a casarse y tener niños, a tener un hogar que los contenga: yo no sé los pormenores del argumento. Pero lo entiendo porque en los medios [de comunicación] no hay muchos agentes que representen los intereses de los homosexuales.

Te lo exige la notoriedad de tu figura pública....

Claro, y en realidad a veces prefiero hablar de otra cosa. Yo no iba a las marchas del orgullo gay, pero en las dos últimas marchas canté y me di cuenta de que era importante participar. Lo que pasa es que a veces yo prefiero hablar de mi disco o de mi novela, porque quiero promocionar mi trabajo. Pero también porque pienso que hay otra gente que está más capacitada que yo para hablar de eso. Porque yo digo cualquier disparate. Soy consciente de que lo que hago, forma parte de una historia, de algo más grande, pero no sé, no conozco cómo ha variado el discurso *queer* con los años.



Calculo que viste la película XXY ¿Qué te pareció?

A mi es una película que me gusta mucho, conozco a la directora y la aprecio mucho y entonces quizás la sobrevaloró desde ese lugar. Estuvo bueno porque puso un tema y una óptica de algo que existe y que por más que sea pequeño en proporción a otras problemáticas, es algo de lo que no se habla públicamente. La película puso el tema en discusión de forma masiva y tuvo mucha repercusión en el Cono Sur y afuera. Uno se da cuenta de la repercusión que algo tiene en Uruguay a través del mercado pirata. Si las películas o los discos tienen copias en el mercado pirata es porque es un éxito. Entonces claro cuando yo vi mi disco en las ferias piratas, dije: "ya lo logré". Y con esta película desde el principio estaba pirateada, filmada desde adentro del cine, y eso significa que generó mucho interés. También demostró que el público masivo en realidad era bastante inteligente, porque las observaciones que se hicieron del tema no tenían tanto prejuicio como uno se suponía que podía tener. Fue una película que la comentaba mi tía en la cena de fin de año, y los adolescentes en la calle y todos con seriedad, y sin esa

cosa que uno esperaba de la película que iba a escandalizar a cierto sector, y ese cierto sector como que demostró que en realidad estaba maduro para esa discusión. Incluso a mi me parece que como experiencia la película movió muchas cosas en ese sentido y también ayudó. Más allá de la claridad estética -criticable o no- socialmente la película tuvo una función, fue una especie de medidor sobre qué opina el sector medio -la gente que va al cine a ver películas- sobre ese tipo de cosas y cómo acepta lo diferente. Es una película que tiene un fenómeno muy interesante atrás y que no sé si abre un camino, pero los profesores hacían talleres sobre eso en los liceos, es interesante.

La legitimización del escritor

Contános cómo fue tu comienzo como escritor en Uruguay.

Yo de chico escribía. Pero eso no quiere decir que escribiera bien; también leía, pero no hacía nada muy elaborado, nada formativo, sino lecturas que eran cosas del momento... y empecé a tener eso de querer escribir. Siempre novelas. Y cada tanto algún poema...como aparte. Pero desde el comienzo primaba mi interés por hacer una novela. Por mi generación yo justo agarré todos esos que estaban de moda en ese momento, los *best seller*. Yo tuve una formación en ese sentido bastante pobre; los libros que leía eran los más vendidos, y no tenía un interés formativo más allá del que tenía en el liceo, tenía que leer Cortázar, lo leía porque lo daban en la clase, pero si no, no lo leía. También leía muchas novelas para señoras, literatura femenina... En aquel entonces los primeros cuentos de J Nider y algunas otras novelas de amor. También veía mucho teleteatro, y a partir de todo eso fui armando todo un imaginario que en realidad se mantuvo hasta ahora. Yo en algún momento pensé que no iba a seguir. Pero ese interés del principio siguió por más que después conocí otras cosas y leí otras cosas.

¿Y qué escribías?

Cuando veo lo que escribía entonces, no valía mucho: era todo la misma temática, con "cintos" afectivos desde una visión muy adolescente; o aventuras amorosas... siempre retratos -generalmente de chicas. Las novelas eran, con una voz en primera persona y contaba todo lo que había que saber. Ahí empecé a escribir, me fui a vivir a Montevideo, y tuve la primera novela que se llama: *Aún Soltera*. Yo no la había publicado, y después hice otra novela que se llama *Miss. Tacuarembó* y la presenté a un concurso que había en una revista en Montevideo que se llamaba *Postdata*, con noticias uruguayas, tenía una parte de cultura medio grande y era un semanario. Y bueno me presenté a ese concurso y gané ese premio. A partir de ese premio después publiqué todo en Argentina. Esos fueron los comienzos.

¿Tuviste dificultades para publicar en Uruguay, cómo fue tu contacto con las editoriales?

Cuando me dieron el premio en *Posdata* yo creí que me iba a servir como una especie de currículum o algo así, que con eso podía editar mi novela. Pero no busqué mucho. Tuve un par de entrevistas con algunas editoriales, pero la novela no encajaba mucho dentro de lo que se editaba en ese momento allá. Primero porque yo nunca tuve el dinero suficiente como para ser independiente, que es lo más sencillo en el Uruguay. No es que pudiera hacer una edición de autor porque nunca tenía la plata para pagarla, entonces siempre dependía de alguna editorial que me publicara. Como gané ese premio pensé que eso podía ayudar. A mi siempre me costó desde el primer momento el tema de legitimarme: como yo no estaba en un ambiente literario, y era como muy al margen, siempre sentía que no podía pertenecer a ese mundo. Yo escribía pero no me sentía escritor, y siempre pensaba que las editoriales no me iban a publicar, porque yo no era escritor y no iba a las cosas de escritores... no es que fuera muy raro, pero no era lo que se editaba y tampoco era yo tan conocido. Bueno también

pasó que lo mío todo lo edité en Argentina. Soy uruguayo pero toda la producción es de allá, de hecho a veces voy a las librerías de Argentina y están mis libros en Argentina, y a veces pido que los cambien a Uruguay.

Entonces, como escritor fuiste reconocido en Argentina...

Sí, el reconocimiento que tuve fue primero en Argentina y después en Uruguay. Por ejemplo, yo al principio era muy desordenado y no juntaba las críticas ni nada. Después vi que tenía que sistematizar eso, o estar más pendiente de eso; entonces no tengo las primeras cosas que surgieron. Pero Uruguay se hizo eco de Argentina. Como escribían de mí en Argentina, me empezaron a dar más bola. Pero eso habla un poco de cómo es el ambiente en Uruguay, o sea, yo en realidad siempre estuve en Uruguay y me conocían un poco, pero, yo como soy muy rencoroso y muy infantil, al principio decía: "ah! no puede ser, me reconocen porque hablan sobre mi en Argentina." Después vi que tá, que es así el sistema del Uruguay: la parte intelectual o crítica en realidad es mucho más frívola que otros sectores. La crítica cultural o periodística en Uruguay, que muchas veces son ondas: "qué bueno lo que dijeron en tal lado sobre tu libro", en vez de "qué bueno tu libro". En mi caso fue muy obvio eso. De hecho sobre mi hablaban en revistas de interés general, como *Posdata*, antes de que hablaran en Argentina, y a veces incluso tenían notas más interesantes que las que después tuvieron las revistas especializadas.

¿Tenés algo así como un grupo de escritores en Argentina?

Sí. Pero lo que pasa es que no es un grupo, sino que casualmente compartí cosas con ellos: Fernanda Laguna, Gabriela Bejerman, Washington Cucurto, Cecilia Pavón. También veo a veces cuando me preguntan sobre esos otros escritores, sobre todo con Fernanda Laguna, creo que hay como una fantasía de que en realidad nos juntamos y hablamos mucho, pero en realidad ellas son amigas mías, porque no sé, vamos a bailar, a tomar algo, y todo eso,

pero en realidad nunca hablamos mucho de lo que escribimos. Por ejemplo, con Cucurto, que a veces es raro porque no tiene pero nada que ver lo que escribimos, y en realidad, claro, somos amigo. Ahora no tanto pero antes nos veíamos re seguido, pero en realidad ni siquiera hacíamos un intercambio de lo que escribíamos. Igualmente en la escritura puede ser que nos unamos en algún punto, porque obvio que me gusta mucho lo que ellos escriben, pero la afinidad con ellos va por otro lado. También me gusta mucho Alejandro López, que he laburado con él para guiones y otras cosas. Después hay uno que es un poco más grande pero que tenemos cosas muy afines, Sergio Bizio. Él también me ha ayudado montones. Es algo medio generacional, todos tenemos más o menos la misma edad, participamos un poco de los mismos lugares.



¿Has cambiado un poco los hábitos de lectura a partir de tus publicaciones?

Leo muy variado, pero siempre es una cuestión de lo que me gusta. Lo que pasa es que no tengo un interés formativo, como a veces muchos escritores. Trabajo mucho

desde la ignorancia entonces leo lo que me gusta o pienso que me pueda gustar. Hay cosas que no conozco y no tengo ni idea; pero no siento culpa por no conocer. Por ejemplo, la forma de escritura de César Aira me encanta y leí un montón, pero de Cortázar he leído muy poco. No sé, me parece que está bien pero no lo leo. No pienso: tengo que leer esto porque si no, no soy nadie; más bien pienso: en algún momento lo leeré cuando sienta las ganas. Como que estoy más relajado en ese sentido, que otros escritores que tienen como un peso muy fuerte por la parte formativa y la acumulación de información.

¿Y esto es algo que compartís con los amigos escritores?

Nooo. Gabriela Bejerman sabe un montón, le encanta leer todo lo más posible sobre literatura. Lo que pasa es que con ellos nunca hablamos mucho de literatura. Nos recomendamos a veces algunos libros, pero más de eso no.

¿Con quién hablas de literatura?

De literatura no hablo con nadie, porque no sé tampoco mucho. Hablo con Damián Ríos que es mi editor y agente, con el que más hablo es con él. Escribo pero no es algo que hable. Mis amigos no escriben la mayoría. No tengo muchos amigos escritores, más allá de esos que nombré. En Uruguay conozco algunos, pero no tengo mucho trato. Nos mandamos mails y a veces nos vemos con escritoras Uruguayas tipo Natalia Mardero, Patricia Túnez, pero tampoco hablamos de literatura.

¿Cómo entendés el trabajar desde la ignorancia?

Me gusta porque me gusta no conocer las cosas: es un estado en el que todo te puede llegar a sorprender en algún momento, y que el tema de no conocer algo no sea un freno para hacer las cosas, como en mi caso para escribir. He aprendido mucho, mis novelas: siempre las cambio, siempre las veo con Damián, o las reviso yo mismo mil veces. Cuando escribo no confío en la inspiración, entonces me gusta escribir algo y después ir cambiándolo y

mejorándolo. Entonces siento que siempre voy aprendiendo. Eso yo lo valoro mucho, porque voy aprendiendo a medida que voy haciendo las cosas. Entonces el *no saber*, el trabajar desde *la ignorancia* es un estado para mi creación que me resulta productivo y a la vez el que más satisfacción me da. Ir aprendiendo a medida que voy haciendo: por eso digo *desde la ignorancia*.

¿Te interesan personajes que también parten de la ignorancia?

Cuando pienso en personajes me imagino personajes bastante complejos en realidad. Personajes que manejan un bagaje de información compleja, digamos. Nunca son académicos pero tienen otro tipo de formación y otra *quema mental*, con una carga fuerte de experiencia simbólica -digamos. Mis personajes comparten una visión semiológica, tienen mucha opinión formada de cosas, que muchas veces no son iguales a las mías. Pero me los imagino así.

La efervescencia del 2001

¿Qué opinas sobre el boom de pequeñas editoriales que hubo en argentina después de la crisis de 2001?

Lo que pasa es que la crisis fue un motor insospechadamente gigante para todo los proyectos culturales, de entretenimientos, o creativos y de ocio también. Era como un momento muy triste y preocupante; pero también surgió mucha cosa de ahí. No sé cuales fueron las cosas que impulsaron todo eso. Por un lado hubo una ausencia de dinero y también del Estado como el padre que solventaba los proyectos, o que vehiculizaba el desarrollo de los escritores, músicos o artistas en general. Esa posibilidad, o la expectativa de esa posibilidad, desapareció. Entonces las reglas fueron otras, y surgió otro tipo de cosas.

En Montevideo el ambiente artístico -o incluso de escritores- aún tiene pendiente ese giro. Aún tiene como

objetivo lograr el reconocimiento de las esferas oficiales de la cultura, del Estado. Ser un artista consagrado y lograr que tu obra vaya al pabellón uruguayo en tal o cual bienal. Ser un escritor premiado en tal o cual concurso. Y bueno son objetivos que no digo que sean malos: yo también me he propuesto como candidato. Sin embargo, es interesante ver como cambió la producción artística cuando no existía ese apoyo del gobierno. En Uruguay surgió una nueva clase de artista, se perdió la figura del artista *lumpen*, la gente con un poco de plata empezó a crear sus propias cosas. También fue el momento en que la información de Internet fue muy fuerte, y la creación artística empezó a tener prestigio dentro de un ambiente considerado como frívolo. El arte pasaba a estar de moda en el sentido de ganar popularidad. La cultura popular incorporaba más elementos del arte y de la *alta cultura*, y viceversa. Entonces se dio una mezcla interesante, surgieron *revistas de tendencia* como *Free way* que mezclaban las dos cosas, y gente que no estaba dentro de la *elite* artística o letrada empezó a animarse a hacer cosas. En mi caso coincidió que yo ya tenía un poco de experiencia un poquito antes del quiebre - que para Uruguay fue en el 2002- y ese contexto me maravilló muchísimo y la verdad que me ayudó un montón. Fue muy bueno porque habían otras voces y el sector que legitimaba la producción cambió un poco, se abrió. Después en Uruguay vino la izquierda, entonces ahí cambió otra vez la situación de quienes legitiman la cultura, haciendo mucho más énfasis en recuperar la oficialidad como órgano rector, y en eso estamos.

¿Podrías contarnos un poco más de eso? ¿Qué cambios ha gestado la izquierda en el gobierno en el campo cultural uruguayo?

Lo que ha cambiado mucho fueron los dirigentes, los directores de todas las cosas. Culturalmente hay cosas que están buenas y hay otras cosas que me parecen bastante paternalistas, y hay otras cosas que intentan ser restauradoras. Sí hay un interés político en la cultura. Paradójicamente el tema es que en otros gobiernos que

fueron más nefastos eso estaba más libre, y entonces permitía más desarrollo. Por momentos hay cosas que son geniales, y por momentos hay cosas que son medidas de control que obstaculizan el arte. Pero hay cosas muy buenas del Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, sobre todo en el arte. Hay cambios importantes: hay directoras jóvenes en museos que durante muchos años estuvo la misma persona, hay proyectos del MEC, de plataformas. Después están los fondos concursales que por un lado siguen con eso que da un poco de miedo porque el estado es el que da los medios para hacer todo. Todavía no sé los resultados, no puedo ver mucho fruto. Hay intentos de ponerse al día, como si intentaras no copiar modelos extranjeros, pero ponernos a su altura, y a veces queda bastante ingenuo. No es que un país tenga que tener un modelo de identidad fuerte o todo lo contrario, que un país tenga que ser brutal en algo internacional. Pero a veces los intentos de poner a Uruguay a la vanguardia, al final, es como un pibe que le copia cosas a lo snob. Como si agarraras una revistas y dijeras: "ah vamos a hacer esto," pero claro lo haces precariamente con lo que hay, con alambre y a veces no sé si amerita tanto. También es muy difícil cambiar un país y un plan cultural lidiando con un montón de gente, por ejemplo, funcionarios públicos que están desde hace años, ponerlos a hacer otra cosa. Cambiar todo un esquema mental, no es fácil. Por ese lado, es meritorio el intento que está haciendo el gobierno.

¿Conoces algo del Proyecto Venus de Argentina?

Si claro, formé parte de eso. Era como un *pre facebook* y con dinero; mejor todavía en algún sentido porque generaba una circulación de valores que fueron muy productivos. Surgió todo en ese momento. Después de la crisis del 2001, me parece que Venus era a la vez la metáfora y la solución más acabada que se pudo hacer. Para mí es una obra artística fundamental y a la vez un proyecto económico ejemplar, de circulación de bienes culturales, de intercambio de opiniones y de creación, un espacio de discusión, para mí fue muy bueno. En el

momento estábamos todos ahí, entonces vendías un libro y te pagaban en Venus y vos decías: ¿qué es eso, una plata que no existe? Era como el juego *El Bancario*. Y sí, no existía a nivel oficial, pero con esa plata podías comprar otras cosas. A veces veías que podías comprar arte de gente conocida y otras veces podías comer. En un momento de crisis podías comprar arte, pero también podías comprar milanesas de soja. Funcionaba muy bien, era una red social muy astuta. Se adelantó un poco a esa visión que ahora es tan común de los avances tecnológicos para favorecer el intercambio. En vez de pensar que esos avances te separan de la gente, te aíslan, pensarlos como algo que te junta, te agrupa, te conecta.



¿Qué diferencia tenía el Venus con el dinero?

Lo que pasa que el dinero que habían inventado era parte del trueque. En aquel momento había mucho trueque en Argentina, era un dinero pero también había algo social, comprabas servicios de uno que te cortaba el pelo, y ese también te decía donde pasaban música y había levante. Era una mezcla de todo. Como todas las redes, tenía sus

vicios. Pero todos los lugares tienen eso; que también quiere decir que era algo que estaba vivo. Capaz que ahora se ve el proyecto Venus con cierta nostalgia, pero fue un espacio muy importante. En Uruguay no hubo experiencia de eso. Lo que había es que como todo el mundo se iba, ibas a las compra-ventas y comprabas todo lo que dejaban tus amigos. Es interesante el 2001 presenta esa visión de que todo era horrible o que todo era una oportunidad, todo era posible. Por un lado lamentabas que se iba toda la gente formada y capacitada para Europa a trabajar en un bar, y por otro veías un montón de gente que empezaba hacer cosas y llenaba ese vacío con proyectos que no había antes. Entonces como que cambió la escena. Ahora, hoy por hoy, también es cierto que ya hay una generación de pibes más chicos, que creció después de eso. Por ejemplo, en Buenos Aires, *Belleza y Felicidad* no era muy aceptado como espacio por los que legitimaban el arte, y ahora hay pibes de 16 años que están escribiendo y la referencia que tienen es *Belleza y Felicidad*. De algún modo, siguen la experiencia de ellos, y los que escriben tienen influencias estéticas y hasta una manera de producir que tiene que ver con ese lugar y con Eloísa Cartonera. En su momento había una visión a veces despectiva, pero ahora toda la generación nueva lo considera referente. Lo mismo Cucurto, hay muchos escritores nuevos que ahora siguen su estética, tanto Belleza y Felicidad como Eloísa Cartonera fueron espacios que habilitaron una producción y generaron interés en la literatura. Por otro lado, también ahora en Argentina los chicos están muy interesados en los 70, literatura del Boom y escritores consagrados. Entonces, por un lado el interés en las estéticas abiertas por los proyectos como Belleza y Felicidad y Eloísa Cartonera y por otro lado se retoma un interés por el Boom y por autores consagrados.

¿Cómo te relacionaste con Eloísa?

Por esa época pasó paralelamente que yo empecé a viajar muy seguido a Buenos Aires y a vincularme con gente de allá. Me hice muy allegado a un grupo de escritores, que

son: Fernanda Laguna, Cucurto, y Gabriela Bejerman. Y eso coincidió con el surgimiento de *Eloísa Cartonera*, y ahí en *Eloísa Cartonera*, le pidieron a varios autores para publicar y era muy variado el catálogo que tenían, ahí publiqué *Aún Soltera*

Dentro del proyecto, teniendo en cuenta todo lo alternativo que es, funcionó la novela porque circuló un montón. Se vendió. Si bien era uno de los libros más caros que tenían ellos, porque era el que tenía más páginas, la novela despertó mucho interés. Hubo mucha gente que le dio para adelante y la elogiaron un montón, salieron hasta críticas y todo; es ahí que una editorial se interesa por mi trabajo, que es *Interzona*.

Ahora, yo estoy muy cómodo en Interzona. Capaz que quisiera probar otra cosa, pero me siento como super dentro de la editorial, porque ellos también me han bancado un montón. Fueron los primeros que apostaron por mí y sacaron la novela. Y funcionó bien.

¿Por qué no seguiste publicando con Eloísa Cartonera?

Con Eloísa después saqué un disco de temas míos, ellos hicieron una edición, pero no lo vendieron mucho, porque fue el único intento que tuvieron con un disco. Yo sigo vinculado, los visito, pero no saqué otros más con ellos. Lo que pasa es que Eloísa me interesaba un montón como proyecto social, pero cuando empecé a editar en Interzona era mi laburo digamos. En Eloísa te dan los derechos y en Interzona me venden los libros, me dan adelantos y yo puedo vivir. Es muy diferente. Pero me siento súper allegado a ellos porque también hay amigos, Fernanda, Barilaro, es el grupo de gente por el que siento más afinidad de Argentina.

dossier
by other means:
the politics of sex and sexuality

Looking History in the Eye: Sex, Memory and *Domien* Subjectivity in Gisèle Pineau's *Chair Piment* Nayana Abeyesinghe¹

Abstract

Sex, namely violent sex, has become a recurrent thematic preoccupation in the work of women writers from the Caribbean overseas departments of France. Apart from violent sex, there is also plenty of voluntary sex in their works. Yet, even this sought after sex is seldom joyful. Often, it merely enacts a power relation and is a useful way of getting something. More often than not, it is an expression of alienation. The profusion of episodes of unhappy and traumatic sex in recent French Caribbean literature has a specific symbolic function, and points to a secret at the origin of Caribbean history: rape and incest. It is an attempt to bring forth from the subterranean of shame the stories of raped women and their children. It is an attempt to look history straight in the eye in order to effect reconciliation, to exorcize the past and touch the future.

Gisèle Pineau's novel *Chair Piment* recounts the story of Mina, a Guadeloupean woman living in Paris. A series of tragic events (the deaths of her parents and sister, fire) force her to move from Guadeloupe to France to live with an emotionally distant half-sister. In France, Mina lives "a fetish of exile" (Edward Said), forming no intimate friendships. Her loneliness is only forgotten momentarily in her many sexual encounters with strangers. To make things worse, the estrangement caused by family malaise is doubled in Mina by her transnational non-belonging. After twenty-two years of unhappiness in France, Mina returns to Guadeloupe, where she discovers the truth of incest in her family, which is understood to be the cause of the family's tragedies. In the confrontation of the truth, Mina is able to reconcile her past and come home to herself. Reading *Chair Piment* as an explicit imagination of reconciliation and accommodation in the acceptance of a stained beginning, this paper will explore its principle character's promiscuity as the expression of individual alienation caused by a family burden on

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the one hand, and on the other, as the consideration of the bearing of incest on the self of the community.

"Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor on the deck of *Christ the King* one day in the year 16** while the ship was sailing for Barbados. I was born from this act of aggression, from this act of hatred and contempt,"² writes Maryse Condé in one of her early novels, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. Sex, especially violent sex, has become a recurrent thematic preoccupation in the work of women writers from the Caribbean overseas departments of France. It reappears in Condé's subsequent novels (*Désirada*, *Célanire cou coupé*, *La Migration des coeurs*). Taking the torch from Condé, other writers from the Caribbean take up the question of rape and incest in their work (Gisèle Pineau's *L'Espérance macadam*, *La Grande drive des esprits*, *Chair Piment*; Evelyne Trouillot's *Rosalie L'Infame*). Apart from violent sex, there is also plenty of voluntary sex in these works. Yet, even this sought after sex is seldom joyful. Often, it merely enacts a power relation (*Célanire cou coupé*, *La Grande drive des esprits*), and is a useful way of getting something. More often than not, it is an expression of alienation (the character of Marie-Noelle in *Désirada*, who moves from one desultory sexual relationship to another during her years of exile in France; that of Mina in *Chair Piment*, for whom frequent sex with random strangers is a temporary grounding from chronic disconnection). The proliferation of unhappy sex in the recent works of French writers from the Caribbean has a specific symbolic function, and points to a common meaning that underlies their writings. Sex in these novels is a sign of a haunting, the process by which something that is seemingly absent makes its presence felt (Gordon). If the proliferation of discourse about sex in eighteenth and

² Condé, Maryse, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Trans. Richard Philcox, Ballantyne Books, New York, 1992. 3

nineteenth century Europe sought to control sexual activity, to silence its organic expression, to send all instances of it except that undertaken within the confines of married heterosexual coupling undercover (Foucault), the profusion of descriptions of sex, violent and dysfunctionally voluntary, between girls and boys, men and women, brothers and sisters and fathers and daughters in post-departmentalized Caribbean literature accomplishes a converse function of *unveiling*. They reveal a notorious secret at the origin of Caribbean history, and its complicity in the creation of the complicated genealogies of Caribbean peoples: rape. The flood of unhappy and traumatic sex in recent French Caribbean literature is an attempt to bring forth from the subterranean shame the memory of raped women, of children born of rape, of children born of rape separated in the mechanisms of slavery and of children born of rape separated in the mechanisms of slavery and caught up, subsequently and inevitably, in unwitting situations of incest. They are an attempt to look history in the eye, in order to effect reconciliation and accommodation, to exorcize the past and touch the future.

Gisèle Pineau's novel *Chair Piment* (2005) recounts the story of its principal character, Mina, a Guadeloupean woman living in Paris. A series of tragic events force her to move from Guadeloupe to France to live with an emotionally distant half-sister. In France, Mina lives in isolation, forming no intimate friendships except for rather superficial contact with two other immigrant women and a multitude of fleeting sexual encounters. Though the women become her confidantes to a certain extent, Mina does not develop any degree of intimacy with them, or feel part of a community. She refuses love and her loneliness is only forgotten momentarily in the sexual contact with strangers, at the end of which she goes back to her zombi-like existence in the company of the ghost Rosalia, who manifests in a spectacular figure of burning flesh after Mina's orgasms. After twenty-one years of unhappiness in France, Mina returns to Guadeloupe, where she discovers the truth of incest in her family, which is understood to be

the cause of the family's tragedies. In the confrontation of the truth, Mina is able to reconcile her past and come home to herself.

Mina's double exile (the effect of an unsettled history and rupture from home) resonates the collective alienation of the departmentalized French Caribbean. According to Édouard Glissant, the historical memory of Caribbean communities is marked by a void, the consequence of a singular "ruse" on the part of French history. The intricate manipulation enacted by the French nation to integrate the historical experiences of the colonized and subsequently departmentalized peoples into one narrative of republican fraternity necessitated the erasure of all histories that contradicted the republican ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, including colonization and slavery (Vergès).³

³ The strategy of systematic denial of sexual and other histories in the Caribbean coincides with the meticulous insularization of sex and sexuality in France into contexts that served the Republic (namely, to provide a labor force for the needs of the new capitalist mode of production) and the erasure of all other sex and sexualities in their relegation to secret spaces of scientific investigation (Foucault). Interestingly, the discourse of race and racial difference – the "scientific" examination and classification of race – runs parallel to the medicalization of non-economically motivated sex, culminating, at the end of the nineteenth century, with Victorian prudishness in matters of sex and with the racist theories of Gobineau and others in matters of race. That sex and race have been theorized, categorized and hierarchized in tandem is not surprising, given that both were transformed into means of serving economic aspirations. Aside from the economic relation between sex and race – right sex provided a work force, as did the appropriate (black) race – of course, is the biological connection between the two. At the source of race is sex and the question of racial mixing and miscegenation was a principle preoccupation of Europe in its encounter with the rest of the world. It is not surprising then that the commodification of sex and race (as fields of investigation and as means of production) should evolve alongside the progress of colonialism.

This deception by which France expected to effect a forgetting of four centuries of slavery and exploitation ultimately fails to achieve its purpose of assimilation, as it discounts the lived experiences of colonization and slavery, which have generated specific histories and identities that cannot simply be dissolved into one French identity. Such an ideology is inherently alienating, and only achieves the estrangement of those who are imposed upon to give up their past. Mina's private "unhomeliness" (Bhabha) thus signals to the collective condition of French Caribbean communities caused by the double trauma of slavery and departmentalization: Mina's experience of separation from family and her contact with incest are reminiscent of the experience of slave communities; her separation from the site of this history and her subsequent *étrangeté* in France repeats the uncanny situation of the overseas departments, obliged to forget their grounding in unique histories in order to become (depart)mentalized into France. Given the manifold ruptures from self (consequence of the "void" in historical memory) and space, the *domien* must effect wholeness in a recovery of the past, mediated by memory, such as that performed by Mina in her return to her family's *morne*. Reading *Chair Piment* as an explicit imagination of reconciliation in the acceptance of a stained beginning on the individual and collective levels, this paper will explore its principle character's promiscuity as the expression of individual alienation caused by an unresolved past and break from home, emblematic of the larger historical problematic of *domien* subjectivity fractured by the past of slavery and the disquiet of departmentalization.

Sex, in *Chair Piment*, is memory. It is the means by which Mina remembers the past. The novel starts with the dual activity of sexual intercourse and remembering, which make up a considerable part of the novel's action:

Elle reserra ses bras autour de lui. Écarta d'avantage les cuisses, afin qu'il entre mieux en elle

- Ça te plait, hein!

Mina détestait que les mots s'accolent aux gestes de l'amour. Ils lui faisaient l'effet de ces hannetons de la campagne antillaise qui, au soir, s'invitaient dans la case. Éperdus, éblouis volaient fous vers la lampe. Finissaient leur courte vie, brulés aux ailes et grillés à coeur, dans des exhalaisons de boucan diabolique. Le matin, la grande soeur Rosalia les ramassait sur le plancher, parmi les poussières, les ravets desséchés et les araignées rouges. Elle essayait de les compter, mais elle n'allait jamais au-delà de trois.

Un. Deux. Trois.

Un, Deux, Trois... alors que le sol était jonché de cadavres. Un, Deux, Trois. (11)

Mina does not speak during sex, and prefers that her partners remain silent during the act, in order to allow her memory to follow the rhythm of moving bodies to the past, to the landscape and people of her childhood. The "one, two, three" movement of her body repeats a memory of three other bodies in Mina's life – the bodies of her parents, and that of her sister Rosalia. At the age of 11, Mina loses both her mother, Médée (who is killed by a speeding car) and her father Melchior (struck down by lightning in his garden) within a period of three months, after which she lives with her mentally retarded older sister Rosalia in their *case* on the *morne* that had belonged to her father's family for several generations. The two girls live a relatively self-sufficient life, looked after in a rather peripheral way by the community, until the death of Rosalia in a fire that also burns down the *case*. Mina is "consoled"⁴ in the immediate weeks following these events by Suzon, a neighbor, before she leaves for Paris to live with her half-sister.⁵ Mina has no

⁴ It is later revealed that Suzon tried to kill Mina prior to her departure for France.

⁵ These are the evidential circumstances of Mina's life: accidental death of her mother; natural death of her father; tragic death of her sister (Melchior's first wife Marie-Perle also dies before her time by drowning, Médée has five miscarriages before she gives birth to Rosalia and Mina,

friends in France. She is suspicious of diasporic belonging as antidote for isolation and is contemptuous of the immigrant population's desperate efforts at creating a community. Sex offers a reprieve from her estrangement in the apparition of Rosalia, who manifests at the climax of Mina's sexual activity:

C'était toujours après la jouissance que Rosalia faisait son apparition, visite fugace. Rosalia remontée de ses ténèbres le 11 septembre 1998, jour anniversaire des vingt ans de l'incendie dans lequel elle avait péri. Nattes en couronne de feu dressées sur la tete. Visage brulé étonné. Peau grillée. Chemise de nuit en Nylon fondue dans ses chairs. Cris muets. Rosalia, un astre-déboulant de la case incendiée. (13)

The ghost of Rosalia first appears in Mina's life in the plane on the way to France, disappears after a few years and reappears unexpectedly several years later, at the moment when Mina, now a teenager, seduces her half-sister's husband, Douglas. Mina's desire for men goes back to this episode with Douglas. Being Guadeloupian, Douglas is a physical link to the past, and in his body, Mina finds an organic connection to the life she has left behind. More importantly, sex with Douglas is a crucial moment in the initiation of Mina's wantonness, because it is with Douglas that she first realizes that sex makes Rosalia appear. The subsequent adventures are but an effort at orchestrating

and Olga remains childless). Certainly a lot of misfortune for one family. The novel presents these events as linked to the machinations of Suzon, who sets out to destroy Melchior's family with the help of various *gadèzafè*, as revenge for his rejection of her after having received her virginity under a mango tree. The role of superstition in the family's misfortune is ambivalent (and indeed, insignificant) except as it relates to Médée, whose death is intimated to be murder (performed by a *gadèzafè* who believes in "modern" solutions and technology to resolve the problems of his clients, rather than in magic). Suzon's obsession with revenge (which embroils her in a lifetime of evil acts), however, is at the center of the story, as it points to the real cause the family's tragedies – unsettled stories, specifically the secret story of Suzon' birth and its fateful consequence of incest.

Rosalia's manifestation. The quality of sexual activity notwithstanding, it is necessary, because it makes Rosalia appear, conflated with the impression of the traveler's tree, half in reprimand and half as intuition of truth:

Rosalia se tenait à coté de l'armoire, adossée au mur tendu de papier peint fleuri. Par on ne sait quelle magie, l'armoire était à présent un arbre du voyageur, gigantesque, curieusement revêtu d'une écorce écaillée et jaspée qui renvoyait des images morcelées de la chambre. Les palmes noires calcinées courbaient, tombaient en cendres sur le lino vert et blanc.

Rosalia regardait Mina (...) Des flammèches jaillissaient de sa bouche et les mots qu'elle aurait pu crier brulaient avant d'avoir eu le temps d'inventer le moindre son. (13-14)

The image of Rosalia as the traveler's tree points to her symbolic existence as the force that sustains the weary Mina and gives her a vague sense of shelter. The traveler's tree is thus named as it provides water contained in its fronds to passing travelers. As long as Mina is engaged in sex, she is able to reach something like home in her imagination in the apparition of Rosalia, who provides a tenuous link with the past. Without the memory that is embodied in the figure of Rosalia, home is unreachable as the site of trauma and unnarrated histories that "brûlaient avant d'avoir eu le temps d'inventer le moindre son." The sex act thus becomes imperative for Mina to reach home, to belong, not to the present or to her partners, but to the past and the *morne*, which, although marked by trauma, is still home.

Pineau presents Mina's sense of belonging in Guadeloupe as rooted in her connection to place, in the "contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth."⁶ Before the fire, Mina and Rosalia live on the hill that

⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice, Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1977.

belonged to their father's family. Despite terrible events in their lives (orphanhood, disability, violence), the sisters find consolation in the familiarity of the land. The land gives them shelter, feeds them, and they need very little from the community. The *morne*, which goes back several generations, is continuity, and as long as the children live there, they are able to cope with even the harshest events that life brings them. It is significant that this land comes to Mina and Rosalia from a remarkable feat of resistance and freedom on the part of the family's legendary ancestor Selena, who buys the land through self-sacrifice, determination and astuteness. The tale of ancestor Selena and her heroic acquisition is crucial to the story. It is 1870, and Selena, a single black woman who "voyait claire et loin" decides to buy the land that she had been leasing from a mulatto so that her goats could have a home. The proprietor of the land of course sees only a ridiculous upstart. Deriding her ambition and not expecting her to find the means to pay for the land, he agrees to sell it to her if she were to raise the asking sum. Selena does so, but is refused the land when she presents the money to the owner, who increases the price in order to prevent her from becoming the owner. Selena goes back with the increased asking price and a third more, anticipating that the proprietor will raise the price once again. He does indeed do this, but by a remarkably clever feat of entrapment, Selena manages to buy the land. Selena's *enracinement* on the hill (a heroic site associated with resistance and freedom in the Caribbean cultural consciousness) can be read as act of *marronage*, an act that the girls re-enact after the loss of their family in their retreat to it and self-sufficient existence in it.

The relation of identity to place has been explored by many contemporary Caribbean writers in their fiction as well as in their theoretical writings. Édouard Glissant presents it as the essential element in the formation of Caribbean identity in his perception of *antillanité*. Glissant's notion of *antillanité* is fundamentally geo-political in bearing and attempts to define Caribbean identity in terms of the

specificity of the region and its historical memory, recuperated in *le vecu antillais* – the languages, skin colors, religious and other cultural practices that define Caribbean being. *Le vecu antillais* determines Mina's way of being, or what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would term as her *habitus*, which enables her to fit into her world.⁷ It is the break from her *habitus* (the rupture from the hill, site of Mina's home and history) that causes her physical and psychological displacement. The break from the *morne* forces Mina's departure to France and causes her sense of exile. Although she cannot quite articulate (or indeed comprehend fully) the reason for her isolation, Mina longs for the landscape of her past even as a child and has a vague sense that her present condition is related to its loss, the full meaning of which she only experiences intuitively, and understands finally only when she returns to it years later. The appearance of Rosalia as the link to the past is the intuition of this loss, which Mina expresses to her ghostly sister in the loneliness of her Paris room:

T'en souviens-tu, Rosalia...La nuit venue, le vent arrachait des lamentations de vieux corps aux bananiers qui poussaient derrière la case...

Une plantation sauvage, sacrifiée aux herbes mauvaises et au bon gré du ciel (...) Un morne habité par deux soeurs inséparables. Mina la petite s'occupait seule de la grande...

T'en souviens-tu, la Rose...

(...) Souvent la nuit, Rosalia faisait des cauchemars et ses cris se melaient au soufflé rauque du vent salé et aux appels terrifiants de la bananaraie

⁷ Bourdieu defines *habitus* (derived from Greek, meaning "manière d'être") as the "coherent amalgam of practice linking habit with inhabitation," the collection of superficial and innate qualities – character traits, dispositions, propensities, state of feeling, habits and manner of dress, speech, comportment, etc. – that define an individual (or class/group). These qualities, according to Bourdieu, are socially and culturally acquired, in that the milieu in which the individual (or "agent" in Bourdieu's vocabulary) resides inculcates its value systems in the individual. Mina embodies a very specific *habitus*, determined by the space and history of the *morne*/the Caribbean.

qu'on croyait hantée pas des confreries d'esprits tordus. Diablesses du temps jadis en déroute. Maudits privés de passeports pour l'enfer, costumes de poussière cendrée et regard d'outre tombe (...) On entendait aussi des abois de chiens libres se déchirant les restes d'un zombi égaré, des envols frénétiques de soucougnans et de chauves-souris dans les arbres à pain....

T'en souviens-tu, la Rose...

La case en bois avait bien cent ans...

Joie et peine dans le meme emballement.

Matin qui rit et soir qui gémit.

Cris. Paroles lancées aux saints des cieux. Vagissements. Imprécations. Concerts de voix. Rales d'agonie. Grand déballage de mots pour bonimenter des voltages de la vie, expliquer l'insondable, démonter les rouages du destin.

Médire. Mentir. Maudire. Et puis ruser. Calculer. Promettre des hyménées éternels à une belle ou à un male et se croire un instant immortel, ange droit tombé du ciel.

Cent ans de bruits.

Jour et nuit.

Nuit et jour.

Avant de quitter ce monde, ravie par les flames, la case du morne Calvaire. (61-63)

Sex then, for Mina, is a way to remember the past. The spectacular figure of Rosalia functions as a trace that keeps Mina connected to her lost home. The memory of home, conjured up by sexual activity, cannot, however, help Mina overcome the rift in herself caused by unresolved events of loss and pain. She must return to the site of the tragedies and unravel their secrets in order to fully understand the past and allow accommodation. She does indeed return to Piment after twenty-one years in Paris and gradually discovers the truth through the narratives of various people in the community and by searching the home of Suzon (who, despite being terrified that the truth will come out, reluctantly accommodates Mina during her

visit, partly in the hope of keeping her from discovering her part in the family's tragedies). The resurgence of the suppressed memory of the events of the night of the fire, together with the discovery of Suzon's macabre box of thwarted love, hope and life⁸ gives Mina the beginning of clarity and knowledge:

Vingt et un ans plus tard, debout auprès de la vieille sorcière, Mina se souvenait parfaitement de l'oreiller appuyé ferme sur sa figure. L'odeur du satin fané. Et puis, Rosalia avait lancé ses flammes. Une bouffée de chaleur saisit Suzon. Les mains de Suzon s'écartèrent. L'oreiller voltigea dans la rue.

Toute la nuit, Rosalia et ses flammes avaient monté la garde près de Mina, repoussait les tentatives homicides de Suzon. Coussin, coutelas, fer à repasser, corde, marteau, roche, bouteille, baton, mille-pates... Les flames s'élevaient chaque fois avec force, brûlant un peu plus les mains, le cou, les yeux de Suzon qui comprit que l'enfant était protégée.

Mina regagna sa couche au mitan de la nuit. Elle eut envie de fuir la case de la marâtre. Repartir en France le lendemain. Mais les ombres autour d'elle faisaient cercle dans la main. Leurs yeux disaient d'un meme coeur: "maintenant tu sais... Maintenant tu sais..." (263)

Mina soon discovers that Suzon's murderous acrimony is tied to a family secret that goes beyond a mere case of seduction and rejection. In the final revelation of her grandmother Nana's narrative, Mina and her cousin learn that Suzon is in fact the illegitimate daughter of Gabriel, Melchior's father, and Lucina.⁹ Mina thus understands the

⁸ In a box hidden in her *case*, among the mementos and tokens of her unfulfilled life, Suzon keeps eighteen dolls that she had made to represent the imagined children from her imagined union with Melchior.

⁹ Gabriel and Nana separate, and Melchior stays with his father in Piment while Nana goes back to her village with their two other children. Melchior discovers Suzon's paternity and renounces his promises to her, however,

reason for Suzon's hatred – the repressed history of incest in the family – and forgives Suzon as a pathetic victim of circumstance, for, ultimately, it is the untold history of the family that is responsible for the misfortunes of Melchior's life and the displacements of his children. Full knowledge and mercy at last enable the *morne* to return from burned hut, scorched landscape and fiery sister to land, Rosalia to disappear into her death and Mina to reach the shade of the traveler's tree. In the final recovery of her ancestor's hill, described in terms of a penetration, the role of sex in Mina's life – as a counterfeit going home – becomes clear as she recovers in actuality the time and space she had tried to reach in her orgasms:

Victor lui avait pris le bras. Comme promis, comme convenu. Et ils avaient gravi le morne ensemble, pareils à deux pèlerins, deux revenants, du temps de l'ancetre Séléna et de son abbé chéri. Deux convalescents (...)

Le soufflé court, ils s'arrêtèrent au pied de l'arbre du voyageur qui déployait son éventail de feuilles immenses.

Il n'y avait aucune trace de la case centenaire. Meme pas une planche calcinée où s'asseoir. Meme pas une vieille Pierre de taille marquée du coutelas de Melchior. Meme pas des morceaux cassés de la jarre où Médée puisait l'eau. Mais au fur et à mesure, le spectacle qui se découvrait de ces hauteurs. La bananaraie du père. La rivière au bas du morne. Tout Piment. La mer infinie. Les îles au loin. (371)

Chair Piment re-articulates thus a recurrent thematic concern of Antillean writers: that of the need to acknowledge, by both France and its departmentalized colonies, the hushed history of *cales négriers*, slavery and repression in order to envision successful assimilation of the

Lucina never tells Suzon why Melchior rejects her after declaring eternal love (which he does feel for her until the end) causing her to become a crazy, bitter woman who grows old surrounded by imagined unborn babies.

overseas departments into one national boundary. Although concealed in the official discourse of French history, the memory of this other experience exists in the collective consciousness of Caribbean communities, which, in the imagination of Caribbean poetics, manifests as a haunting. Just as Rosalia's haunting intimates the presence of a secret history in Mina's life, the burning flesh of Piment (Mina and other exilic *domiens* in the novel), by its appearance in France, signals to un-admitted episodes in French history. As Avery S. Gordon writes, "haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities. The ghost is the sign, or the empirical evidence that a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, a key to that dense site where history and subjectivity intertwine. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition."¹⁰ In the corporeality of her manifestation, Rosalia is not merely an expression of Mina's homesickness or a symbolic enactment of her guilt at not having saved her sister from the fire. She is a sign of the true meaning of Suzon for Melchior's family and the community in Piment. Rosalia is the intuition of "that which has not been allowed to leave a trace" (Gordon). Her persistence in Mina's life urges the unraveling of the past and the recovery of the truth. This act of recognition leads Mina to the shelter of the traveler's

¹⁰ Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1997, 8

tree, enabling her to reclaim her *enracinement* in her family's land and consequently, the temporal continuity of self. On the collective level, the problematic belonging of *domiens* in metropolitan France (marked by exclusion, racism and exile) can be seen as a haunting that signals to the unresolved relations of violence between France and her departmentalized colonies. Although left out by the official record-keeping of France, the memory of this violence persists in the palimpsestic voices of *domien* communities, which must be granted their place before assimilation can be imagined. The synecdochal function of the personal haunting in *Chair Piment* is evident from the beginning of the novel in Pineau's language describing Mina's sexual activity, the means by which she conjures up Rosalia/the past:

Mina ne désirait rien d'autre que la musique produite par les corps. Le frottement des chairs. Le froissement des peaux. La rencontre des humeurs. La fièvre. Et ces frissons qui donnaient l'illusion de l'amour. Elle voguait. Tanguai. Dérivait. Brimbalait par les vagues. Puis, elle se trouvait aspirée dans les profondeurs pourpres de la mer où prennent naissance les lames, où reposent les vieux coquillages, les étoiles défuntes, les squelettes de bois des caravelles corsairs, les cimetières de poisons et les boulets de canon. Parfois, enivrée comme d'un alcool fort, elle croyait entendre des abysses monter d'étranges mélopées, des rires de femmes empoisonnées d'injures. Elle épiait les émois de son corps. Espérait surprendre une vibration nouvelle qui annoncerait ce sentiment d'amour qu'elle n'avait jamais abordé ni connu. Meme pas l'éphémère, le temps d'un éclair. (12)

The (sub)marine world she evokes in the act of sex – sailing, drifting on waves, breathing the crimson depths of the sea where waves are born, where old shells, defunct stars, wooden skeletons of pirate ships, cemeteries (of fish) and canon balls rest, where the chants of the laughter of women poisoned with abuse are sometimes heard – leaves

no doubt as to the alluded history of the Middle Passage and its horrors, from which, as says Tituba in Condé's novel, "I", the Caribbean, was born. Just as Mina's private memory of home is the memory of catastrophe, the community memory of founding is the memory of drownings, separations and other violence. And it is in the remembrance of all these histories, heroic and "shameful," that have gone into making the Caribbean self, that the Caribbean subject abolishes the devastating effects of slavery and European whitewashing.

Remembrance, in the communities of the "people of the sea" (Benitez-Rojo) is a matter of creation. In the absence of a historical record of the violent origin of Caribbean families and consequently, of Caribbean communities, the Caribbean writer functions as a de facto historian, whose work tell the truth about the genesis and evolution of Caribbean societies. The literary and theoretical writings of the Caribbean remember its shocking past in the imagining of premises such as *négritude*, *antillanité* and *créolité*, all of which are attempts to restore the "submarine" (Braithwaite) story of the Caribbean and envision a wholeness of self interrupted in the currents of European history. The pre-departmentalization writers of Martinique and Guadeloupe conceive continuity of Caribbean history and Caribbean subjectivity in terms of their relation to an African past, expressed in the poetics of *negritude*. *Négritude*, starting in the 1920s (and inspired by the Harlem Renaissance), is an expression of difference and the desire for freedom from all colonial (French) insertion; *antillanité* and *créolité*, on the other hand, are post-departmentalization moves at asserting cultural specificity in the face of what some consider the ultimate and successful colonization of the sugar islands. The Martinican writer and theorist Édouard Glissant in his works articulates the essential *antillanité* of the Caribbean subject. In his notion of *le vecu antillais*, Glissant identifies a process of *métissage*, which must be articulated in new founding myths that provoke filiation in order to reverse the effects of erasure and the consequent break from self; following in the heels of Glissant, créoliste

writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant reiterate Caribbeanness as the synthesis of the various elements that have been forced into the insular space of the Plantation, creating a rich "chaos monde" (Glissant) of syncretic languages, religions and traditions. The Syrian merchant, the East Indian indentured laborer, the white creole and colonizer, as well as the African slave brought with them their languages, religions and cultures, and their mixing has flourished into a Caribbeanness proclaimed in *Eloge de la Créolité* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, 1989) and exulted in works such as *Solibo Magnifique* (Patrick Chamoiseau, 1988) and *Eau de café* (Raphael Confiant, 1991).

Gisele Pineau presents a singular moment in the talk of identity in the Caribbean. The publication of her first works coincides with the heyday of the *créolité* movement, in which she is often placed by literary historians (Pineau's first short stories, "*Paroles de terre en larmes*," "*Ombres créoles*" and "*Lena*" were published by *Editions Hatier* in 1987, one year after the publication of Patrick Chamoiseau's *Chronique de sept misères* and two years before the publication of *Eloge de la créolité*). Pineau acknowledges her affiliation with the creolist writers and the role of *créolité* as a movement in her success,¹¹ in that it paved the way for writing and language that had been considered folklorist and regional to enter the mainstream of the French publishing industry, if not entirely into the French canon. Her place within the creolist movement, however, is a complicated one. Pineau was born in France to immigrant parents of Guadeloupean origin. She spent her childhood in "a very racist suburb"¹² of Paris until the age of thirteen, at which time her family moved to Martinique. Pineau stayed in Martinique and Guadeloupe for the following twenty years, qualifying as a psychiatric nurse and publishing her first writings. She returned to Paris at

¹¹ Veldwachter, Nadège. Interview with Gisèle Pineau, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol.35, Issue 1, 180-187, Bloomington, Spring 2004.

¹² *Ibid.*

the age of thirty-three. Unlike Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, Pineau was not born in the Caribbean. Given her diasporic or “negropolitan” status, her vision transcends the limits of a strictly creolist poetic, placing her both within and without *créolité*, as well as both inside and outside the borders of the Caribbean. Her imposed return to the Caribbean as an adolescent and her self-conscious decision to return to France as an adult preclude convenient categorization of her place in the Caribbean literary canon. While Pineau’s cultural transnationality reflects the new global polemic of multiple filiations in the discourse of identity, it is most striking in the occasion it offers to consider the positioning of the sugar islands within the political geography of France.

The political status of Guadeloupe and Martinique, along with that of French Guyana and Reunion Island, was changed from colony to overseas department at the end of the Second World War. A singular phenomenon in the history of European colonialism, departmentalization is predicated on an assimilationist ideology of coming into various cartographies of belonging – in the geographical landscape and the political structures of France, in the cultural heritage that defines Frenchness, in the *habitus* of the land. Assimilation of the Caribbean into the geography of France, and of the Caribbean subject into French subjectivity, however, are fundamentally fallacious notions and gestures given the specificities of Caribbean identity as well as the cultural inheritances (including racism codified in the *code noir*) of France. The cultural difference affirmed in the notions of *antillanité* and *créolité* re-places the Antilles in its own unique identity, linked to, but separate from French identity. Efforts at assimilation that discounts this difference is bound to be problematic, affecting more readily the displacement of people previously grounded in the specific cultural belonging of *le vecu antillais* than their grounding in the French nation and achieves, in one extreme, not much more than exile (exemplified by Mina in *Chair Piment*) or, in the other extreme, fanonian alienation. The pseudo-assimilation of *domiens* who impersonate Frenchness by

assuming its superficial qualities (the only elements that are accessible to the outsider) find themselves in a situation of double exile from both France and their native places (embodied by the character Lysia in her ambitions and interactions with Guadeloupe).

If the affirmation of cultural difference on the part of the Caribbean subject complicates the success of departmentalization, the assertion of racial difference (and a racial hierarchy) by metropolitan France toward its *domien* populations reinforces this difficulty. The racism of France (recounted by Pineau in her autobiographical novel *L'Exil selon Julia*) maintains the overseas departments on the outside of French life, separated, quite literally by *la périphérique* (the circular road that demarcates the inside and outside of major cities in France).¹³ The discourse of assimilation notwithstanding, the actuality of the *domiens'* positioning as outsiders grouped together as a racial and cultural minority in the periphery of urban geography and society reasserts their *étrangeté* within the political and social landscape of France and repeats the experience of the literal and metaphorical insularization of the sugar islands during the period of colonialism and slavery.

The asymmetry of belonging (to nation, citizenship, culture) of the people of the *departments d'outre mer*, brings to light the inherent incongruity of departmentalization as means of assimilating the former colonies into France and their subjects into Frenchness. If the perversion of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* in the rhetoric of a *mission civilisatrice* was the ruse by which post-revolutionary France sought to take in its enslaved and/or colonized subjects, departmentalization was the strategy by which it sought to take them in two centuries later. And just as the *mission civilisatrice* proved to be a difficult ideology by which to acculturate people(s) defined by cultural, historical and racial specificities outside hexagonal filiations into a shared

¹³ The immigrant communities, including the Antilleans, generally live in the economically underprivileged suburbs on the outside of the *périphérique* of large metropolitan cities.

freedom, equality and brotherhood, departmentalization falls short of its intention of absorbing the sugar islands and their inhabitants into one French nation and one French identity.

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Introducción a "Las 120 jornadas de Sodoma" de D. A. F. de Sade: un manuscrito escondido, perdido, vendido, editado, a ser leído

Carlos Etchegoyhen

I

"Más allá del sadismo, Sade", tal fue la convocatoria de una jornada de estudio de la *école lacanienne de psychanalyse* en Montevideo, en mayo del 2005, y que motivara el presente texto. Retornar a Sade y su obra ha sido, desde hace años, una imperiosa e inquietante necesidad del ámbito académico y, muy especialmente, en el campo freudiano.

La psiquiatría, más precisamente la psicopatología, y el psicoanálisis desde sus orígenes, se han sentido interrogados por el citado personaje y por su obra. Los sesgos de lectura y de comprensión, aplicados a ambos, han sido diversos, dispares y contradictorios, como asimismo lo han sido sus consecuencias, que resultaron mayoritariamente normativas, prejuiciosas, stigmatizantes.

Un giro singular, dentro de ese panorama, han impreso el ya histórico trabajo de Jacques Lacan, Kant con Sade, y la revisitación que hiciera al mismo - ya en este siglo- Jean Allouch, con su *Ça de Kant, cas de Sade*. Es quizá desde esa perspectiva que se intenta aquí re-introducir al conde de Sade y a una de sus obras más "sulfurosas", Las 120 jornadas de Sodoma: en la manifiesta convicción de que tanto la obra como el autor, ese hombre gozante y sufriente, merecen aún formas de aproximación, distintas y novedosas, que nos acerquen al otro.

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Una de las últimas ediciones de la *Histoire de la Révolution Française*¹, de Jules Michelet (1798-1874), cuenta con un diccionario de los personajes mencionados en esa misma obra y que ha sido establecido por Alain Ferrari. Allí, y con relación a Donatien-Alphonse-François, Conde de Sade (1740-1814), más conocido bajo el título de marqués, se señala que Michelet no oculta en su obra su repulsión por el “horrible de Sade, el infame y sanguinario autor... ese noble profesor emérito del crimen.” Ferrari, sin embargo, se encargará enseguida de agregar que “poco o mal conocido durante el siglo XIX, el escritor de Sade debía ser re-descubierto recién en el siglo XX, sobre todo por los surrealistas” (Michelet, 970).

Michelet expresaba claramente su opinión sobre de Sade en el texto que cierra el capítulo VI del libro XV, el cual estaba referido a *Lavoisier – la gran química – las costumbres del 94*: allí el historiador, entre 1847 y 1853, describe, con preocupación, a una Revolución a la cual más allá de su

grandeza, se le ve su brutalidad, su ceguera, su vértigo. Ella comienza la grande y terrible operación que, a través de juicios, proscripciones, batallas, hambruna, etc., desde 1794 a 1815 - durante más de veinte años - va a disolver, descomponer, volver a la naturaleza, esta enorme masa viviente de varios millones de hombres.

En medio de esta destrucción surge en muchos hombres, y por añadidura, una emoción de placer, salvaje, homicida. Cosa oscura y triste de decir: esos hombres aman más destruir que crear. En esas naturalezas bajas y estériles es destruyendo que uno se siente Dios.

Y cuanto más estéril es esta naturaleza, más pobre y escasa de goces, más reclama sus alegrías a la muerte y al dolor. (783)

¹ Michelet, Jules. “*Histoire de la Révolution Française*”, Tomo II, R. Laffont, 5ª Ed., Paris, 1979

Para Michelet es así como, en el seno de aquella bienvenida violencia revolucionaria, de transformación social y cultural, también volvían, insospechadamente, ciertas actividades recreativas de los señores del Antiguo Régimen, de la Edad Media, con su séquito de golpes y ultrajes, al ritmo del látigo y el bastón, retornando así algo muy brutal ligado, por entonces, al sólo solaz y diversión de la nobleza. Y nos recuerda que

en el siglo XVII había todavía muchos de esos señores *divertidos*. La guerra, la caza y el duelo eran tres maneras que tenían de derramar sangre, sin perjuicio del asesinato. [...] El gran Condé había dicho, con relación a no sé qué carnicería: Bah, esto no es más que una noche de París! Los Condé, cazadores salvajes, demasiado hechos a la vista de la sangre en esas inmensas masacres que llamaban grandes cacerías, vivían de buena gana en los montes, con sus mil caprichos extraños. [...] La tiranía ilimitada de estas grandes casas de la nobleza sobre sus sirvientes y vasallos persistía en pleno siglo dieciocho. "¿Si esta gentuza vive de nosotros –decían–, qué importa si también mueren por nosotros?"

El placer no era más gozar (plus de jouir), sino romper. [Estas] miserables generaciones eran el último lazo de un mundo acabado, sin corazón, sin imaginación y carente de sentido, cuyo placer sólo sabía del dolor de quienes, en su vicio impotente, ingresaban a un infierno. En los castillos de los Condé, de una de sus damas de honor, nace el héroe de este género, el señor de Sade. (783-4, resaltado mío)

Y rememoraré, no sin ironía o incluso con sarcasmo, las andanzas de ese príncipe *divertido* y en permanente querrela con la justicia: por ejemplo cuando golpeó y torturó a una prostituta la cual huye tirándose por una ventana, o bien luego cuando, por mera diversión, habría envenenado (en realidad, intoxicado con polvo de cantárida, un supuesto afrodisíaco) a otras dos jóvenes

rumeras en Marsella, y cómo, ya perseguido por la justicia, al huir se llevó consigo a su bella y joven cuñada hasta Venecia. (Lacan, muchos años más tarde, considerará estos episodios apenas como *badinages*, travesuras.) Más temprano que tarde de Sade caerá preso, ahora por orden del Rey – merced al impenitente, persistente rencor de su suegra, la viuda del Presidente (de la Corte de Justicia) Montreuil – y será enviado prisionero a la terrible cárcel de la Bastille. Ello no obstará para que Michelet agregue, impiadoso, que un hombre como de Sade bien hubiese merecido, de pleno derecho, ser el primer ajusticiado en la guillotina. Tan terrible era el profundo desagrado que cierta leyenda del personaje, ya acuñada en esos tiempos, le inspiraba.

Pero el rencor de Michelet, un republicano probo, se exagera aún más hacia de Sade cuando recuerda que ese hombre, liberado en los fragores de la Revolución, logra constituirse primero como secretario, y luego ¡ presidente de la Sección de Piques en la Place Vandôme, bajo Robespierre, el Incorruptible! Eso fue demasiado para Michelet. Pero hacia el fin de 1893 comenzará en Francia el “culto revolucionario a la moral y las buenas costumbres: se perseguirá a las prostitutas, a los libros obscenos, a la podredumbre que esconde Paris” (id.). Al fin, dirá nuestro republicano historiador, de Sade será descubierto y arrestado, “ese hipócrita”. Y un juicio lapidario para de Sade:

con más de cincuenta años de edad, este profesor emérito del crimen, enseñaba con la autoridad que otorgan los años y las formas elegantes de un hombre de su condición que la naturaleza, indiferente al bien o al mal, no es más que una sucesión de asesinatos, que ella ama matar una existencia para suscitar otras miles, que el mundo no deja de ser un vasto crimen.

Las sociedades acaban – sentencia Michelet - por cosas monstruosas como estas: la Edad Media por un Gilles de Retz, el célebre asesino de niños; el

Antiguo Régimen con de Sade, el apóstol de los asesinos.

Terrible situación la de esta República naciente que, en el caos inmenso de un mundo convulsionado, se ve amenazada por estos reptiles espantosos. Las víboras y los escorpiones pululan entre sus cimientos. (785, resaltado mío)

II

El presente trabajo pretende, no sin cierta incomodidad—habida cuenta de la opinión de mi muy querido Michelet—promover la lectura de un texto que Donatien-Alphonse-François, conde de Sade, ese autor maldito, nunca vería publicado en vida, y al cual supusiera perdido para siempre.

El manuscrito de *Las ciento veinte jornadas de Sodoma (Escuela de libertinaje)* es, hacen explícito Jean-Jacques Pauvert² y Pierre Beuchot, el primer gran texto de Sade.

El *objeto* es impresionante: un rollo de tenue papel de doce metros de largo y once centímetros de ancho, cubierto del derecho y del revés de una escritura microscópica y regular... Escrito a partir de 1782 en Vincennes y terminado en la Bastilla en octubre de 1785, este manuscrito desapareció en el transcurso del pillaje que siguió a la toma de la fortaleza." "Toda esta gran banda ha sido comenzada el 22 de octubre de 1785 y terminada en 37 días," dice el propio autor. (Sade 419)³

El rollo estaba escondido en un estuche cilíndrico que, probablemente, usara de "consolador" (o dildo), aunque quizás operase como base falsa de un candelabro, a efectos de que no fuera encontrado y requisado por las autoridades de la prisión pero, días antes de la Toma de la Bastille, "seis

² Pauvert, Jean-Jacques y Pierre Beuchot. "*Sade en procès*", Ed. Mille et une nuits, 1999, Turin. p. 48

³ de Sade, Marqués. "Las 120 jornadas de Sodoma," Trad. de Joaquín Jordá, Col. de Erótica dirigida por Luis G. Berlanga, La sonrisa vertical, Tusquets editores, septiembre 1991, Barcelona.

guardias armados irrumpieron en la celda de Sade a la una de la madrugada y lo condujeron hasta un coche de caballos, apenas vestido y sin permitirle que se llevase ninguna de sus pertenencias" (308).⁴ El 9 de julio de Sade escribirá una carta diciendo que

tom[a] a Dios, a la justicia y a la humanidad por testigos para que *observen las execrables vejaciones, amenazas, agravios, maltratos y hurtos de que fui objeto la noche del 3 al 4 de julio de 1789 por parte de una banda de insolentes bandidos enviados a mi celda de la Bastilla*, quienes, sin mostrarme orden alguna, anunciaron que ejecutaban órdenes del despotismo ministerial tan tristemente extendido por toda Francia, y quienes, bajo ese engañoso, peligroso y criminal pretexto, me transfirieron a una casa de locos, con quienes se me ha mezclado. (*Cartas* 309⁵)

De Sade será, nueve meses más tarde, liberado del hospicio para dementes de Charenton y, casi simultáneamente, su esposa solicitará y obtendrá el divorcio: él sentirá profunda ira hacia ella y a su familia política, los Montreuil, pero a ella –Pélagie– la acusará muy especialmente de haber descuidado sus manuscritos, la responsabilizará de gran parte de la pérdida de su obra.

Quince volúmenes de mis obras en manuscritos, listos para pasar a manos del impresor, todos estos efectos [...] fueron guardados bajo llave por el funcionario de la Bastille, pero Madame de Sade *cenó, fue al baño*, se confesó y se durmió. Finalmente [...] *todos mis efectos fueron robados, [...] todas mis posesiones, incluidos los*

⁴ Du Plessix Gray, Francine – “Marqués de Sade”, Trads. A. Debrito y M. Diago, Javier Vergara Editor, 2000, Bs. Aires, p. 308

⁵ Citado en DuPlessix Gray. Carta de Sade al inspector Chénon, 9 de julio de 1789. *En Sade, Lettres inédites et documents*. Ed. Jean-Louis Debauve, Ed. Ramsay/Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris, 1990, p.207. Resaltado mío.

*manuscritos por los que cada día derramo lágrimas
teñidas de sangre. (Cartas 323)*⁶

Uno de los participantes en el operativo nocturno llevado a cabo en la Bastille en aquellos días pondrá el texto en manos de la familia Villeneuve-Trans, la cual aseguró su salvaguardia durante tres generaciones. El manuscrito fue luego vendido al siquiatra berlinés Iwan Bloch quien lo tradujo y publicó en 1904 bajo el seudónimo de Eugen Dürgen (o Duerhen), en Berlín y París, pero fueron apenas 200 ejemplares que pasaron – casi – desapercibidos para el gran público.

En 1929 Maurice Heine adquirió el manuscrito por exclusivo mandato de la familia de Noailles, y lo llega a publicar entre 1930-1935, antes de que el mismo fuera vendido a un coleccionista extranjero. Jean Allouch, en pleno siglo XXI, dirá que esa fue una “edición irreproachable / 600 ejemplares” (Allouch 161).⁷ Pero no será hasta el 25 de abril de 1967, en las *Obras Completas* de Sade, que dirigirá Gilbert Lely, que aparecerá *Las 120 jornadas de Sodoma. Escuela de libertinaje*, a plena luz del día. Será en el Tomo decimotercero, con prólogo y notas de M. Heine, A. Hesnard y P. Klossovski, entre otros, y apenas doscientos años más tarde de su creación.

III

Simone de Beauvoir decía sobre el conde de Sade, hace ya más de cincuenta años (1951-1955), que “*durante once años de cautividad –primero en Vincennes más tarde en la Bastille – agoniza un hombre y nace un escritor*” (de Beauvoir 40, resaltado mío), pero precisa además que, si bien “a primera vista puede parecer que Sade al escribir no ha hecho más que reaccionar como tantos otros a su

⁶ Sade a Gaufridy, *circa* mayo 1790, Ed. Bourdin, p.269, citado por DuPlessix Gray.

⁷ Allouch. Jean, “Faltar a la cita. ‘Kant con Sade’ de Jacques Lacan. *Erotoogía analítica* III, Trad. De Silvio Mattoni, Ediciones literales, 2003, Córdoba, Argentina. Anexo 1.

situación de prisionero" (65), debe destacarse que "la literatura permite a Sade desencadenar y fijar sus sueños, y también superar las contradicciones implicadas por cualquier sistema demoníaco, aun mejor: ella misma es un acto demoníaco puesto que exhibe agresivamente fantasmas criminales, y aquí radica lo que le otorga su incomparable valor" (66). El conde de Sade será nuevamente enclaustrado en 1801, aunque esta vez en instituciones asilares u hospitales cerrados para dementes, y durante años. "Sade protesta y se enoja - dirá de Beauvoir; pero al menos puede de nuevo darse despreocupadamente a la pasión que ha reemplazado a la del goce (?): *escribir. Nunca dejó de hacerlo*" (46, resaltado mío).

Y no cualquier creación literaria, sino una muy específica: la erótica. "He concebido – escribe – todo lo que se puede concebir en este género, pero no he hecho todo lo que he concebido y no lo haré seguramente." Coincidimos con de Beauvoir en que "de Sade ha establecido sistemáticamente, según las recetas de una especie de arte combinatoria, un repertorio de las posibilidades sexuales del hombre" y que "*hizo de su erotismo el sentido y la expresión de toda su existencia: no es, pues, por curiosidad ociosa que procuremos precisar su naturaleza*" (47, resaltado mío).

La misma autora precisará que

escogiendo el erotismo Sade ha escogido lo imaginario, sólo en lo imaginario conseguirá instalarse con certeza sin arriesgarse a la decepción; lo ha repetido a lo largo de toda su obra: "*El goce de los sentidos está siempre regulado por la imaginación. El hombre no puede pretender la felicidad mas que sirviendo a todos los caprichos de su imaginación*". Por ella escapa al espacio, al tiempo, a la prisión, al vacío de la ausencia, a las presencias opacas, a los conflictos de la existencia, a la muerte, a la vida, a y a todas las contradicciones. *No es mediante el asesinato*

como se realiza el erotismo de Sade: es por medio de la literatura." (resaltado mío)

A de Beauvoir le surge, súbitamente, un cierto pudor que parece requerir de ella una cierta precisión:

[que] por supuesto no se trata de atribuir a Sade las opiniones que profesan en sus novelas los pederastas especializados; pero el argumento que coloca en boca del Obispo de las *Jornadas de Sodoma* está bastante próximo a su corazón para que - según esta autora - podamos considerarlo una confesión. Dice éste (el Obispo), en lo que concierne al placer; "Vale más un muchacho que una chica; consideradlo desde el lado del mal, que es casi siempre el verdadero atractivo del placer; el crimen os parecerá más grande con un ser de vuestra especie que con quien no lo es, y a partir de ese momento se duplica la lubricidad." (53-54)

Pero el Conde de Sade ya se explayaba sobre el tema, casi con delectación, en algún que otro texto:

[...] los gustos del hombre, en el acto del libertinaje, los podemos reducir a tres: *la sodomía, las fantasías sacrílegas y los gustos crueles*. La primera de estas pasiones es hoy universal [...] Se la divide en dos clases: la activa y la pasiva. El hombre que la mete por el culo, ya sea a un muchacho o a una mujer es un sodomita activo; cuando hace que se la metan, es un sodomita pasivo (82)⁸

Esta acción [...] es la misma a la que se refiere una singular fábula aparecida en la mediocre novela de las Sagradas Escrituras, esa pesada compilación realizada por un judío ignorante durante el cautiverio en Babilonia, pero es falso, carente de toda verosimilitud que esas ciudades, o más bien aldeas, hayan perecido bajo el fuego como castigo por sus excesos; al estar enclavadas en los

⁸ de Sade, Marqués. "La filosofía en el tocador," Trad. de Mario Nistal, en Jorge A Mesta, Ediciones Escolares, marzo 2001, Madrid.

cráteres de antiguos volcanes, Sodoma y Gomorra, desaparecieron del mismo modo que esas ciudades italianas enterradas bajo las lavas del Vesubio. (113)⁹

No existe un rincón de la tierra en que ese pretendido delito de sodomía no tenga templos y seguidores. Los griegos, que hicieron de ello una virtud, por así decirlo, le erigieron una estatua bajo el título de Venus Calípige; "Roma imitó las leyes de Atenas e introdujo este placer de los dioses [...] al amparo de las águilas romanas se extendió de un extremo al otro del mundo; al destruirse el imperio buscó refugio junto a la tiara, siguió a las artes en Italia y se implantó entre nosotros [...]. No, no, no hay en el mundo un placer similar a éste: es el de los filósofos, el de los héroes [...]" (116-117). Así se expresaba el señor Dolmancé, ese preceptor inmoral dedicado a la educación de jóvenes damiselas, en un libro que de Sade titulara *La filosofía en el tocador* y que iniciaba con un sugestivo colofón: "La madre recomendará a su hija la lectura de este libro". Para de Beauvoir "*la enorme importancia que Sade concede en sus escritos a esa fantasía y el ardor de sus alegatos, todo ello confirma que ahí reside uno de los aspectos esenciales de su sexualidad.*" (47, resaltado mío). Ella incluso no vacilará en señalar, que

en su vida privada de Sade, en el episodio de Marsella, se hace sodomizar por su criado Latour, quien parece muy habituado a rendirle este género de servicios, sus héroes lo imitan a porfía, y él declaró en alto, en términos muy vivos, que el máximo placer se alcanza combinando sodomía activa y pasiva. No hay ninguna perversión de la que él hable tan a menudo ni con tanta complacencia, con apasionada vehemencia incluso. (52)

Las 120 jornadas de Sodoma, esa escuela de libertinaje, incluirá, de manera casi sistemática, la sodomía en casi todas sus jornadas, actuadas o como recurso

⁹ *Ibid.*

discursivo, por todos los personajes de la obra. Digamos que para Simone de Beauvoir – inspirada en el reduccionismo psicoanalítico de Pierre Klossovski en esos años, dirá Brighelli¹⁰–

las fantasías son primero narradas, antes de pasar a practicarlas: mediante este desdoblamiento el acto deviene un espectáculo considerado a distancia en el instante en que es ejecutado... Los cómplices son particularmente necesarios para dotar a la sexualidad de una dimensión demoníaca; mediante ellos el acto cometido o sufrido reviste una forma segura en lugar de diluirse en momentos contingentes; al hacerse real, cualquier crimen se revela posible, común, uno se familiariza con él tan íntimamente que cuesta trabajo juzgarlo condenable. Para asombrarse, para espantarse, hace falta contemplarse de lejos, a través de ojos ajenos. (60)

No podemos dejar de coincidir con cierta reflexión sobre el carácter colectivo de sus fantasías orgiásticas: *“gracias a los testigos congregados alrededor se mantiene una presencia que ayuda al sujeto a permanecer él mismo presente. Él espera realizarse a través de representaciones, y para observarse hace falta ser observado”* (61, resaltado mío). Y así, quizá, no estar tan solo.

Georges Bataille, según nos recuerda Annie Le Brun, ya había advertido que *“nada sería más vano que tomar a Sade, literalmente, en serio* (resaltado mío). Desde cualquier ángulo que se lo aborde, ya se ha sustraído de antemano. De las diversas filosofías que les presta a sus personajes, no se puede retener ninguna.” Y ella agregará que Sade deja pocas certezas, salvo que

no era el enfermo, ni el revolucionario, ni el santo, ni el profeta, ni el literato, ni el carnicero, ni el prójimo, ni siquiera el pensador que habían pretendido que fuera.

¹⁰ Brighelli. Jean-Oaul. *“Sade. Sa vie. Sa légende”*, Larousse-Bordas/HERR, 2000, Paris. p.238

*Únicamente sabía que estaba solo, como nosotros nos esforzamos por ignorar que pueda estarlo. Despiadadamente solo.*¹¹

Escribiendo, eso sí.

IV

Pero la imaginación de nuestro autor libertino no se agotará, en exclusividad, en el elogio de la sodomía en ese texto sino que develará otros deseos, otros placeres. Por ejemplo describirá en la Quinta jornada, por boca de la Duclos, que

[...]vimos llegar al burdel a una mujer de unos treinta años, bastante bonita, pero pelirroja como Judas. Al principio creímos que era una nueva compañera, pero ella no tardó en desengañarnos diciendo que solo venía para una sesión. El hombre a quien le estaba destinada esta nueva heroína llegó pronto por su cuenta. Era un gran financiero de bastante buen aspecto, y la singularidad de su gusto, puesto que a él se destinaba una mujer que sin duda nadie más hubiera querido, esta singularidad, digo, me dio muchísimas ganas de ir a observarles. Tan pronto como estuvieron en la misma habitación, la mujer se desnudó por completo y nos mostró un cuerpo muy blanco y muy rollizo. “¡Vamos, salta, salta!” le dijo el financiero, “acalórate, sabes perfectamente que quiero que sudes.” Y ya tenéis a la pelirroja haciendo cabriolas, corriendo por la habitación, saltando como una cabritilla, y nuestro hombre examinándola mientras se masturba, y todo ello sin que yo consiguiera adivinar todavía el objetivo de la aventura. Cuando la criatura estuvo

¹¹ Le Brun. Annie. “De pronto un bloque de abismo, Sade”, Trad. de Silvio Mattoni, Ediciones literales, editorial de *la Ecole Lacanienne de Psychanalyse*, setiembre 2002, Córdoba, Argentina, p. 22-23. Resaltado mío.

empapada de sudor, se acercó al libertino, alzó un brazo y le dio a oler el sobaco, cuyos pelos chorreaban de sudor. “¡Ah, eso, eso es!” , dijo nuestro hombre contemplando enardecido aquel brazo pegajoso bajo su nariz, “¡qué aroma, me encanta!” Después, arrodillándose ante ella, olió y respiró de igual manera en el interior de la vagina y en el agujero del culo, pero siempre volvía a los sobacos, bien porque esta parte le gustara más, bien porque allí encontrara mucho más olor: siempre era ahí donde su boca y su nariz se dirigían con mayor celo.”¹²

Otro texto llega a nuestro olfato, con un tufillo similar, valga la imagen: cuando

[é]l besa, con sus labios, esa frente cubierta de barro que los hombres han pisoteado con su polvoriento talón... Aspira, con su desvergonzada nariz, las emanaciones de aquellas dos húmedas axilas... Vi las membranas de estas últimas contraerse de vergüenza, mientras, por su lado la nariz se negaba a aquella aspiración infame, pero ni él ni ella prestaban atención alguna a las solemnes advertencias de las axilas, ala apagada y lívida repulsión de las fosas nasales. Ella levantaba más sus brazos y él, con más fuerte impulso, hundía el rostro en sus huecos [...] inaudito desenfreno [...] forzada aleación de aquellos dos seres.¹³

Similar fantasía, pero no la misma: el “Conde” de Lautréamont no es el “Marqués” de Sade, aunque a veces se le parece, o bien están hermanados en esa nube de azufre que el surrealismo ya percibía, y festejaba, a través de Paul Éluard (1937) o Maurice Blanchot (1949).

El conde de Sade, desde el principio de *Las 120 jornadas de Sodoma*, nos aconseja no asombrarnos en

¹² op.cit., p.126

¹³ Lautréamont, Conde de (Isidoro Ducasse). “Cantos de Maldoror,” Trad. de Angel Pariente, Col. La Cruz del Sur, Edit. Pre-Textos, 2000, Valencia, p. 146.

demasía o, mejor aún, no disgustarnos por la singularidad, complejidad y extensividad de los posibles, inusitados, placeres que habremos de encontrar en el transcurso de la lectura de su obra: no sería justo, según él, para nadie.

Es ahora, amigo lector, cuando hay que preparar tu corazón y tu espíritu al relato más impuro que jamás ha sido hecho desde que el mundo existe, no encontrándose un libro semejante ni en los antiguos ni en los modernos. Imagínate que todo goce honesto o prescrito por esta bestia de la que hablas incesantemente sin conocerla y que tú llamas naturaleza, que estos goces, digo, serán expresamente excluidos de este libro, y cuando los encuentres, por azar, será siempre porque irán acompañados de algún crimen o coloreados por alguna infamia. Sin duda, muchos de todos los desvíos que verás pintados te disgustarán, ya se sabe, pero habrá algunos que te calentarán hasta el punto de costarte una acabada. Y he ahí lo que se buscaba. Si no hubiésemos dicho todo, analizado todo, ¿cómo querías que hubiésemos podido adivinar lo que te conviene? Eres tú el que debe agarrarlo, y dejar el resto. Otro hará lo mismo, y poco a poco, todo encontrará su lugar. Esta es la historia de un magnífico banquete donde se disponen 600 platos distintos a tu apetito. ¿ Los comerías todos? No, sin duda, pero ese número prodigioso amplía los límites de tu elección, y encantado por este aumento de facultades ni se te ocurre rezongar al anfitrión que te agasaja. Haz lo mismo aquí: elige y deja el resto, sin declamar contra ese resto sólo porque ese resto no tiene el talante que te place. Piensa que gustará a otros, y sé filósofo."¹⁴

¹⁴ Sade. Marquis de. "Les 120 journées de Sodome. École de libertinage". Ed. 10/18, 1975, Paris, p. 74-75 (Trad. CE) (Agradezco a R. Capurro recordarme la cita, y su ubicación precisa en el texto).

***Mujer constante más allá de la muerte* or, the overpowering constructions of femicide in Ciudad Juárez¹**

Adriana Martínez²

Abstract

More than 15 years after the first gender-related murders or feminicides were detected in Ciudad Juárez in 1993, it is still hard to believe that these atrocious crimes are mostly unsolved. To date, approximately 500 feminicides have taken place in this border city and the fact that many of the women's bodies found were dumped in the desert, exhibiting signs of sexual assault and torture, is a significant factor in the climate of horror surrounding these cases. In this paper, I note that when the majority of the representations that arise from the feminicides emphasize the image of women-as-victims, they become forever entrapped as disempowered, voiceless, violated Others. Amongst these depictions, I have selected Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005), as the work that better emphasizes the interplay of interpretations of the extremely sexualized and politicized *victim* of the Juárez feminicides.

More than 15 years after the first gender-related murders or feminicides were detected in Ciudad Juárez in 1993, it is still hard to believe that these atrocious crimes are mostly unsolved.³ To date, approximately 500 feminicides have

¹ "Invariable Woman Beyond Death": a wordplay on Francisco de Quevedo's "Amor constante más allá de la muerte" (Invariable Love Beyond Death).

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³ The expression feminicide, which refers to murders of women specifically motivated by gender (Monárrez, "Feminicidio"), appears alternatively as 'feminicide' and 'femicides'. I have chosen to use the former throughout

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<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/rll/tiresias/index.html>
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
University of Michigan

taken place in this border city and the fact that many of the women's bodies found were dumped in the desert, exhibiting signs of sexual assault and torture, is a significant factor in the climate of horror surrounding these cases.⁴ On the other hand, the unsolved status of these murders has motivated a proliferation of local and international outrage directed towards the state and federal governments for their inability or unwillingness to stop these crimes.⁵

While this appalling situation evidently explains an overpowering representation of death in the constructions of *juarenses* women in a variety of media, there are notable differences to be observed in the two main embodiments of femicide: the victim and the activist. In this paper though, I will center exclusively on the paradoxes that emerge from highlighting a representation of helplessness and victimization. In order to explore this key portrayal, I have selected Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005),⁶ which emphasizes the interplay of interpretations of the phenomenon of the Juárez feminicides that have originated from both Mexico and the United States. The reasoning behind the selection of *Desert Blood* for this study is not only because it is the single full length novel centering exclusively on the feminicides, but also because it offers a distinctive viewpoint on the representation of the murdered women. That is to say,

this text, partly because "femicide" has also been linked with the term genocide (Schmidt Camacho, "Ciudadana X" 275).

⁴ In 2003, Amnesty International published a report titled "Intolerable Killings —Mexico: 10 Years of Abductions and Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua," where the exact number of murdered women was placed at 370, and of these, at least 137 exhibited signs of sexual violence. More recent data, from the National Commission for Human Rights (*Criterios*), increases these figures by 79 more murders from January 2004 to July 2007.

⁵ The most notable example of international mobilization on this issue happened when V-Day 2004 was dedicated to the Murdered and Missing Women of Juárez. The money raised was donated to local support groups. Source: <http://www.vday.org/contents/vcampaigns/spotlight/juarez>

⁶ The novel will be referred to only as *Desert Blood* for the remainder of the text.

Desert Blood, while still depicting *juareense* women as inescapably victimized, considers this portrayal from a more detached, external context.

Within the realm of the specific and contextualized border imaginary of Ciudad Juárez, one would expect a multiplicity of narratives that corresponded to the diverse life stories of the women who have been involved in this tragedy in one way or another. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, only two distinct representations stand out in the wide range of literary, filmic and popular culture texts inspired by these terrible events.⁷ Furthermore, these two portrayals are intrinsically enmeshed in each other, as the murdered women become the *raison d'être* of the female activists and the protesters become the voice of the dead. While this melding of images may conjure up a visual of women being dragged into a vortex of unresolved trauma, it should be clear that no analysis of the Juárez feminicides could ever be that simple.

To begin with, any avenue of interpretation must consider the specific socio-historic context of this border city, an already conflictive site where the vectors of globalization, political and economic power of Mexico and the United States, class division, illegality, and patriarchal mores on female sexuality, have often clashed. Simultaneously, from a more abstract position, I propose the dual concepts of visibility/invisibility and voice/silence as theoretical parameters to guide the analysis of the current representations of women in Juárez. For, if in a post-NAFTA era the figure of the *juareense* woman has been repeatedly made invisible on account of her socio-economic marginality and her inferior status within a patriarchal society, it is also regrettably true that in the age of femicide she only becomes visible when she is being sexualized or killed. Here is where her representations turn paradoxical in different levels.

⁷ In the website of the NGO Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa / May Our Daughters Return Home, there is an extensive selection of over 50 documents related to the feminicides, such as books, poems, songs, movies, plays and documentaries.

Firstly, there is the contradiction that arises from the apparent impossibility of transcending the portrayal of *the victim*. On the one hand, there exists an undeniable urgency to uphold this portrayal because of the vast pain inflicted in the *juarenses* society by the feminicides and the overall absence of justice regarding these cases. Nevertheless, when the majority of the representations emphasize the image of women-as-victims, they become forever entrapped as disempowered, voiceless, violated Others. As for their families and the activists that demand justice, their paradox is similar: they are likewise and problematically bound to their representation *exclusively* as mediums for the victims. Now, when the patriarchal and misogynistic Mexican authorities insist on sexualizing all women connected with the feminicides by means of depicting them as “outsiders”, “uncontrolled”, and “improperly public”, the third and most important paradox appears.⁸ It resides in the dilemma of how the images of these women can be (re)appropriated without falling into the trap of assuming traditionally expected feminine positions of “innocence” and silence.

***Desert Blood, or Pobre Juárez...
Tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de sus víctimas⁹***

*Next shot: the girl lying face up in the sand, hair chopped off,
still wearing her uniform, arms tucked under the body, one
leg bent so sharply the heel was touching the hip*

Gaspar de Alba, 281

⁸ For a complete account of the authorities' insulting discourse, see: Tabuenca-Córdoba, María Socorro. *Baile de Fantasmas en Ciudad Juárez al Final/Principio del Milenio.* *Más Allá de la Ciudad Letrada: Crónicas y Espacios Urbanos.* Eds. Boris Muñoz y Silvia Spitta. Pittsburg, PA: Universidad de Pittsburg, 2003.

⁹ Poor Juárez... So Far Away from God, So Close to its Victims. The original saying is alluded to in *Desert Blood*: “Pobre México, Tan Lejos de Dios, Tan Cerca de EEUU” [“Poor México, So Far Away from God, So Close to the United States.”] It is attributed to Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915).

Before the ghastly images of the victims of femicide began to dominate the cultural landscape pertaining to Ciudad Juárez, the literary representations of border women included the exploration of female bodies as central loci for self-discovery, and not emblems of death.¹⁰ These illustrations from pre-femicide times now contrast with an ever-degenerating climate of violence in Mexico which has effectively overshadowed the specter of femicide in the national imaginary.¹¹ In the midst of this sobering scenario, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's second novel, *Desert Blood*, summarizes to an extent all the larger issues surrounding the Juárez femicides. My analysis of the representations of *juareense* women in this novel will thus reflect how these depictions are inextricably linked to more general social concerns originating from this border region. In other words, the problematic construction of *juareense* women mainly as *victims* will be examined through its interaction with globalization as a relatively recent social, economic, political and cultural force in the area. Furthermore, the effects of femicide will be explored in relation to the gendered victimization fostered by the murders and echoed by cultural representations such as *Desert Blood*: a victimization that extends beyond patriarchal subjugation and sexualization of women, to a silencing of their voices, a rejection of their worth and an erasure of their selves.

Now, in order to comprehend how the novel finds a variety of social actors guilty for their involvement in the murder of *juareense* women within the framework of *globalization*, it would be appropriate to advance a working definition of this much-touted term. Thus, understanding globalization in a general sense as a series of processes of reciprocal economic and cultural dependence that "*reorder*

¹⁰ The short story compilation, *Callejón Sucre y Otros Relatos* (1994), by *juareense* author Rosario Sanmiguel, is a good example of pre-femicide representations of women.

¹¹ Any given day, the reader of www.jornada.unam.mx will find a story on the wave of violence that has been unleashed on the Mexican society by the scourges of organized crime and a corrupt police force.

differences and inequalities without suppressing them" (García Canclini 49, emphasis mine), has at least one serious benefit. Namely, this concept of globalization places an accent on the rearrangement of socioeconomic disparities that necessarily disturbs an existing equilibrium, one which was already unfair for women in Juárez in terms of patriarchal repression. Therefore, femicide can be comprehended as an indirect consequence of globalization, since the appearance of global interdependence in this border scenario creates new imbalances that affect women in particular in several fronts. On this note, *Desert Blood* specifically takes into account not only the *maquiladora* exploitation of women workers fostered by globalization but also its contribution to a climate of border violence and broad socioeconomic marginalization that acutely infringe on women's human rights.

The plot of the novel starts hinting at all of femicide's underlying issues from the very beginning. For starters, the Chicana academic point of view (a reflection of the author's) is personified in the protagonist Ivon Villa. A lesbian ABD in Women's Studies, Ivon returns to her native El Paso to adopt a Mexican baby from Cecilia, a *maquiladora* worker in Juárez. When she gets there, she discovers that the pregnant girl has been brutally killed and her body found in the desert. At this point, Ivon's cousin Ximena—a social worker in El Paso/Juárez—convinces the reluctant mother-to-be to consider adopting another child. This introduces the reader to a second Mexican mother, Elsa, who is portrayed in a pitiful state, as she is dying of cancer and therefore looking to give up her three-year old son. To make matters worse, the reader finds out that Elsa has probably been artificially inseminated in a *maquiladora* by one of the supposed femicide killers, who has allegedly used her body for medical experiments that may have caused her to develop the disease.¹² Now, as Ivon starts

¹² The real life name of the man alluded here was Abdul Latif Sharif, a chief suspect in the murders of Juárez, and who died in prison in Chihuahua in 2006. He was never suspected of running experiments with women but the

getting more involved with the crimes, her younger sister Irene disappears in Juárez and Ivon starts a frenetic search of her own to find her before she becomes the next victim. She finally manages to rescue her sister from the snuff ring that was holding her, with the help of a police detective from El Paso. The novel ends on a happy note with a family scene in Irene's hospital room that includes the little Mexican boy, soon to be adopted by Ivon and her partner Brigit.

The apparently simple plot of the novel camouflages to an extent the aforementioned deeper links of the feminicides to globalization and to the victimization of *juarense* women that *Desert Blood* means to address. Thus, the opening pages of the novel, the gory description of a pregnant woman being murdered and disemboweled in the desert, offer important clues as to what we might expect further in the story with respect to the representation of *juarense* women: "The rope tightened around her neck, and she felt her belly drag over sand and rocks, the wound in her breast pricked by sagebrush" (Gaspar de Alba¹). And while this is not the only femicide described in the novel, its location at the beginning of *Desert Blood* is crucial, as it firmly positions the women of Juárez as helpless *victims* of horrendous crimes.¹³

The extreme cruelty inflicted on the bodies of the femicide victims, as narrated in *Desert Blood*, has the effect of reducing all other characterizations of *juarense* women in the novel to this personification of powerlessness. Therefore, a closer look at the nature of the victimization process seems necessary at this point. On this matter, René Girard has theorized that societies are, by essence, always on the verge of imploding due to internal violence, which must be appeased by finding "a surrogate victim [...]"

authorities contended that he was the intellectual author of countless murders, even while being behind bars.

¹³ In fact, activists take great pains in calling attention to the euphemism implied in the popular term "Las Muertas de Juárez", which obscures the fact that these women did not simply die, but they were brutally murdered.

chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand" (2). In Gaspar de Alba's novel, there are merely three characters that actually become victims of femicide but they are clearly meant to symbolically substitute for other women, to take their sacrificial place in what is constructed as a society misogynistic to the extreme. As for the actual selection of the victims, it is quite remarkable that the three women who are killed in the novel appear to conform to the requirement that in order "to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community (sic) to choose victims outside itself" (Girard 8). The fact that the chosen victims —Cecilia, Mireya, another *maquiladora* worker, and an unnamed little girl who is murdered as part of a snuff tape— all seem to share a working class background supports the idea that this is the condition that marks them as victims, further bespeaking of the state of marginality that erases them.¹⁴

On the topic of victimization, it must be noted that one of the most significant aspects of *Desert Blood* is that its textual representation of *juarese* women furthers a necessary reflection on the intricate —and problematic— symbolism attached to the figure of the victim, that is, the idea of her helplessness and her disempowerment. This characterization of *las mujeres de Juárez* mostly as victims is particularly challenging because it runs the risk of "collapsing these women in a vacuum of sameness", or turning them into speechless subalterns (Rojas, "The 'V-Day' March" 223). And while the novel does this to a point —mainly with respect to its depiction of working class Mexican women as stereotypically meek— it could also be argued that *Desert Blood* fails to transcend that victimized representation precisely due to its stated pursuit of greater awareness of the femicides. Besides, Gaspar de Alba's text does allow for other women, such as Ivon and Irene, to

¹⁴ This is the extent of my agreement with Girard's theories about victimization, as the continuation of the phenomenon of femicide attests to the fact that unlike the postulates of *Violence and the Sacred* (1979), there is neither a sacralization of the murdered women or an apparent restoration of the social order stemming from these deaths.

possess a degree of agency, therefore debunking the idea that *all* women are victims necessarily. Finally, the novel considers portrayals of the murdered women which are not necessarily *centered* on their sexual modesty, thus differentiating its representations of the victims of femicide from those of most *juarese* activists.

Now, within the textual space of *Desert Blood*, the victimization of the women of Juárez can be characterized by four general emphases. Firstly, there is the stress on their helplessness, which can be best exemplified by the novel's portrayal of a failed motherhood. A second aspect of this victimization is related to their silencing, which is significantly connected to processes that ultimately alienate them as citizens. Thirdly, there is a distinct accent in the representation of *juarese* women as worthless human waste—a depiction easily linked to the prevalent figure of the cadaver in the novel. Finally, *Desert Blood* highlights the victimization of these women in connection to their sexualization, especially as it is associated with their work at the *maquiladoras*.

With respect to this first aspect of the characterization of *las mujeres de Juárez* as helpless victims throughout the novel, it is quite significant to explore how the idea of their vulnerability becomes inextricably linked to their failure at the basic, traditional, feminine role of motherhood. An initial explanation of this connection, from the perspective of Gaspar de Alba's work, would argue that these Mexican women are not able to be effective as mothers not by any fault of their own but because of the environment of poverty that surrounds them. In other words, the *juarese* mothers that the novel focuses on are regarded as ineffective mostly because they are helpless to alleviate their indigence, considering that the slum where they live "was no place to bring up a child [...] but it wasn't Elsa's fault, or the grandmother's, either. They were doing what they could to survive their poverty and Elsa's illness" (Gaspar de Alba 89). This lack of agency becomes all the more problematic when the only solution offered by the novel is the intervention of the women from *el Norte*.

Thus, when compared to Ivon and her wife Brigit —the ultimate “good mothers” who will truly be able to care for the poor Mexican child— it seems obvious that their Mexican counterparts are woefully deficient in their material resources. And yet, there are other important failures implied in this comparison. For, in a country such as Mexico, where maternity is held in the highest of regards, this lack of success in the traditional gender role *par excellence* is a serious matter. Considering how the characterization of *juareense* women as unsuccessful mothers can be so problematic within the local context, it is additionally distressing to note the paradoxical bind to traditional patriarchal values that these Mexican mothers are shown to have in *Desert Blood*. In the novel, a prime example of this conventional outlook can be found in the Mexicans’ expected prejudice towards Ivon’s homosexuality. The explanation to this alleged bigotry is relatively stereotypical: these poor Mexican families appear to be controlled by their religion, which only reinforces their traditional point of view and their wariness of “foreign” lifestyles. Furthermore, these misgivings serve the textual purpose of pitting Ivon as a heroine against a traditionalist, narrow-minded society, which can only conceive of women as following strict standards with respect to their sexuality and expected gender roles.

As a final point on this discussion on motherhood in *Desert Blood*, it must be noted that both Cecilia and Elsa, the two Mexican mothers who are featured most prominently in the plot of the novel, are ultimately denoted by the exploitation of their reproductive abilities. This is mostly inscribed in their characterizations as women who will give up their children to the liberal *Americanas*. And yet, while the image of Third World babies being rescued from squalor by a US-American heroine —even if lesbian and Chicana— might seem distasteful to some, the novel manages to hold its moral compass. It does so by emphasizing that this condition of neglect and wretchedness that corners women and children is one that Mexican mothers seem helpless to overcome.

Expanding on this idea of vulnerability in association with economic disempowerment, it must be noted that it is precisely this metaphorical lumping of all the women of Juárez into a specific marginal class which works as one of the prime ways in which *Desert Blood* characterizes them as victims. The silencing of their voices logically follows this stratification, as they are deemed not worthy to be heard. Moreover, even the space of their silence becomes occupied, as the descriptions of their dead bodies underpin the idea that “Sobre todo en Ciudad Juárez [...] el cuerpo femenino es un objeto de uso, de consumo, una superficie inscribible” [“Especially in Ciudad Juárez [...] the female body is an object of use, of consumption, an inscribable surface”] (Melgar y Belausteguigoitia 10). In the novel, then, there is a particular emphasis on the gruesome “messages” that the assassins leave behind on the dead victims, such as the “worthless pennies” that are stuffed into them, or the satanic markings on their breasts (Gaspar de Alba 249-251). With this savage appropriation of the murdered women’s bodies and voices beyond death, the idea of the expendability of their lives is repeatedly underscored.

This image of the disposable, silenced *juarense* woman is well embedded into the socio-cultural context depicted in *Desert Blood*. In it, these marginalized populations become stripped of the most basic rights awarded to a national citizen (Fregoso, “We Want Them Alive!” 111). This is possible because the working class women who become the victims of feminicide in the novel, as well as their families, are no match against an environment of misogynistic violence propped up by the highest levels of power in the region. Now, more specifically, *Desert Blood* points to U.S. Border Patrol agents, Mexican *judiciales*, vicious cartel drug lords, government officials, and *maquiladora* owners as alleged responsible parties for the women’s murders. And while the actual perpetrators in this whodunit turn out to be a gang that produces snuff films, it is important to note that all of the aforementioned actors —with some of them in fact belonging to the snuff ring— are fundamentally implicated

in the globalized setting that allows for the Juárez murders to continue being ignored and routinely dismissed by the Mexican authorities.

In the end, though, the issue of assigning blame for the murders of women in Juárez is much more complex than pointing fingers at specific nations, industries, socioeconomic processes or gendered social structures, regardless of how hegemonic they may seem. This is so because the situation in the U.S.-Mexico border appears to be increasingly approaching what has been termed a *necropolitical* social order, where “multiple forces and processes, including militarization, denationalization, neoliberalism, and ingovernability” cohabitate (Fregoso “We Want Them Alive!” 109). In *Desert Blood*, these larger powers are associated with the silencing of women in a direct way:

A huge malignant tumor of silence, meant to protect not the perpetrators, themselves, but the profit reaped by the handiwork of the perpetrators [:] from the actual agents of the crime to the law enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements. (Gaspar de Alba 335)

The use of the term “agents” must be particularly emphasized here, as it stands in stark contrast with the lack of voice, and therefore *agency*, which the victims of femicide suffer from. And yet, from the perspective of *Desert Blood*, it would appear that the abetting of the murders of the *juareense* women by the highest authorities in the region goes hand in hand with the representation of these women as *silenced* victims devoid of their human rights. In the novel, the most extreme form of this representational alienation from their rights as citizens and as human beings will be undoubtedly manifested in the figure of the *cadaver*, as can be observed in the following excerpt from a scene depicting the autopsy of a murdered woman, which the protagonist attends.

Her head was turned sideways, facing Ivon, the eyes a milky red, the mouth wide open. The body

was marbled green and yellow, the skin loose, the hands curled inward, toes pointed. Dark rope burns on her neck. [...] Ivon counted seventeen black gashes. (Gaspar de Alba 50)

The aesthetics of murder used in this description completes the dehumanization of the character of Cecilia, in a fashion eerily reminiscent of Mexican *nota roja* newspapers or even their more polished TV avatars, such as the X-Files or CSI.¹⁵ In the palette of the autopsy scene, the abnormal colors complete the impression that this is no longer a woman, not human anymore. In many ways, the following words of Cathy Fourez are echoed in Gaspar de Alba's depiction: "La identidad única de la víctima se desagrega en su cadáver, [...] pero también en lo abyecto" ["The unique identity of the victim is disaggregated in its cadaver, [...] but also in that which is abject." (81) Thus, the alienation of the person is completed with the uncanny degradation of her body. All of this, though, makes up for a bizarrely seductive element of morbid titillation in the portrayal of a murdered body—which may explain the popularity of textual and visual representations such as this. In the case of *Desert Blood*, then, it would follow that its choice of format was based on a conceptualization of the murder mystery as a well-liked genre, in the hopes that this would increase its expected audience. However, by keeping to this genre, the text necessarily diminished its complexity vis-à-vis its character development, with the result of Mexican women mostly appearing as, by and large, stereotyped victims.

Nevertheless, more than a victimized typecasting of *juarense* women, arguably the most important dilemma arising from the focus on the murdered bodies in *Desert Blood* is that it reiterates a particular discourse that, according to Alicia Schmidt Camacho, problematically represents these women as human waste ("Body Counts" 24). This depiction thus unintentionally mimics the

¹⁵ *Nota roja* newspapers commonly display gory photographs and crime scene stories in the most scandalous ways possible. [The common translation of yellow press is not completely accurate here, as *nota roja* is only devoted to covering bloody deaths, of common folk.]

underlying assumption behind the ineptitude of the authorities in solving these crimes: that the murdered women are of no significance to their society. The fixation on the image of the cadaver in the novel acquires a particularly disturbing additional connotation since the tortured bodies are confirmed as “objects” of no importance precisely due to the fact that both Cecilia and Mireya are found discarded in the desert, as if they were refuse. They are thus doubly robbed of their personhood: in their atrocious murders and in the way they are deemed worthless by the continued desecration of their bodies in death.

The last facet of the characterization of *juareense* women as victims in *Desert Blood* adds a crucial subtext to the portrayal of femicide by delving into the intersections of a long-standing *sexualization* of women in borderland settings and the incursion of relatively recent socio-cultural representations involving the *maquiladoras*. The first association then implies that women are being killed in Juárez because of their sexualized representations, which, in the novel, are even advertised in the internet: “*You will not find a place with more beautiful, available, hot-blooded young ladies*” (Gaspar de Alba 117). Hence, there is a textual creation of the urban space, especially the bars, as a place of moral —and literal— danger for women, since they become linked to the eminently dispensable and despised figure of the prostitute. Within *Desert Blood*, this risky association in women’s portrayals is explained as motivated by patriarchal attempts at controlling female sexuality. As Ivon ponders “No wonder these crimes haven’t been solved [...]. From the prostitutes to the police, everyone thinks it’s just about sex, it’s just about the girls going off with men, *por allí*” (Gaspar de Alba 186). Again, this textual reproduction of misogynist cultural perceptions via the moral degradation implicit in this sexualized connection underlines the figure of the *victim* as the predominant representation of the women of Juárez: a

victim with no value, with no rights —including the right to an unpunished sexuality.¹⁶

The representation of the sexualized victim, deprived of her human rights, becomes even more paradoxical when it is associated with what should have been perceived as an avenue for economic empowerment: the work of women in the *maquiladoras* of Juárez. For women's employment in these industries, far from being symbolized positively in this border context, appears to constitute a challenge to patriarchy by virtue of her labor, thus begetting "moral" attacks on the image of *maquiladora* workers. This can be readily explained as they denote a direct confrontation to a patriarchal ideal of domesticity and economic dependence for women. An example of this vilification of working women in *Desert Blood* can be noticed in the figure of the "maqui-loca" Barbie dolls sold all over the city, which showcase the supposedly popular depiction of these workers as whores. In fact, the definition of this term that the novel provides is that "maqui-loca" is "the vernacular way of referring to *maquiladora* workers who become Americanized and turn into whores" (Gaspar de Alba 211). Now, the consideration of what exactly is meant by "Americanized" is a challenging issue to be pondered in this text, as it touches on the difficulties that patriarchy has in "controlling" working women, as well as on questions of national and gendered portrayals and expectations within the context of globalization.

This imagined prevalence of women in the *maquiladora* scenario only serves as fodder for the misogynist paranoia implied in the aforementioned patriarchal association with

¹⁶ As briefly aforementioned, the sexualized representation of *juarese* women has been repeatedly countered by most local activist organizations with a problematic opposite: the figure of the *innocent*, virginal young woman. This image holds conflictive connotations due to its inherent adhesion to a patriarchal double standard concerning female sexuality and women's moral "worth". This paradoxical portrayal will be discussed at length in the analysis of *La Batalla de las Cruces*, as it concerns more directly the depiction of female activists when they access public spaces and claim a voice for the murdered women.

the figure of the “fallen woman”.¹⁷ In Gaspar de Alba’s novel, this particular border stereotype is further reproduced in this dialogue between Ivon and her cousin Ximena.

‘Do they [the *maquiladora* workers] *turn* into whores [...] or is it just how people perceive them because they have jobs outside the home?’

‘Whatever, [...] nobody respects them. Some don’t have a choice, you know. They got kids to feed and they can’t do that on their pitiful salaries’.
(Gaspar de Alba 211)

Other than the surprising textual suggestion that working class women have no other option but to prostitute themselves in order to make a living, the preceding dialogue contains a fascinating insight with respect to the significance of social perceptions in the shaping of a specific gendered image. Furthermore, the persistent sexualization of the *maquiladora* worker in turn makes her an “obvious” candidate to become a victim of femicide in the border imaginaries, owing to the warped but seemingly widespread view that the murder of a “whore” is justifiable.

In reality though, studies have shown that the percentage of murdered women in Chihuahua who actually worked at a *maquiladora* is quite small.¹⁸ However, the manner in which this link continues to turn up in popular and textual representations (including *Desert Blood*) —as does the inaccurate connection between the murders and

¹⁷ While all socio-cultural conceptions of *juarense* women in one way or another hint at their supposed predominance in the composition of the *maquiladora* workforce, actual statistics paint a diametrically different picture. Susan Tiano, for instance, analyzes the information provided by the INEGI (Mexican National Census Bureau), which confirms that “by 1998, the proportions of men and women in border *maquiladoras* were almost equal” (85) and that afterwards the number of women employed in the industry has steadily (albeit slightly) declined.

¹⁸ It is known that 10.4% of 442 cases registered between 1993 and 2005, were factory workers, according to the report elaborated by Julia Monárrez Fragoso (“Las Diversas Representaciones” 360).

migration to the city— must still be underscored.¹⁹ It is my belief that both associations (to *maquiladora* workers and to migrants to Juárez) reinforce the image of feminine helplessness by means of their assumed socioeconomic disempowerment: a portrayal that keeps them as vulnerable *victims* within a borderland symbology. Again, part of this victimization can also be traced back to a misogynist conceptualization of the “proper place” of women in Mexican society, a view that excludes women who work and/or who migrate through their sexualized representations.

Paradoxically, the woman who works in the *maquiladora* industries could readily be construed as both destabilizing for the powers that be and easily exploited. As already noted, the first sense of her subversion would lie in the supposed assault that her labor entails to the patriarchal standard of feminine roles within the family. Besides, in the material exploitation of the female worker lies her only value for the capitalist, neo-liberal model. Because of this, the image of these employees as *disposable* is reinforced, more so as the cheap sub-employment in the US-Mexico border is progressively endangered by global competition.

Another seemingly “jeopardized” element of border imaginaries that works in connection with the feminicides is related to constructions of Mexican masculinity with respect to a particularly chauvinist brand of nationalism. In *Desert Blood*, the patriarchal universe where men are expected to support their families props up the following explanation regarding the murders: “The women are being sacrificed to redeem the men for their inability to provide for their families, their social emasculation, if you will, at the hands of the American corporations” (Gaspar de Alba 252). This rather overarching observation presupposes several preconceived ideas that support and bring together both

¹⁹ In Monárrez’s aforesaid report, 60 % of the victims of femicide were found to be natives to the State of Chihuahua, a figure that contradicts the popular perception of the victims as “lonely migrants from the South”. (Monárrez, “Las Diversas Representaciones” 358)

“morality-based” and globalization-related rationalizations on the Juárez feminicides.²⁰ Firstly, the expectation of traditional roles for men and women is subverted by the belief that women are “taking men’s jobs” at the *maquiladoras*. This then amounts to a case of nationalist wounded pride, as it somehow implies that by the intrusion of the U.S.-American industries into the socio-economical dynamics of the Mexican patriarchal system, the nation itself —represented by the men’s virility as providers— is being insulted, a crime that ostensibly demands women’s deaths.

Considering in that case that feminized blue-collar labor could be represented as lethally insulting to national hubris, the idea of Juárez as *la mejor frontera de México* is clearly shown to be a desert mirage. In spite of this, a patent association between the murders of *juareense* women and the Mexican *state* is not emphatically favored in *Desert Blood*. This might be initially explained by the textual stress of the novel on the connection between the feminicides and the *maquiladoras* within the context of globalization, viewing the factories as somehow detached from the Mexican nation.

Another significant textual absence in the focus of *Desert Blood* pertains to the depiction of the women of Juárez not related to the *maquiladoras*. Now, when they do appear, these female characters are basically meant to stand in for the *juareense* activists that protest against the feminicide, for the reporters who cover the story of the murders (Gaspar de Alba 44), and for other middle and upper-class Mexican women and *muchachas*. It is quite noteworthy that in Gaspar de Alba’s novel, the portrayal of these women is fairly secondary to its overall spotlight on the feminicides, a factor which helps to concentrate textual

²⁰ This view from the novel would then seem to support an assertion such as “feminicide is the ‘blood price’ the nation pays for globalization” (Fregoso, “Voices without Echo” 142) but it would add the further complication of an assault to the patriarchal system via Mexican masculinities.

attention on the figure of the poor *juareense* woman —even if this turns out to be a conflictive point.

This may well be the most contradictory aspect of *Desert Blood*: its contribution to the subalternization of *juareense* women by keeping them *stereotyped* as victims of femicide, thus adding to the instances of problematic cultural representations overcoming reality —such as the inaccurate prevalence of *maquiladora* workers among the murdered. Consequently, ideas in the vein of “La frontera es el espacio geográfico de la subalternidad” [“The border is the geographical space of subalternity”] (Monárrez Fragoso y Tabuenca Córdoba 10), while arguably factual, do not leave any leeway for representational agency of *juareense* women in texts like *Desert Blood*.

In the novel, then, the *sine qua non* condition of victimhood is vulnerability and it is mainly based in a lack of voice, a seemingly inescapable silencing tied together to the depiction of the women of Juárez as worthless through their sexualized image. Furthermore, in Gaspar de Alba’s book, the portrayal of a Mexican maternity doomed to failure unintentionally serves to replicate a condition of inferiority and even a certain degree of patronizing of these women, especially when compared to the final textual success of the U.S.-American mothers in “rescuing” an almost destitute Mexican child. Finally, it is essential to keep in mind that this portrait of *juareense* women as victims inadvertently strengthens particular hegemonic positions which marginalize border women in general: namely, the strict patriarchal controls of feminine societal roles and the globalized socioeconomic structures of exploitation.

However, Gaspar de Alba’s novel does manage to insert itself into a unique position with respect to other voices that have denounced the Juárez femicides. As a U.S.-American cultural product, it is able to provide a fairly detached point of view that “allows” it to question different borderlands players as responsible parties for the killings of women than the majority of the local texts who have delved into this matter. Thus, the distinctive perspective of *Desert Blood* examines the situation in Juárez far beyond the regional

and local levels, implying, for instance, that the United States and its border policies play a bigger role in the impunity of the feminicides than is commonly believed. Furthermore, the distinctive viewpoint of the novel, while centering its attention on the victims of feminicide, significantly differs from most Mexican versions in that its depiction of *juarenses* women is not trapped by the representational paradox of *having* to emphasize their innocence. This is because *Desert Blood*, while advocating for the murdered women, does not have to actually confront the sexualized and therefore, devalued, portrayals of the victims that are circulated in Juárez. Hence, the novel can provide a very dissimilar standpoint from the one put forward by activist-inspired representations.

Reimagining the public woman as a matter of life or death: *Mujeres de Juárez*

When attempting to plot the representations of women in Juárez, it is extremely difficult not to be overcome by the sense of despair created by the upsurge of violence that seems to have emanated from this border city to the rest of Mexico. What started as a virtual state of emergency for the women of Juárez appears to have extended to all major urban centers in the country: a similar vision of horror, of silence, of death, of impunity. A cutting-edge town, indeed.

The case of Juárez sadly evinces the power of gendered violence in a massive scale. The numerous cultural texts that have surfaced from the *juarenses* feminicides clearly show that the killings have almost fulfilled their unannounced but subtly insidious purpose of terror: disallowing any female representation beyond patriarchal stock images such as the commonplace virgin/whore binaries. This plainly explains why the image of border women enjoying economic power and sexual independence is so dangerous, as they are daring to step outside of their stereotype as victims. In other words, there is still quite a stretch to achieve diversification in the representation of

juarense women beyond the victimhood generated by the feminicides. The real tragedy of Juárez is that there appears to be little genuine societal will to imagine spaces for "Other" women in a scenario devoid of fear and death.

Nevertheless, the question of why this phenomenon developed precisely in Juárez continues to be a haunting one. Clara Rojas suggests that this border city has suffered from "historical silences", which would mean that in the *juarense* cultural representation of feminine submissiveness, there is no other way to picture anything else beyond these silences ("Reinventando" 86). My own reading propounds that the characterization of women of Juárez as victims is a significant factor in their becoming casualties of femicide as their portrayal then follows a vicious circle of denigration of women. The advent of globalization into this equation appears to add to the cultural representation of the victim by figuratively slotting all *juarense* women into the defamed stereotypes of *maquila* workers: either subservient conformists or worthless libertines. These conceptualizations then blend into the desert imaginary, a no-man's land, an eminently masculine frontier, eminently misogynist, eminently unpunished.

Considering both the alarming increase in violent crimes in Mexico and the intolerable duration of the phenomenon of femicide in Juárez, it becomes more crucial than ever to theorize about possible links between these two occurrences. A first clue may reside in the question of why the representation of women-as-victims continues to be so prevalent, which I understand as an integral factor in the propagation of a climate of fear in Mexico. From my perspective, the powerful entities identified in *Desert Blood* are poised to benefit from the continuance of this situation, as they are clearly banking on paralyzing apprehension to persist as a fundamental element of the dominant discourse in Mexico. And yet, it is regrettable to note how this state of shock has only come about after the dramatic increase in the numbers of murdered *men*, almost as if they were the only valuable or

real citizens of the nation. The end of feminicide may only be at hand when instead of chanting "Todos somos Marcos", the Mexican people finally exclaim "Todas somos Juárez".²¹

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Delito femenino y transgresiones de género y clase social en el cine uruguayo

Cristina Miguez¹

Resumen

En este trabajo exploro la representación de la prostitución, el tráfico y la trata de personas como transgresiones de género y clase social en el cine uruguayo reciente. En *La puta vida* (2001), la directora Beatriz Flores Silva expone las contradicciones de roles femeninos en estructuras jerárquicas tradicionales como la familia, el Estado y el mercado, así como de la figura cinematográfica *femme fatale*. Por otro lado, la cultura visual latinoamericana contemporánea hace visible las potencialidades de los roles femeninos de los espacios domésticos, como analizara Jean Franco en la literatura mexicana. Me refiero a la madre y la hermana –roles de pasividad o servidumbre en la familia, el convento o el prostíbulo. La pasividad de las madres y hermanas se transforma en prácticas de oposición y resistencia, cuando los personajes femeninos establecen relaciones de poder horizontal. Acerca de las causas y la naturaleza del crimen, la cultura coincide con las teorías sociales de Ted R. Gurr, Howard Zehr, Durkheim y Merton que conciben al crimen como un acto racional producido por condiciones de pobreza relativa y expectativas frustradas.

Dentro del cine uruguayo reciente, me interesa explorar las potencialidades y limitaciones del *crimen* femenino como transgresión de género y clase social en la película dirigida por Beatriz Flores Silva, *En la puta vida* (2001), sobre la prostitución y el tráfico y la trata de personas hacia Europa.

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Entre las potencialidades, estos crímenes representan una crítica de la sociedad, sus instituciones y sus normas, lo que transforma al delito en un acto político, por parte del criminal, como dijera Howard Zehr. A su vez, por parte de la sociedad, el crimen es altamente político por dos razones: primero porque se incorpora en estos filmes como el resultado de decisiones políticas y segundo porque la decisión de qué actos son criminales también es un acto político. Así los personajes compiten por definir qué es crimen o quién es criminal, es decir, modifican el margen entre lo que es legal y lo que es ilegal. Por ejemplo, se borran los límites entre criminales, víctimas y detectives o se invierten estas figuras. Estas transformaciones involucran conceptos de carácter político, ético y estético como heroísmo, autoridad, inocencia y culpa. De este modo, vemos cómo la categoría del crimen es una frontera móvil que da cuenta de una sociedad y su cultura –como analizara Josefina Ludmer para la literatura; especialmente en una sociedad caracterizada por cambios políticos, económicos y sociales tales como el fin de la dictadura uruguaya en 1985, el retorno a la vida democrática con cierto grado de tutelaje militar, la continuidad de políticas económicas neoliberales dentro del contexto de la globalización y la reducción de las áreas de influencia del Estado. Respecto a la relación entre crimen y cambios políticos y económicos, analizaré diversas teorías de las ciencias sociales para llevar estas conexiones hasta el campo de la cultura y así intentar otro acercamiento a estos fenómenos representados en el cine uruguayo reciente. Por ejemplo, Ted R. Gurr en *Why Men Rebel* (1971) desarrolla la teoría de pobreza relativa como una explicación socio-psicológica de violencia colectiva. Gurr se basa en la teoría de Robert K. Merton, quien atribuye la delincuencia no a la pobreza, sino a la discrepancia entre los objetivos que una sociedad establece para sus miembros y los medios legales para obtenerlos. Gurr establece que esta brecha existe hasta en los mejores tiempos, pero existen momentos de crisis cuando esta discrepancia entre expectativas y logros se hace intolerable para ciertos sectores de la población.

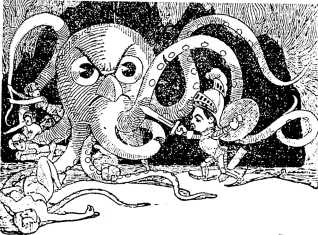
Entre los factores del aumento de esta brecha se encuentra un cambio de gobierno o un desarrollo industrial rápido, los cuales producen un aumento de las expectativas mayor al crecimiento económico o una recesión económica cuando el nivel de expectativas de la población se mantiene en los niveles previos. En cualquiera de estos casos, se produce frustración que degenera en agresión, lo que podría explicar tanto la violencia interpersonal como la colectiva. En otras palabras, me interesa analizar el *crimen* como un termómetro de estos cambios en la sociedad uruguaya contemporánea.

En términos cinematográficos, estas mujeres criminales del cine uruguayo reciente contradicen la categoría de la mujer fatal. La *femme fatale* es una subjetividad femenina que amenaza el orden social establecido, especialmente la familia patriarcal tradicional, por su carácter seductor o desviado de la norma en una forma monstruosa. Por el contrario, estos personajes femeninos no sólo no amenazan las relaciones de género tradicionales ni atentan contra la familia patriarcal, sino que en cierta manera intentan seguir las normas establecidas para una mujer en una sociedad tradicional. De allí que sus historias de transgresión parodian las contradicciones de la *femme fatale*, del rol femenino en la familia patriarcal y la crisis y/o el fin del Estado paternalista.

Por otra parte, como explica Laura Mulvey, las películas femeninas tienden a exponer las contradicciones de la sociedad patriarcal. Al analizar la prostitución se registra como la mujer es subyugada por reproducir los modelos de feminidad tradicionales y por su deseo de ascenso social. No obstante, la relación de poder del proxeneta que subyuga a la prostituta se invierte temporalmente cuando la prostituta pide ayuda al Estado europeo, con lo cual se problematiza la perspectiva del espectador sobre estas relaciones de poder prostituta-proxeneta. De esta manera, la inversión de relaciones de poder en la película rompe con las narrativas melodramáticas que simplifican la relación prostituta-proxeneta como una relación víctima-criminal, donde la prostituta es un ángel y el proxeneta es un agente

diabólico y manipulador que la lleva hacia el camino del mal. El proxeneta es apenas una pieza de otra estructura de poder vertical formada por los otros proxenetes, su jefe, los oficiales que falsifican los pasaportes e, incluso, los clientes de la prostitución. La prostitución es una red que abarca a toda la sociedad.

En la puta vida se basa en hechos reales investigados por la periodista María Urruzola y publicados en *El huevo de la serpiente. Tráfico de mujeres Montevideo-Milán: el nacimiento de una mafia* (1992). El tráfico y trata de personas entre América y Europa no es un fenómeno nuevo. La expresión “trata de blancas” proviene del inglés, *white slavery*, frase creada por los abolicionistas ingleses en el siglo XIX, para equiparar el comercio de mujeres con el de los esclavos africanos. La historiadora Ivette Trochón reseñó esta práctica en *Las mercenarias del amor: Prostitución y modernidad en el Uruguay (1880-1932)* publicado en 2003 y *Las rutas de Eros: La trata de blancas en el Atlántico Sur. Argentina, Brasil y Uruguay (1880-1932)* del año 2006. Lo singular es que la ruta se ha invertido. Desde fines del siglo XIX hasta mediados del siglo



Una representación de una escena del tráfico de esclavos, en este caso negro, que atropala con una tratante o esclavista europeo. En esta caricatura el tráfico de esclavos de África a América Latina, Brasil y Uruguay, así como el tráfico de esclavos al comercio europeo, presenta al tráfico, entonces, como el resultado de la...

XX, mujeres europeas eran reclutadas y transportadas a América para ejercer la prostitución. Sin embargo, con la recuperación económica de Europa occidental, el tráfico parte ahora desde América Latina hacia otros continentes, entre ellos, Europa, la previa fuente de trabajadoras del sexo².

En el pasado, Trochón registra una tendencia a demonizar a los traficantes y victimizar a las prostitutas. Estos diabólicos personajes reclutarían a inocentes y angelicales mujeres para pervertirlas y esclavizarlas sin su consentimiento. Trochón utiliza la leyenda del minotauro y el laberinto de Dédalo para representar cómo los discursos

² Todavía sigue como fuente en los países de Europa Oriental.

de la época representaban estas redes de prostitución. En otras palabras, se construía una narrativa melodramática fuertemente cargada de estereotipos. Un discurso moralizante circunscribía el “mal” a determinados círculos y se entronizaba como el “bien” para combatir el flagelo de la prostitución. En la caricatura, el minotauro se representa como un pulpo que con sus tentáculos atrapa muchachas inocentes, mientras que el ministro de Instrucción Pública, Baltasar Brum, “el bien”, es un “caballero manchego” quien “enfrenta al ominoso monstruo, provisto de yelmo, armadura, escudo y la espada de la ley”, reza el diario *La Razón* en 1913. Sin embargo, Trochón, Urruzola y Flores Silva revelan una situación más compleja, donde el Minotauro no es un individuo sino las condiciones sociales y económicas, las relaciones de género y las aspiraciones de estatus social de los involucrados. Por ello, el tráfico de mujeres no sería sólo una red que se puede extirpar como un cáncer, sino que la red interactúa con la sociedad donde se desarrolla. Como analiza Robert K. Merton (1938) al respecto del incremento del crimen en “Social Structure and Anomie”:

delinquency result from a discrepancy between the goals which a society sets for its members and the means which it legitimizes for attaining them. Any society provides certain culturally defined goals for its members – in modern Western cultures these include material wealth and high social status –as well as norms defining which means are considered acceptable for the attainment of these goals. Thrift and social mobility, for instance, are considered legitimate means of attaining wealth; theft and violence are not. Anomie and, therefore, delinquency ... may occur when society's goals have been internalized but its norms governing means have not –as would be the case if great stress were placed upon goals relative to means or, presumably, if goals were successfully emphasized by a society while legitimate, socially structured means for attaining these goals with

reasonable effort were lacking. Goals and means would be out of step if a society succeeded –as the West has done during the past century or so– in selling certain common material and egalitarian values to the population at large while its social structure was too rigid and economic opportunities too few or unequally distributed to allow access to these values and symbols by all members of society. In such a situation, some members of society either would reject society's norms or would become frustrated and turn to crime as a means of reaching the goals which they share with society at large. (cita en Zehr 23)

En la transición de la dictadura a la democracia, las promesas de igualdad de oportunidades o progreso social circulan entre todos los miembros de la sociedad. Sin embargo, la inmovilidad social continúa dejando en la precariedad a amplios sectores de la población. En la cinta se representan las limitaciones de quien pretenda ir más allá de relaciones de género tradicionales o quien intente traspasar su clase social. A causa de esto, la película marca un contraste entre las condiciones de explotación de la prostitución en Montevideo dentro de un régimen capitalista y la trata de mujeres dentro de un sistema de esclavitud. La regresión a la esclavitud no es una monstruosidad casual, sino el producto de las condiciones capitalistas previas que funcionan como trampolín del sistema de opresión que le sucede. Las condiciones previas junto a las expectativas no satisfechas generan las condiciones posteriores, tanto para las prostitutas como para los proxenetes. Comencemos con el escenario previo, la prostitución en Uruguay.

Ser prostituta en Montevideo parece casi un juego *En la puta vida*. Elisa, la protagonista, llega a la prostitución tras dejar a su madre y a su jefe/novio, quien no cumpliera su promesa de dejar a su mujer y ayudarla a empezar la peluquería con su amiga Lulú. Sin familia, sin casa, sin trabajo y sin el dinero suficiente para alquilar un local, Lulú y Elisa entran en el "oficio". Se instalan en cuartos

contiguos en un edificio de la ciudad vieja, llamado *El rey de París*, regentado por doña Jacqueline. La película crea una atmósfera supuestamente controlada por las chicas y doña Jacqueline. Ellas controlan a los clientes, quienes deben pagar la bebida y el sexo, de acuerdo a las reglas explicadas por la *madame*:

Cabezas muy erguidas, con mucha simpatía, pechos salientes, barrigas para adentro, culos para afuera y cuando tienes tu bebidita levantas el meñique con mucho disimulo.

Elisa entra en el mundo de la prostitución como quien comienza una vida nueva de independencia y aventura. Lulú le muestra su cuarto y Elisa se pasea orgullosa y triunfante, deja su cartera, mira alrededor, abre la ventana, respira hondo como quien ha conquistado un nuevo espacio. La ventana se abre a un patio interior, desde otra pieza un hombre –estilo Bogart– la saluda, Plácido. El mundo masculino interviene a través de los policías y de este proxeneta, Plácido, quien no parece tener un rol protagónico en el local, un espacio interior. Sin embargo, cuando cambia el comisario, todas terminan presas, incluida la dueña. Entonces, Plácido llega a la estación de policía y simplemente dice: “Me la llevo”, refiriéndose a Elisa. Mientras tanto, se busca un nuevo acuerdo con la “ley”, o mejor dicho, con el nuevo comisario. De este modo, el mundo de la prostitución en Uruguay reproduce la estructura de la familia patriarcal, las mujeres controlan el espacio doméstico y los hombres el espacio público de la comisaría. Al respecto la periodista María Esther Gilio en *Protagonistas y sobrevivientes* (1968) dedica un capítulo a la prostitución en Montevideo en los años 70. Entonces, los locales también tenían una “dueña” como doña Jacqueline, aunque según un “cafishio”: “la dueña es la que está al frente, pero atrás siempre hay un hombre. Con ese hombre tiene que tratar otro hombre. Alguien serio. Que se haga responsable. Es un trato entre hombres” (77). En suma, Gilio, Urruzola y Flores Silva coinciden en registrar estructuras de poder vertical en el mundo de la prostitución, las cuales tienden a reproducir los roles de

género de la familia patriarcal cuando las mujeres se muestran autosuficientes en un ámbito privado como el prostíbulo –con relaciones de tipo horizontal entre ellas, excepto por la *madame*– y los hombres –proxenetas y policías– dominan espacios públicos como la comisaría. Esta estructura se modifica al entrar en la red de tráfico y trata de mujeres en Europa.

El proxeneta seduce a Elisa y Lulú con una vida mejor en Europa. Sin embargo, las reglas en el Primer Mundo son mucho más estrictas y la representación se acerca al melodrama mencionado previamente y reproducido en una caricatura de 1915,

donde un pulpo sujeta a las mujeres con sus tentáculos y vacía su cartera. En el filme, Lulú y Elisa son conducidas por un estrecho callejón de Barcelona, donde cada prostituta se define por el dinero que produce: desde Adriana con \$ 700 por noche hasta la reina Tita con 1700. Como en una



"La trata de blancas en Montevideo"
Los Sucesos, Año I, N.º 24, s.p., Montevideo, 4-6-1915.

fábrica se les exige productividad y eficiencia: son siete minutos en la habitación del hotel y se regresan a la parada; no pueden hablar con nadie y la plata se la dan a su proxeneta. A partir de aquí la historia hace evidente el contraste entre dos formas de prostitución, por un lado, la prostitución en Uruguay controlada fundamentalmente por mujeres y, por otro, la red de prostitución en Europa de un control absoluto efectuado por hombres. Del espacio interior de control femenino de Montevideo se pasa a una doble exterioridad: primero, se hallan fuera del espacio doméstico en la calle y segundo, fuera de la nación. Tanto en la casa como en la nación una subjetividad masculina tradicional dominaría a la mujer pero también le daría cierta protección que la mujer pierde al abandonarla. En las calles

de Europa, la subjetividad masculina del esposo/padre de la casa o del Estado uruguayo ya no la domina ni tampoco la ampara.

¿Cómo funciona el control de los proxenetas sobre las prostitutas? Se pueden registrar al menos dos niveles en esta relación. En un primer nivel, las mujeres pretenden mantener una relación de pareja tradicional con su "fiolo". Quieren casarse, salir a pasear. Los proxenetas participan de esta conexión emocional hasta que el área estrictamente laboral pelagra. Entonces, en un segundo nivel actúan como jefe que destruye la fantasía de amor entre "la puta y el fiolo" y demandan producción. Al desaparecer el vínculo romántico, se pone en primer plano, la asimetría de la relación: la superioridad del hombre que se traduce en explotación de la mujer; el hombre como parásito de la mujer, pues depende completamente de que ella trabaje para él.

Elisa: "Vos sos una mujer para casarse"

En el primer segmento que ilustra la relación proxeneta-prostituta, Lulú y Elisa se escapan de la parada y representan una típica conversación femenina sobre novios. Mientras se pintan y peinan una a la otra en el baño, Elisa le cuenta a Lulú su salida con Plácido. Para él, es un viaje de trabajo, va a ver a don Eusebio, su jefe, y le lleva un maletín con su pago. En cambio, Elisa traduce el viaje a términos románticos: crucero con alfombras, caminata por la playa, cena con mariscos y pedido de casamiento. Sin embargo, en la escena cliché de los enamorados que caminan, corren, se persiguen y se abrazan en la playa, Plácido camina con un arma en la cintura. Elisa intenta convencer a Lulú y a sí misma de que su fantasía amorosa con Plácido es real. Para ello, interpreta la frase de Plácido: "Vos sos una mujer para casarse" como una propuesta de casamiento. La fantasía se interrumpe con la entrada de Plácido, ya no como prometido, sino como proxeneta de la red: "Nosotros nos estamos rompiendo el alma para

cuidarles la esquina y ustedes acá hablando pelotudeces. Afuera, afuera, vamos”, les dice.

La fantasía romántica no es exclusiva de Elisa. Otra prostituta se niega a trabajar y amenaza con suicidarse porque su hombre “hace dos noches que no viene a dormir” y le pega. Lulú diagnostica que la chica “está pasando por una crisis de pareja”. Cuando Elisa y Lulú hablan con ella, las tres comparten el sueño de tener una peluquería en un barrio. En otras palabras, el cuerpo de las prostitutas se vuelve un cuerpo útil sólo si es productivo y subyugado. Esto depende de representar correctamente las formas de conocimiento de su posición en las relaciones de poder. Su cuerpo simboliza una sexualidad hipócrita en las relaciones heterosexuales, basada en la dominación y la violencia, como indica el psicoterapeuta Peter Szil. Pero además el cuerpo como conocimiento que muestra las relaciones de poder existentes exhibe una tecnología de género que la prostituta aplica a sí misma como su propia cárcel. Primero, ellas son seducidas por su fantasía romántica de una pareja tradicional. La segunda tecnología es su sueño de ascenso social y prestigio. La fantasía patriarcal y burguesa *En la puta vida* es tan contradictoria como la situación misma de la prostitución en Uruguay. Estas mujeres provienen de todas las clases sociales, tienen estudios de secundaria y algunas han asistido a la universidad. Pero en Uruguay, el estudio no garantiza la realización de sus sueños. Con suerte, brinda un trabajo rutinario en una fábrica o una oficina. Contrariamente a la creencia popular de que la prostitución es la profesión más indigna, para estas mujeres la prostitución es una forma de dignidad y un modo de no renunciar a sus sueños, dice Flores Silva en una entrevista³. Piensan que “en el oficio” por dos o tres años podrán reunir el dinero para realizar sus proyectos. Como la figura del *gánster*, Elisa sueña con integrarse al sistema capitalista. En cambio, su práctica está más ligada con la búsqueda de sobrevivir como sucede con el *bandido*, otro icono del cine.

³ Ver la entrevista de Karina Peer en “Uruguayan Director Beatriz Flores Silva and her *Tricky Life*”. latinstylemag.com. 15 de marzo de 2005.

Por ello, la prostituta sería una figura mixta porque desea insertarse en el régimen capitalista y sus valores, como el *gánster*, aunque sólo logra sobrevivir y despierta la admiración de ciertos sectores sociales que se identifican con la criminal, como sucede con el *bandido*.

Elisa: "¿Cuán nos casamos?"

Otra escena romántica cliché se da cuando Elisa afeita a Plácido con una navaja. La conversación se inicia con los reclamos de una pareja tradicional: "¿Cuándo nos casamos?"; "Hace cuatro meses que no me llevás a ningún lado"; "No me voy hasta que me digas qué somos nosotros dos". Plácido rasga violentamente el velo romántico: "Acá no vinimos de joda. Vinimos a laburar". Entonces, Elisa parece reaccionar cuando le dice: "No te creo más nada a vos. Y yo de ahora en más quiero saber cuánta plata tenemos Lulú y yo". Le muestra la libreta donde ambas anotan sus ganancias. No obstante, continúa usando un lenguaje de pareja que suena completamente ridículo: "Tengamos cuentas separadas". Sin embargo, Plácido continúa la conversación desde el rol de jefe: los hombres del crucero no serán invitados a la boda como se preguntaba Elisa, "los hombres" son "don Eusebio", "el loco de Interpol", el falsificador de pasaportes para prostitutas y proxenetas. Es decir, toda una red masculina que representa el mercado de clientes de la prostitución, proxenetas y funcionarios de la ley, la policía y el Estado. Pero ese mundo masculino, como le contesta Elisa, "lo bancamos con mi plata". Elisa pide un balance y lo recibe. El balance de golpes y patadas tiene como objetivo que no pida más balances en el futuro. Como indica Urruzola en *El huevo de la serpiente*, esto es lo que se llama "educar" a las mujeres.

Entonces, la red masculina de poder integra el mundo de la ley y la policía, así como el mundo criminal, sin perder por ello su cariz legal. Para ellos, no existe la frontera del crimen. Cambia la definición de crimen para ellos.

Después de la golpiza, Lulú es asesinada y Elisa va a policía. La relación de poder prostituta-proxenetista se invierte y, con ello, se evidencia la precariedad de la posición de los proxenetistas. Su poder sobre los cuerpos y almas de las prostitutas se ejerce más que se posee. Plácido, es tan solo una parte de la red de conocimiento y poder que permite que el tráfico y trata de mujeres funcione. El poder –como explica Foucault– no sólo se ejerce sobre los cuerpos subyugados de las prostitutas, sino sobre los que supervisan, corrigen, entrenan o “educan”, los proxenetistas. Además, el poder de los proxenetistas sobre las prostitutas no es un privilegio adquirido, sino el efecto de su posición estratégica. El callejón es un territorio donde se da una lucha constante entre los proxenetistas mismos, entre los proxenetistas uruguayos y los travestís brasileños, entre los proxenetistas y las prostitutas, entre las prostitutas y los clientes. Como explica Foucault:

the power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to disposition, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a *perpetual battle* rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory. In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its *strategic positions*/an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. (26-27, cursiva mía)

El fiolo es sólo una pieza en la red de poder que esclaviza a las prostitutas en Europa. Si él o ella no cumplen las reglas, ambos desaparecen. En efecto, Plácido ha cometido un error, le encargó a Elisa que escondiera su arma. Elisa se vuelve custodia del falo que mató a un travestí brasileño. Al ser asesinada su amiga, Elisa va por

segunda vez a la policía, esta vez no para liberar a su hombre, Plácido, sino para “castrarlo”, cuando entrega su arma a la policía. Las autoridades en Europa logran atrapar y condenar algunas piezas de la red, pero la organización continúa intacta como indica Urruzola en su libro y Flores Silva al final de la película:

A pesar de los juicios realizados en Uruguay y en Europa, la red no ha podido ser desmantelada.

Los hombres encarcelados fueron sustituidos por otros. Las mismas mujeres siguen hoy paradas en las mismas esquinas.

Si alguna represalia ha caído sobre Elisa, nadie se ha preocupado de enterarse. Su paradero actual, y el de los niños, es en realidad desconocido.

La inversión de poder en la relación proxeneta-prostituta es tan solo la revocación temporal de un “micro-poder”. No significa un nuevo funcionamiento o una destrucción de la red de prostitución, simplemente porque la naturaleza de estas relaciones representa tecnologías de poder en toda la sociedad. Como en cualquier red de tráfico ilegal –sea de mujeres, drogas, pornografía– si no se atacan las raíces del problema, el tráfico continúa. Como indica Szil, la prostitución manifiesta un concepto masculino de sexo basado en la dominación y la violencia. La persistencia de rasgos de una sociedad patriarcal es la causa de la prostitución y la pornografía. Según Naciones Unidas, cuatro millones de personas son víctimas del tráfico de personas, de las cuales entre 700.000 y 2 millones provendrían de América Latina y el Caribe. Este aspecto de la prostitución en Europa es exhibido en la película como una contradicción radicada en el viejo continente.

Melodrama: sustitución del fiolo por el policía

La fantasía romántica entre la prostituta y el proxeneta es sustituida por el romance con el policía europeo, Marcelo. Elisa vuelve a Uruguay acompañada de este oficial español. Al aterrizar en el aeropuerto uruguayo, el oficial local de

Interpol llega con seis policías para detenerla por “posesión de documento falso”, es decir, los pasaportes que él mismo oficial ha falsificado. El policía español aduce hallarse en “misión oficial” y se la lleva en un vehículo del Cónsul español.

Marcelo y Elisa entran al orfanato donde se reproduce otra escena cliché: los dos hijos corren al encuentro de la madre, se abrazan, juegan. Posteriormente y al igual que con Plácido, Elisa lleva a Marcelo al barrio de clase, Pocitos, para mostrarle el local donde quiere instalar su peluquería, al borde de la playa. Los niños y la nueva pareja juegan en la arena.

Los mitos de la burguesía asociados con el matrimonio, la familia y las prácticas de consumo se renuevan y estabilizan con la nueva pareja. Como indica Mulvey, el espectador de melodramas o películas femeninas se identifica con la subjetividad del personaje femenino y sus emociones. Por ello, estos géneros muestran cómo las fantasías misóginas de la ideología patriarcal se contradicen con la ideología de la familia. Elisa como madre de dos niños ha intentado sustituir al padre ausente en tres ocasiones. Primero, con García, su jefe casado, quien fracasa como padre sustituto y como proveedor del sueño burgués de la peluquería, el negocio propio. García, según la ideología patriarcal puede ser un adúltero, pero su fantasía misógina de bigamia entra en conflicto con los deseos de la protagonista y la estructura familiar, pues García no abandona a su esposa ni aporta capital para la peluquería. En segundo lugar, Plácido inicialmente lleva a los niños y a Elisa en su auto, le enseña a manejar a los niños y alienta a Elisa en su proyecto del negocio propio. Cuando se van a Barcelona, el padre sustituto paga por la manutención de los hijos, quienes quedan a cargo de Teresa, una niñera. Sin embargo, el segundo patriarca al igual que el primero, García, atenta contra la familia, la madre y los hijos. No envía más dinero para los niños por lo que son enviados a un orfanato, tampoco cumple con el sueño de la peluquería. La familia es relegada porque Plácido privilegia los compromisos del mundo masculino: su

jefe, Interpol, los otros proxenetas. Desde la perspectiva femenina, Lulú es sacrificada por el universo falocéntrico. La narrativa cinematográfica la representa como una amenaza para la obediencia y productividad de la red porque dejan la parada para festejar su cumpleaños. En tercer lugar, Marcelo –como representante de la ley y del Estado– muestra la reconciliación de los sexos del melodrama. En la relación con Marcelo, la diferencia entre los sexos no se representa como peligrosa o explosiva (como en el caso de los proxenetas), sino que se suaviza. Para ello, este personaje masculino exhibe aspectos más femeninos, se aleja de la esfera masculina del trabajo y la acción (la policía) y se acerca a la esfera privada y familiar de Elisa, su sueño de la peluquería y sus hijos.

Volviendo a las causas y la naturaleza misma del crimen, según Merton, es el resultado de una discrepancia entre los objetivos que una sociedad establece para sus miembros y los medios legales para obtenerlos. Basándose en Merton, Gurr y James C. Davies explican la violencia colectiva a través de las teorías de pobreza relativa y frustración-agresión. La teoría de la pobreza relativa es importante para entender las décadas de los ochenta y noventa en Uruguay. Por ejemplo, en 1985 con el retorno de la democracia los sindicatos vuelven a funcionar legalmente y constatan que los trabajadores durante la dictadura han perdido 50% de su poder adquisitivo; por otro lado, el gobierno democrático de Julio Ma. Sanguinetti promete mejoras económicas, pero la relación entre sindicatos, patronales y gobierno es crítica: en cuatro meses se registran 200 huelgas⁴. Gurr hace referencia a períodos de cambios de gobierno –dictadura a democracia en Uruguay– o crecimiento industrial rápido –continuación

⁴ Ver “Los sindicatos uruguayos desconvocan la huelga general. La CNT concede un respiro al Gobierno de Julio María Sanguinetti” en *El País* de Montevideo. 6 de junio de 1985.

(http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/SANGUINETTI/_JULIO_MARIA/_POLITICO_DE_URUGUAY/BOLIVIA/CONFEDERACION_NACIONAL_DEL_T_RABAJO/sindicatos/uruguayos/desconvocan/huelga/general/elpepiint/19850706elpepiint_28/Tes/)

de las políticas económicas neoliberales con reducción del Estado paternalista–, como causas que disparan el índice de pobreza relativa. En estas condiciones de cambios políticos y económicos, Gurr y Davies dicen que la brecha entre lo que los individuos esperan y lo que realmente obtienen aumenta en un grado tal que resulta en frustración. La pobreza relativa es evidente en la película tanto para las prostitutas como para los proxenetas, porque no se trata de pobreza necesariamente, sino de expectativas frustradas de estatus social. A ello se agrega la teoría de Gurr sobre frustración-agresión, la cual podría explicar tanto la violencia colectiva como la interpersonal. Al respecto de la teoría de frustración-agresión de Gurr, Lewis Coser en *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1964) agrega que la agresión puede ser dirigida directamente contra el objeto fuente de hostilidad, pero también puede ser dirigida contra objetos sustitutos, los cuales no tienen ninguna relación con la causa de la frustración u hostilidad. De allí la utilidad del crimen en la sociedad como válvula de escape de hostilidades, lo cual reduce el nivel de frustración y satisface necesidades básicas como cuando Elisa se prostituye en Montevideo para independizarse de su madre y García, sin abandonar a sus dos hijos ni renunciar a su sueño de la peluquería. Según Zehr, estos delitos son una válvula de escape de las expectativas frustradas de los individuos porque reducen la frustración antes de que se acumule y se dirija contra el Estado y los cimientos de la sociedad. La prostitución satisface necesidades materiales básicas o de estatus social desafiando las normas sociales momentáneamente pero sin atentar contra el gobierno o el mercado, los cuales son responsables directos de su situación de falta de oportunidades y pobreza relativa.

Por otro lado, si consideramos la naturaleza del crimen, los medios masivos –mediante una estética del espectáculo– y algunas teorías sociales representan el crimen como un acto irracional o como anomalías monstruosas o erotizadas de la vida moderna/urbana. En contraposición, las teorías de Zehr, Gurr o Davies explican el *crimen* como una decisión racional –como quien elige un

nuevo trabajo o contrae matrimonio, dice Zehr (143)– para resolver una situación. Como explica Durkheim, el crimen es normal porque implica el mismo tipo de comportamiento y decisiones de los que no cometen crímenes (cit en Zehr 144). Del otro lado de la pantalla, el espectador se identifica con las potencialidades de las transgresiones de estas mujeres criminales, pero también con las limitaciones de sus fugas. La audiencia ha experimentado las dificultades de quien intenta romper con roles de género o intenta alcanzar el estatus social que la educación uruguaya gratuita o las promesas de la reciente democracia auguran. Sin embargo, los roles femeninos y masculinos tradicionales continúan reproduciéndose al mismo tiempo que las promesas de movilidad social se dan raramente. Los espectadores en las butacas del cine se identificarían con la puesta en escena porque representan la persistencia de relaciones de género tradicionales y la continuidad de la inmovilidad social en la posdictadura uruguaya.

Hasta aquí un esbozo de algunas conclusiones sobre el *crimen* como un acto normal resultado de condiciones de pobreza relativa, expectativas frustradas, todo lo cual lo transforma en un *acto político* de protesta contra las condiciones sociales. El crimen como acto político a su vez es un intento de *transgresión de clase social*, el cual no atenta contra dichas instituciones ni contra las bases de la sociedad en el caso de estas mujeres criminales del cine uruguayo reciente. Ahora resumiré algunas conclusiones acerca del crimen como *transgresión de género*. La película sigue la tendencia indicada por Mulvey de exponer cómo ciertas fantasías misóginas de la estructura patriarcal se oponen a la ideología de la familia, especialmente cuando pensamos en los personajes femeninos como madres. Elisa intenta preservar su función de madre, mientras que son las figuras masculinas tradicionales las que abandonan a la familia. Esta tendencia modifica y problematiza la tradición de la *femme fatale*, porque la mujer fatal se representa como una subjetividad femenina que amenaza a la familia. Por el contrario, las transgresiones de estas mujeres criminales no rompen con roles femeninos tradicionales

como la relación de subordinación en la pareja de las prostitutas y los proxenetas ni transgreden el rol de madre. Los filmes de Flores Silva coinciden con algunos estudios acerca del delito femenino en la literatura y el cine latinoamericanos como *transgresión de género*. Jean Franco en "Killing Priests, Nuns, Women, Children" (1985)⁵ indica cómo la crítica feminista subestimó las potencialidades de oposición de la mujer como madre en territorios sagrados como el espacio doméstico de la familia. El feminismo en su oposición al sistema patriarcal subestima el poder de las mujeres en espacios privados como el hogar, el convento o el prostíbulo porque sólo ve la función de servidumbre:

In Latin America, this sense of refuge and the sacredness that attaches to certain figures like the *mother*, the virgin, the *nun* [en su versión secular sería la *hermana*, como la fraternidad entre las prostitutas], and the priest acquire even greater significance, both because the Church and the home [y el prostíbulo] retained a *traditional topography and traditional practices* over a very long period, and also because during periods *when the state was relatively weak* these institutions were the only functioning social organizations. *They were states within the state, or even counter-states*, since there are certain parishes and certain families which have nourished traditions of resistance to the state and hold on to concepts of "moral right" (E.P.Thompson's term), which account for their opposition to "modernization" (i.e. integration into capitalism). This is not to say that the patriarchal and hierarchical family, whose priority was the reproduction of the social order, has not rooted itself in Latin American soil. But the *family* has been a *powerful rival to the state*, somehow more real, often the *source of a*

⁵ Ver Jean Franco "Killing Priests, Nuns, Women, Children" en *On Signs*. Sin embargo, la desaparición de estos espacios sagrados y su potencialidad se hizo obvia en el caso de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo en Argentina.

maternal power which is by no means to be despised, particularly when, as in contemporary Latin America, the disappearance of political spaces has turned the family (and the mother, in particular) into a major institution of resistance. (416, cursiva mía)

Una figura tradicional femenina, la *hermana*, el vínculo fraterno entre mujeres, es una práctica de cuidado y responsabilidad que nos remite al espacio de la familia, del convento o del prostíbulo. Éste es el lazo que une a las trabajadoras sexuales tanto en Montevideo como en Europa. Las prácticas asociadas a la *hermandad* sostienen las prácticas *transgresoras de género*, los delitos femeninos. Otra figura tradicional femenina es la *madre*. Aparentemente, como la hermana, la madre tendría un poder de resistencia y transgresión que ha sido subestimado por los estudios feministas. La función de madre le da el valor a Elisa para denunciar a la red de prostitución en Europa y volver a Uruguay a buscar a sus hijos, aunque sabe que la prisión es su destino casi seguro, sino la desaparición. Entonces, a través de estas mujeres criminales, coincidimos con Franco en decir que los roles femeninos del espacio doméstico cambian de significado: de pasividad o servidumbre se transforman en resistencia a estructuras diferentes de la familia (419).

Retomando la tesis inicial, el cine uruguayo reciente representa el *crimen femenino* como *transgresión* de *género* o *clase social* explorando, por un lado, sus *potencialidades* de resistencia, oposición y, por otro lado, sus *límites* cuando la ruptura tiene un valor simbólico que culmina en la invisibilidad de los personajes transgresores, sin que ello atente efectivamente contra las relaciones de género tradicionales, la lucha de clases, el Estado o el mercado.

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Una lectura transgénera de *El beso de la mujer araña*

Cole Rizki¹

Resumen

En este trabajo, propongo reexaminar a Molina, un personaje central de *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) de Manuel Puig, reformulando la tesis central de Geneviève Fabry en "Cuerpo, nombre y enunciación: acerca del efecto-personaje en *El beso de la mujer araña*" (2002). Desde esta rearticulación surge una lectura alternativa transgénera del personaje en la cual incorporo la teoría de la performatividad del género propuesta por Judith Butler en *Gender Trouble* (1990) junto con un análisis semiológico de los signos lingüísticos textuales de la novela de Puig. Así pretendo desestabilizar no sólo el género de Molina sino también la sexualidad de los personajes del texto, desafiando la interpretación tradicional del cuerpo crítico de esta obra a la vez que deconstruyo la fijeza limitante de estas normas binarias que pretenden gobernar las posibilidades de la auto-expresión.

Introducción

En *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) de Manuel Puig, los personajes Valentín Arregui Paz y Luis Alberto Molina se encuentran encarcelados en la misma celda, el primero por sus actividades guerrilleras y el otro por haber corrompido a un menor de edad. Para pasar el tiempo, Molina le cuenta a Valentín la trama de varias películas que recuerda. A través de la yuxtaposición de esta narración y el diálogo entre los dos, se desarrolla una relación íntima que desafía las expectativas del lector. Pretendo reexaminar *El beso de la*

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mujer araña siguiendo el punto de vista de Molina como una persona transgénera en vez de un hombre homosexual, a diferencia del cuerpo crítico tradicional sobre esta obra, por medio de una consideración de la teoría de la performatividad del género propuesta por Judith Butler en *Gender Trouble* (1990) y por medio de un replanteamiento de la tesis desarrollada por Geneviève Fabry en su artículo "Cuerpo, nombre y enunciación: acerca del efecto-personaje en *El beso de la mujer araña*" (2002).

Butler y la performatividad del género

En las últimas dos décadas, se ha visto una gran proliferación de textos teóricos concernientes al género, su presentación, la performatividad y la identidad. En concreto, una de las teóricas más influyentes que redefinió el campo es Judith Butler. En *Gender Trouble* (1990), uno de los textos fundadores de la teoría queer, Butler, a través de un argumento arraigado en su entrenamiento filosófico, une elementos de las teorías de Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva y Wittig para desestabilizar la institución hegemónica binaria del género.

El primer elemento clave de la teoría de género propuesta por Butler es su refutación del planteamiento esencialista de que el género existe *a priori* como "esencia" interna. Para lidiar con este argumento, Butler reformula una de las tesis centrales en el análisis de Jacques Derrida de "Before the Law" de Franz Kafka. En su lectura de Kafka, Derrida propone que no es sino la *anticipación* de una revelación autoritativa del significado la que crea el medio por el cual esta misma autoridad se encuentra atribuida e instalada. Para Derrida, la anticipación evoca o hace aparecer su objeto. Butler extiende el planteamiento de Derrida, proponiendo que de la misma forma, nuestra expectativa (o anticipación) de que el género, operando como una esencia interna produce el fenómeno que al mismo tiempo se anticipa. De este modo, el género conceptualizado como una esencia interna que existe *a*

priori, revelado por el sujeto, resulta un discurso erróneo. (Butler *Gender Trouble* xv)

El segundo elemento clave del argumento de Butler es la naturaleza performativa del género. Para Butler, la performatividad del género no consiste en un solo acto de realización sino en una repetición o un rito, actualizado por la estilización continua del cuerpo. Este produce el efecto o la apariencia de una "totalidad" tanto "natural" como "coherente", lo que lleva a la sociedad a creer en el mito del género como una esencia interna. De esta forma, si la interioridad del género no es un hecho y si el género consiste en la realización de una serie de actos presentados en la superficie del cuerpo, resulta que no hay géneros ni originales ni verdaderos ni falsos porque todos están fabricados, producidos por cada individuo en una temporalidad y un espacio/contexto cultural específicos. Como consecuencia, la existencia de una mujer verdadera o un hombre verdadero es una falacia, una ficción cultural. Así Butler expone el género como una construcción social y, habiéndolo desnaturalizado, abre la construcción de género a la posibilidad de una reformulación radical. (Butler *Gender Trouble* xv)

El (trans)género versus el sexo

Otro campo de estudio que ha brotado dentro de las últimas décadas con la reformulación de la teoría del género es el estudio académico de lo transgénero. Según Butler, el término se aplica a una persona que transgrede las normas heterosexuales sociales que intentan limitar o regular las posibles expresiones del género. Se aplica a una variedad amplia de personas que, con cirugía u hormonas o sin éstas, intentan vivir dentro de la sociedad fuera de las normas sociales del género. (Butler *Undoing Gender* 6)

Otra distinción importante que hace falta destacar es la diferencia básica entre el sexo y el género. En este momento, según los campos de la medicina y la psicología, se considera el sexo como algo anatómico y el género,

según la reformulación de Butler, como lo performativo. Es imprescindible destacar que ni la expresión del género necesariamente corresponde al sexo anatómico, ni la sexualidad está determinada por la anatomía de una persona. Obviamente, si es necesario, se intenta definir la sexualidad a través del género (no el sexo) de las personas involucradas en una relación sexual. En el caso de una persona transgénera, por ejemplo, equiparar la sexualidad con el sexo anatómico hace una violencia enorme al cuerpo de esta persona al negarle la legitimidad de la realización de su género. Así que, al hablar de la sexualidad de alguien, es necesario considerar el género actualizado por la persona y no su anatomía física ni la presencia o falta de ciertas hormonas o cromosomas sexuales, especialmente si éstas no corresponden con el género realizado a través de la performatividad.

Tomando en cuenta la reformulación del género por Butler como performativo, las definiciones previas de lo transgénero y la distinción básica entre el sexo y el género, resulta que se puede considerar a Molina de *El beso de la mujer araña* como una persona transgénera y así emprender una lectura transgénera del texto. Esta rearticulación del género de Molina tiene implicaciones profundas y radicales para una lectura del texto de Puig.

La “no-representación/presencia”

En su artículo, “Cuerpo, nombre y enunciación: acerca del efecto-personaje en *El beso de la mujer araña*,” (2002) Geneviève Fabry nota que, en los relatos de Molina, abundan las descripciones físicas de las actrices. Sin embargo, en contraste total con los relatos, la obra carece de cualquier descripción de los cuerpos físicos de los dos personajes centrales, Molina y Valentín, salvo la mención del lunar del último. (Fabry 505) De ahí, Fabry argumenta que esta ausencia total de descripción física tanto de Molina como de Valentín convierte el cuerpo en una mera *presencia corporal* postergando y hasta evitando su

significado. Llama esta relación dialéctica “la no-representación/presencia”. Si el cuerpo en esta obra no es sino una presencia, resulta que no tiene un género esencial o interior porque es un vacío sin significado anterior ni significante inherente que lo haga significar. Así que mediante la conversión del cuerpo en una mera presencia corporal, Puig encuentra la posibilidad del desarraigar la fijeza o estabilidad del género.

Sin embargo, esta relación dialéctica que señala Fabry es solamente parcialmente exacta y útil. Por mucho que la obra carezca de una descripción física de los personajes, no hacen falta los significantes textuales (o, supongamos, verbales porque la narración es un diálogo entre Valentín y Molina) que hacen significar los cuerpos de los dos. De esta forma, la idea de la no-representación es medio engañosa porque no es posible concluir que no haya ninguna representación de los personajes en la obra sino que ésta toma la forma de actos de discurso o enunciación que funcionan como significantes.

Una de las formas más importantes de esta auto-representación lingüística se encuentra en las mediaciones entre Valentín y Molina. En el diálogo cierta tensión brota porque Valentín trata de ligar el género de Molina con su anatomía por varios comentarios que emplean significantes masculinos para referirse a Molina. Cada vez que esto surge, Molina corrige a Valentín, negándole una interpolación equivocada al emplear dos estrategias distintas. En algunos casos, emplea una estrategia implícitamente correctiva que normalmente establece, de una forma cómica para aliviar parte de la tensión, que no se identifica como hombre:

-[Val] Pero claro, hombre.

-[Mol] ¿Qué hombre?, ¿dónde está el hombre?,
decíme dónde que no me
lo dejo escapar. (Puig 35)

En otros casos, Molina emplea una estrategia correctiva más explícita por lo cual se define como mujer recurriendo a un signo femenino (a través de un sustantivo o un adjetivo):

-[Val] ¿Sos un señor burgués en el fondo, entonces?

-[Mol] Una señora burguesa. (50)

En ambas situaciones, aunque no hay significantes físicos para hacer significar el cuerpo, uno ve claramente la actualización del género a través del lenguaje, o por los significantes lingüísticos femeninos empleados o por las estrategias correctivas a las cuales recurre Molina, para instalar cierto significado de sí misma, implicando que se ve de una forma más ambigua de lo que el binario de género (reforzado por el idioma español) le permite expresar.

El sexo queer entre una persona transgénera y un hombre

Sin embargo, la mayoría de los críticos han analizado la relación entre Molina y Valentín como si fuera homosexual.² Al privilegiar una lectura de la relación basada en la anatomía de los dos personajes en vez de una lectura que considera como legítima la performatividad del género de Molina, hacen una violencia al cuerpo transgénero del personaje al negarle la posibilidad de la legitimidad o viabilidad como sujeto. Al privilegiar lo literal (o sea la anatomía) sobre lo figurativo, le niegan a Molina el reconocimiento básico necesario para constituirlo como un ser socialmente viable.

Planteo que, al contrario de la interpretación homosexual de la relación entre los dos personajes, la representación del sexo entre Molina y Valentín apoya una lectura transgénera de la escena que le concede a Molina los derechos básicos de la personalidad y, así, implica que el sexo entre ellos no es otro sino un acto [--]sexual o,

² Véase por ejemplo pp. 3-4 en el análisis de Néstor Perlongher en "Molina y Valentín: el sexo de la araña." en *Tiempo Argentino*, Buenos Aires, 29 de junio de 1986. También el análisis general de Elías Miguel Muñoz en *El discurso utópico de la sexualidad en Manuel Puig*. Madrid, Pliegos, 1987.

mejor dicho, queer.³ Si hubiera una descripción anatómica del sexo o aun una referencia a la anatomía de Molina durante la escena, el resultado de privilegiar lo literal despojaría la performatividad del género de Molina de cualquier legitimidad. Al decidir no privilegiar lo anatómico, Puig representa el sexo de una manera que le otorga viabilidad a la performatividad del género de Molina.

Hay dos ocurrencias de relaciones sexuales en la obra. En ambos casos, no hay ni mención de ni referencia a la anatomía física de los genitales de los personajes. Además, el uso de los elipsis promueve más la noción de lo irrepresentable. Por ejemplo, en la primera instancia:

[Val]-...

[Mol]-...Despacito, por favor, Valentín.

[Val]-...

[Mol]-Así...

[Val]-... (221 Puig)

Y, en la segunda instancia:

[Val]-...

[Mol]-Así...

[Val]-Callado... callado un ratito.

[Mol]-Sí...

[Val]-...

[Mol]-... (266 Puig)

En ambos casos, la única referencia a la anatomía tiene que ver con la ubicación de las piernas de Molina y obviamente tal referencia no matiza la situación como homosexual o no. Al contrario, simplemente indica que hay cierta necesidad de una postura específica dadas las condiciones o las limitaciones del espacio físico.

³ Quiero decir con [---]sexual que no es ni hetero- ni homosexual sino un acto *sexual* entre dos seres humanos imposible de definir de otra forma. Además, es imprescindible destacar que un replanteamiento del acto como queer no significa que el acto sea homosexual (lo que indicaría el sentido tradicional de la palabra queer). Empleo el término como lo define Butler: el adjetivo queer se refiere, en este caso, a un acto que desafía las normas y expectativas sociales que a través del lenguaje, las leyes y las regulaciones dictan las posibilidades de lo sexual.

Fabry, en su análisis, lee la escena como no representable porque, según su argumento ya explicado, los cuerpos de los personajes no son sino presencias físicas sin forma. Sin embargo, como ya argumenté, la relación de "la no-representación/presencia" es problemática porque el primer término, la "no-representación", no toma en cuenta que sí hay significantes que hacen significar el cuerpo de una manera marcada por el género. Como los cuerpos no carecen de género, la escena no resulta irrepresentable por el hecho de que los cuerpos son presencias sino porque cualquier representación realista gráfica visual tendría que hacer referencia a la anatomía de los personajes y, al privilegiar ésta en vez de la performatividad, despojaría el género de Molina de cualquier legitimidad posible. Así que el sexo entre una persona transgénero y otra(s) persona(s) o entre dos o más personas transgéneras no es literalmente representable porque es sumamente figurativo. El coito sí ocurre pero los términos que uno necesitaría para representarlo no serían realistas sin hacer violencia al cuerpo transgénero que no necesariamente refleja físicamente el género que esta persona proyecta. Al negarse a recurrir a lo literal, Puig (y Valentín, por participar en el acto sin referirse a la anatomía de Molina) le otorga viabilidad a Molina.

El nombramiento/reconocimiento de "la mujer-araña"

En su obra *Undoing Gender*, Butler destaca que la tradición hegeliana liga el deseo con el reconocimiento, proponiendo que el deseo no es otro sino un deseo para el primero. De ahí, es solamente a través de este reconocimiento que cada individuo se encuentra constituido como un ser socialmente viable. (Butler 2) De esta forma, se puede leer el deseo de Molina para Valentín no como algo necesariamente sexual sino más como un deseo del reconocimiento de sí misma como un ser viable. Molina se da cuenta de que es a través de este proceso de legitimación de su género que puede

obtener la condición de ser, es decir cierto acceso a la legitimidad heteronormativa que desea tanto. Entonces, la consumación del coito entre Valentín y Molina representa una transferencia de legitimidad desde un hombre que se define a sí mismo como heterosexual hasta una persona transgénera sin poner en cuestión la heterosexualidad de Valentín. Al entrar en una relación sexual con Molina, Valentín elimina el diferencial que existía antes entre los dos por interpolarla a Molina como se reconoce ella a sí misma.

El empleo de metáfora

Sin embargo, el reconocimiento que ocurre durante las escenas sexuales es implícito porque aunque Valentín no hace referencia directa a la anatomía de Molina, tampoco le otorga validez a través de un significante verbal en estas escenas. Como resultado, es a través de la enunciación de una metáfora que le confiere la máxima validez a Molina. Directamente después de darle el beso prometido, Valentín le dice a Molina: “-Vos sos la mujer araña, que atrapa a los hombres en su tela” (Puig 265). Esta enunciación, al venir desde el lugar privilegiado de la autoridad patriarcal representado por el hombre heterosexual, interpola a Molina en lo femenino directamente por emplear el significante y, a la vez, hace hincapié en el hecho de que no sea un hombre al mencionar que “atrapa a los hombres en su tela”. Al emplear esta frase, Valentín le otorga a Molina toda la validez posible.

No obstante, al interpolar a Molina a través de declararla una “mujer araña”, se enfrenta otra vez con la dialéctica de la “no-representación/presencia”: al utilizar una metáfora en vez de llamarla “una mujer”, hay otro desplazamiento más que destaca la ausencia o falta de un léxico apropiado para poder nombrar a una persona transgénera. La representación lingüística a través de los signos tradicionales (limitantes) del binario resulta imposible y es necesario recurrir a la metáfora.

De casualidad, en una entrevista recién con Ronald Christ, Puig responde a una pregunta:

...Among the twentieth-century writers, I admire Kafka especially. What is he interested in? Cobwebs, the world of the unconscious, the system that somehow manipulates us, the bars we're not aware of but which are there and don't let us act freely. What the reader is mainly searching for now is not heroes but the man in the crowd and why he can't act otherwise... But it's extremely difficult to capture that invisible net of repression. Anyhow, that's what interests me: to try to capture the unconscious of the characters. (Christ)

Al terminar *El beso de la mujer araña* con una representación de esta misma mujer araña, esta "pobrecita" que:

...no puede moverse, ahí en lo más espeso de la selva está atrapada, en una tela de araña, o no, la telaraña le crece del cuerpo de ella misma... (Puig 285)

Puig revela los hilos de la ideología heteronormativa hegemónica que limitan la posibilidad de la representación de la experiencia de la mujer transgénera a la vez que destaca la complicidad de ella en promover estas normas al sugerir que "la telaraña le crece del cuerpo de ella misma". Esta paradoja, la representación de la mujer-araña que está tan atrapada por la ideología dominante como por su misma participación en este sistema represor que la limita constituye el "final enigmático" de la obra. (Puig 285)

Conclusión

Al desligar el género de lo corporal, Puig demuestra que el primero existe independiente de lo físico, lo que apoya el argumento de Butler que el género no existe *a priori*. Partiendo de esta noción y tomando en cuenta que no hay descripciones físicas de los personajes en la obra, la única manera en que el lector ve actualizado el género de Molina

es a través del lenguaje que emplea. Así que Molina realiza la performatividad de su género a través de la narración, de su empleo del lenguaje, de la repetición de los adjetivos femeninos, los sustantivos femeninos y las estrategias repetidas correctivas. Hace significar su cuerpo por medio de la auto-narración o representación. Si el género puede ser narrado o actualizado sin ningún elemento corporal, resulta que el género no es nada interior que existe ligado al cuerpo, apoyando el argumento de Butler. De este modo, los personajes problematizan y abordan una redefinición crítica del género por sí mismos a través de la narración y le lleva al lector a reexaminar sus expectativas de una identidad única de género. Aunque resulta que no hay una representación física de los personajes, el género de ambos es actualizado por los signos lingüísticos, matizando el planteamiento de Fabry concerniente la dialéctica de la "no-representación/presencia". Así la obra de Puig logra desestabilizar la fijeza de la construcción del género, socavándola a través de una revelación de los hilos de la telaraña de las normas binarias heterosexuales que pretenden gobernar las posibilidades de la auto-expresión.

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A Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha: Pornografia do século XVI?

Denise Saive¹

Abstract

The *Carta de Pero Vaz Caminha* has since long been studied in the field of History and Portuguese Studies since it describes the first arrival of European men in the land now known as Brazil. In the letter, among descriptions of the land and its inhabitants the nudity of the native population is set out with remarkable detail, which is quite curious for a travel account. This paper questions the attention Caminha gives to the naked female body and analyzes the discourse that surges from these observations that indicate a pre-colonial ideology. Women are seen as a metaphor for the discovered land. Both are fertile and ready to be explored. The paper uses essays from scholars Silvano Santiago, Anna Klobucka and Sarah Toulalan to see whether Caminha's descriptions indicate humanist curiosity or voyeurism of the "other".

Na famosa Carta do Achamento do Brasil, Pero Vaz de Caminha louva a terra e os seus habitantes. Na sua descrição deste paraíso a mulher indígena tem um papel extremamente importante. Ela é observada sem pudor e vergonha, como se de um projecto científico se tratasse. O discurso referencial que desta observação surge mostra já a ideologia pré-colonial dos portugueses. A mulher é vista como metáfora da terra descoberta, fértil, e aos olhos dos portugueses pronta para ser explorada.

As observações de Caminha acerca do corpo feminino são bastante eróticas e também mostram como os

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portugueses tinham os primeiros contactos com as mulheres. Silvano Santiago vê na Carta uma prefiguração da Ilha dos Amores, o canto d'Os *Lusíadas* onde os marinheiros portugueses têm uma aventura sexual com as ninfas para "recompensar" a viagem longa.

Neste trabalho analiso as observações de Caminha sobre as indígenas e pergunto se demonstram uma curiosidade humanista ou um voyeurismo quase pornográfico. Primeiro analiso esta curiosidade "humanista" para depois descrever os elementos *ver* e *experimentar* e como aparecem na Carta.

Quando a frota de Cabral chegou ao Brasil em 1500 não havia uma língua comum entre os indígenas e os portugueses. Com acenos e gestos os dois povos tentavam comunicar-se e todo o "discurso" é um conjunto de (mal)entendidos, interpretações e opiniões. Pero Vaz de Caminha descreve na famosa Carta de Achamento do Brasil datada 1 de Maio de 1500 como estes primeiros contactos ocorreram e explica ao Rei D. Manuel I que só descreveu o que lhe pareceu: "Toma Vossa Alteza, porém, minha ignorância por boa vontade, e creia bem por certo que, para alindar nem afeiar, não porei aqui mais do que aquilo que vi e me pareceu" (91).

Esta dicotomia entre *ver* e *parecer* é importante. A palavra *parecer*, que significa "ter a aparência de alguém ou de alguma coisa, ser semelhante a" aparece 28 vezes na Carta. Isto implica que Caminha queria dizer que não tinha a certeza absoluta e só descreveu o que ele pensou que viu. *Ver* no entanto é o acto de olhar ou notar. É curioso que a palavra olhar aparece somente uma vez no texto. É quando Caminha e os portugueses estão a observar as "vergonhas" das indígenas:

Por ali andavam entre eles três ou quatro moças, bem moças e bem gentis, com cabelos muito pretos e compridos pelas espáduas, e suas vergonhas tão altas, tão cerradinhas e tão limpas das cabeleiras que, de as muito bem **olharmos**, não tinham nenhuma vergonha. (100)

Aqui imagina-se os portugueses, com altos níveis de testosterona, a observar as indígenas como se estivessem num *stripclub* avant la lettre. Este aspecto erótico ou pornográfico das Carta ainda não foi analisado por outros críticos.

Há críticos que identificam a Carta sobretudo como diferente. A curiosidade humanista de Caminha é um dos aspectos que a diferencia de outros relatos da época. Por exemplo, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht é de opinião que a curiosidade de Caminha lhe dá uma posição diferente no conjunto de escritores de literatura de viagens. Segundo Gumbrecht, "Its author comes across as more curious, as more capable for empathy for what is foreign to him, and as less greedy than other writers of early European colonialism" (423). Uma explicação para esta diferença é o que Gumbrecht chama "o ritmo do diário". Concordo que o estilo da Carta é atraente mas em geral todos os diários de bordo têm este estilo de "diário". Porém nota-se em Caminha uma preocupação com a verdade, o que é típico na literatura de viagens; aí ele não é uma exceção à regra.

Jerry Williams descreve a linguagem de Caminha nesta maneira:

His language (...) is unpretentious yet humorous, slightly picaresque, and reflects a measured response to the marvels experienced; he opts for a seemingly unembellished approach to reporting. Caminha's humanistic attitude toward the Indians likewise underscores the ethnographic dimension of his treatise; the *carta's* documental or prosaic character is transcended by the writer's ability to capture the affections of both the land and its peoples. (60)

O mesmo crítico nota na Carta duas vozes diferentes "Caminha the humanist and ethnographer" e "Caminha the chronicler, scribe and official voice of the crown" (69) que mostra um zelo para a dominação (religiosa e económica) dos indígenas. É o que Hanna Betina Götz chama uma

“ruptura” na narrativa, ou seja uma certa mudança no tom. Segundo Götz, esta ruptura evidencia-se quando os portugueses começam a sua missão católica, mas também há “a possibilidade de que o narrador da expedição esteja em conflito com o ethos do etnógrafo” (85).

As duas narrativas mencionadas acima já mostram que a Carta de Caminha não pode ser qualificada como um texto de tom humanista genuíno. Obviamente há no texto uma celebração do ser humano mas revela também descrições dos indígenas como seres diferentes e até animalizados. Os indígenas não são compreendidos e como não percebem a língua portuguesa eles precisam de aprendê-la para ser salvos (2002: 116-117). São comparados a animais e descritos como “gente bestial, de pouco saber e por isso tão esquiva” (107). Joana Miranda fala no seu trabalho *Um olhar sobre o Outro: A Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha* sobre o “desejo” de Caminha de “tecer um olhar objectivo” (62). Mas como o autor é herdeiro da tradição greco-latina, que “desde cedo teoriza a diferença entre o Mesmo e o Outro”(62), é impossível deixar de lado uma avaliação baseada numa teoria de alteridade. Segundo Miranda:

Em Caminha, o Outro é remetido para um estado civilizacional já ultrapassado pelo Mesmo, para o plano de uma humanidade inferior mais próxima de animalidade.(...) Da comparação entre o Mesmo e o Outro resulta uma hierarquização, em que <os homens do mar> estão acima dos <homens da terra>. (63)

Esta hierarquização mostra como, mesmo que haja na Carta uma atitude de admiração e louvor à terra e aos seus habitantes, existe também uma tendência para ver esses habitantes como “outros” e inferiores.

Mas o que é de certa forma inevitável na teoria da alteridade é a relação ambígua que temos com o Outro. Ao mesmo tempo que determinámos o outro como Outro, também precisamos deste para completar o nosso próprio Mesmo. Há sempre um desejo para conhecer melhor o Outro. Este desejo manifesta-se na Carta claramente

através das descrições do corpo. O que me impressiona são as descrições muito detalhadas do corpo. O objectivo da Carta é dar informação acerca da terra e dos seus habitantes. Mas pergunto-me se é realmente necessário tanta preocupação com o corpo feminino. No próximo parágrafo analiso em mais detalhe esta preocupação com o corpo e o acto de olhar praticado por Caminha.

Ver/Parecer

Na Carta lê-se como os dois povos tentavam comunicar-se com acenos e gestos, e Caminha explica como os portugueses 'entendem' ou que querem entender: "Isto tomávamos nós nesse sentido, por assim o desejarmos! Mas se ele queria dizer que levaria as contas e mais o colar, isto não queríamos nós entender, por que lho não havíamos de dar!" (91). Este exemplo mostra como os portugueses entendem aquilo que lhes está vantajoso. Logo na introdução Caminha enfatiza que somente escreveu o que lhe pareceu (91).

Já indiquei como a dicotomia entre *ver* e *parecer* é importante. Enquanto *parecer* é o verbo mais escolhido por Caminha para descrever os espectadores portugueses, o verbo *olhar/ver* foi escolhido para descrever as observações do corpo. Em geral *olhar* é uma actividade mais directa do que *parecer*. Quando alguém está a olhar dirige o olho para um objecto e recolhe em si todas as impressões do objecto observado. Como já vimos é quando os portugueses estão a olhar as "vergonhas" das indígenas que este acto mais directa está referida.

A palavra "vergonhas" aparece 5 vezes, o que indica uma certa obsessão e o que também é curioso num texto oficial. Segundo Silviano Peloso a palavra "vergonha" tem um carácter polissémico. Na Carta *vergonha* tem pelo menos três significados diferentes: 1. Não ter vergonha de olhar (o

caso dos europeus). 2. Os órgãos genitais (as vergonhas).²
3. A consciência de estar nu/nua, ou seja a inocência dos indígenas. Como os indígenas não estavam cientes da sua nudez, i.e. não tinham se metido ao pecado original, eram vistos como inocentes e por isso tinham que ser “salvos”. Nas palavras de Peloso:

Ao tema da superioridade da beleza exótica (que depois se tornará um *topos* da literatura de viagens não apenas portuguesa) acrescenta um singular pastiche linguístico que, explorando ao máximo a polissemia do termo *vergonha*, termina por anular-lhe a carga de negatividade, confundindo os significados (...) Um trecho sem dúvida surpreendente caso se pense que estamos falando de um documento com as marcas da oficialidade e ainda por cima dirigido ao próprio soberano. (27)

Vendo neste trocadilho um simples ‘pastiche singular’ que anula a carga negativa da palavra desconhece o impacto que a descrição dos genitais pode ter. Quando se lê a opinião de Sarah Toulalan autora de *Imagining Sex: Pornography and Bodies in Seventeenth Century England* a descrição da vergonha não é inocente: “Any clear delineation of the male or female genitals turns it into a licentious or obscene representation” (11).

Obviamente não se pode afirmar que o texto de Caminha é obsceno por causa da descrição das vergonhas. Mas enquanto muitos críticos têm denotado a Carta como um texto de carácter humanístico, quase não existe uma crítica ou análise sobre o porquê da descrição tão detalhada do corpo feminino.

É muito interessante como os portugueses olhavam “sem vergonha” para as indígenas, com um olhar que incorpora o desejo. O seu entusiasmo para o corpo feminino é óbvio nesta passagem:

² É interessante notar que Caminha repara como os homens não eram “circuncisados”. Isto significa que não eram judeus ou mouros, inimigos da religião cristã.

Também andavam, entre eles, quatro ou cinco mulheres moças, nuas como eles, que não pareciam mal. Entre elas andava uma com uma coxa, do joelho até o quadril, e a nádega, toda tinta daquela tintura preta; e o resto, tudo da sua própria cor. Outra trazia ambos os joelhos, com as curvas assim tintas, e também os colos dos pés; e suas vergonhas tão nuas e com tanta inocência descobertas, que nisso não havia vergonha alguma. (105)

Podemos perguntar até que ponto esta visão mostra a curiosidade científica, mas também onde se torna numa certa “pornografia” quinhentista. Já vimos em alguns exemplos como o Outro é observado/a como se fosse um objecto. Enquanto na própria sociedade provavelmente não era aceite olhar/observar com tanto pormenor o corpo feminino, os portugueses nem têm ‘vergonha’ de olhar quando se encontram fora dessa sociedade. Será que a acentuação do facto dos indígenas não terem vergonha e não fazerem caso de se cobrir, é usada para ‘desculpar’ o olhar europeu que não tem timidez e observa o corpo sem escrúpulos? E qual é a relação entre estas observações e a política imperial europeia? É como Ronald Hyam escreve no seu livro *Empire & Sexuality* : “The expansion of Europe was not only a matter of ‘Christianity and commerce’ it was also a matter of copulation and concubinage. Sexual opportunities were often seized with imperious confidence” (2).

Na Carta a mulher indígena torna-se num objecto de desejo e de amor carnal. É por isso que acho interessante a comparação que Caminha faz entre as indígenas e as mulheres europeias: “e uma daquelas moças era toda tingida, de baixo a cima daquela tintura; e certo era tão bem feita e tão redonda, e sua vergonha tão graciosa, que a muitas mulheres da nossa terra, vendo-lhe tais feições, fizera vergonha, por não terem a sua como ela” (100). Hans Gumbrecht aponta a dificuldade de interpretar estas citações “curiosas” e eróticas:

We will never know for sure exactly what Pero Vaz de Caminha intends to say by pointing to their lack of shame. He certainly underlines that shame did not overcome him, *even though* he thoroughly looked at these splendid young bodies. Was the lack of shame equal to his astonishment over a lack of desire? Or did he mean to say that, far from his own Christian world, he enjoyed desire without any threat of sin? That he compares –and very favorably compares– the bodies of the native women to those of the women back in Portugal seems to indicate that it was not the lack of desire that surprised Pero Vaz de Caminha. (426)

Concordo com Gumbrecht que é difícil de saber o que era a intenção de Caminha. Mas em vez de analisar a intenção dele, o que é importante é tentar perceber os efeitos das suas descrições. Não podemos esquecer as consequências que os “descobrimientos” tiveram para as civilizações que viviam na terra “descoberta”. Alguns resultados negativos dos primeiros encontros foram a conquista e o colonialismo. É então importante identificar quais os precursores destas atitudes eurocêntricas que são descritas nos textos sobre os descobrimientos, como neste caso a Carta de Caminha. Como Richard Trexler, autor do livro *Sex and Conquest*, afirma:

Let us not conceal the fact that all discourse about sexuality and gender (...) is among other things about hierarchy, about dominion and subordination. (...) We can learn a good deal about American sexual practices if we keep in mind that the Iberians were the conquerors and that their descriptions of sexual practices are discourses about power no less than were indigenous sexual practices. (2)

É portanto necessário de incluir uma análise do aspecto sexual da Carta de Caminha. Pode-se obter informação importante sobre a conquista portuguesa no Brasil quando se usa esta metáfora entre sexualidade e poder.

Ver vs. Experimentar

Nota-se como os verbos *ver* e *parecer* são aparentes na carta e como os portugueses observam em particular o corpo indígena feminino. Mas para realmente saber ou conhecer uma coisa é necessário usar todos os sentidos. Jerry Williams usa uma citação de Michel de Certeau para explicar como a interação com os indígenas era importante para Caminha e que isto não somente se manteve a um nível “visual”. Nas palavras de Williams:

Certeau points to the historian's need to combine empirical data with that received from tradition: “Only an appeal to the senses (hearing, sight, touch, taste) and link to the body (touched, carved, tested by experience) seem capable of bringing closer together and guaranteeing, in a singular but indisputable fashion, the real” (74). It is Caminha who distinguishes himself through his attempts to *comprehend* the Indian as the other by repeatedly intermingling with the populace. (64-65)

Então para conhecer melhor o Outro, não basta somente observa-lo. É necessário de ter uma certa interação e contacto físico. Mas pergunta-se até que ponto este contacto é inocente e onde é que se torna numa subjugação do Outro. Não há referências directas no texto às relações sexuais mas pode-se presumir que houve alguma forma de contacto físico entre os portugueses e as indígenas. Devido ao muito tempo passado num barco sem mulheres os marinheiros provavelmente não se limitavam somente a observar as mulheres, mas também as “experimentavam”. Como Silviano Santiago no seu ensaio “Destinations of a letter, Predestinations of a country” afirma:

Shamelessly, the woman exists as the only textual element loaded with meaning for the sailor. She is the very reason for sailing and adventure, for life and death, for the discovery. She is the motive for

delight and the possibility of hedonism after the stoic asceticism of the extremely long voyage on the ocean's third shore. (338)

Parece então que a mulher é o prémio dos marinheiros. Enquanto a terra e os recursos naturais são descritos como futuro posse da Coroa Portuguesa, os marinheiros podem começar a estabelecer o poder europeu através o descobrimento das suas habitantes.

No próprio texto temos dois exemplos de como os marinheiros portugueses *experimentavam* as mulheres indígenas. O primeiro exemplo é talvez bastante provocativo: quando temos a descrição detalhada das vergonhas, Caminha diz que são "tão altas, tão cerradinhas e tão limpas das cabeleiras" (100). Algumas destas qualidades, especialmente a "cerradinha", são qualidades que não podem somente ser avaliadas pelo olhar observador mas têm que ser experimentadas pelo tacto.

No segundo exemplo temos a situação do contacto entre os homens europeus e as mulheres indígenas: "Em tal maneira isto se passou que bem vinte ou trinta pessoas das nossas se foram com eles onde outros muitos estavam com moças e mulheres" (108).

Já se sabe que muitas vezes os marinheiros ou lançados mantinham relações com as mulheres, o que mais tarde resultou numa sociedade miscigenada. Segundo Silviano Santiago a situação do marinheiro pode ser comparada com a do indígena, ambos sem casa e economia. A única diferença entre eles que Santiago vê é a presença da mulher:

The woman is the differentiating element between the two human groups that meet each other for the first time on the island of Vera Cruz and, for this reason, she is always the thing that is most coveted. She will be given as a fatal prize to those who brave the ocean. (337)

O que é no entanto ainda mais interessante é a maneira como Caminha representa e descreve estes comportamentos e contactos eróticos, mesmo num relato oficial. Enquanto o objectivo da Carta é dar informações

sobre a terra, Caminha às vezes foca mais nos habitantes, e espanta-se com a sua nudez. Pode-se perguntar qual é a função destas descrições. Podemos interpreta-las como uma descrição dos acontecimentos entre os portugueses e as indígenas no 'descobrimento' do Brasil. Por outro lado, a descrição sexual do povo indígena reflecte o desejo europeu de dominar este Outro. É necessário ver nos textos oficiais do império como a sexualidade é representada. Silviano Santiago compara a Carta por exemplo com o nono canto d'*Os Lusíadas*. Ele descreve a voz poética de Caminha assim:

The scribe Caminha covets the seductive native woman, completely without Christian modesty. (...) The eyes and words of a scribe which are more like the eyes of a baroque poet, as they decorate the female body with gracious style and swirls of wordplay. (337)

Sou de opinião que a voz poética de Caminha não é assim tão graciosa e inocente como a de Camões. Enquanto Caminha descreve com muito detalhes os corpos, exibindo um visual sedutora até ligeiramente chocante, trata-se no nono canto d'*Os Lusíadas* "somente" de "famintos beijos na floresta".

Na Ilha dos Amores, Vasco da Gama e seus marinheiros repousam da longa viagem enquanto a deusa Vénus encena uma "festa erótica" para eles. Há várias ninfas bonitas na ilha, disponíveis para fornicar com os marinheiros. Mas embora esta orgia aconteça há um "final feliz", em que todos os marinheiros se casam com a sua ninfa depois das relações sexuais. Anna Klobucka argumenta no seu artigo "Lusotropical Romance: Camões, Gilberto Freyre, and the Isle of Love" que na descrição de Camões da ilha há uma certa visão pornográfica:

Pornographic representation is summoned by Camões to play one of its traditional roles, that of promoting proper sexual development of the young male. In effect, the Isle of Love is designed by Venus and described by the poet as a perfect *pornotopia*, a term proposed in Steven Marcus's

account of sexuality and pornography in mid-nineteenth century England, *The Other Victorians*: a utopian fantasy in which representation of external reality is relevant only insofar as it sets the stage for and encourages sexual commerce, just as the heavily eroticized descriptions of the lush vegetation covering the Isle of Love prefigure the orgy that is to take place in its midst. (129)

Então através de descrições sexuais um certo comportamento sexual está encorajado. No caso de Caminha pode-se talvez sugerir que a descrição das indígenas como seres mais alcançáveis estimula, nos olhos dos europeus, um certo comportamento dominador. A dificuldade do termo pornografia existe, como aponta Sarah Toulalan, não na terminologia mas na recepção. Determina-se a pornografia como uma representação que provoca excitação sexual nos leitores. Mas distinguir em cada leitor como reage à provocação sexual é mais difícil. Segunda Toulalan há várias diferenças entre pornografia e a erótica mas o mais evidente talvez seja que a pornografia usa a representação sexual por fins comerciais. Na Carta vemos este aspecto comercial na descrição da mulher, que serve como metáfora da terra que devia ser explorada. Com a sua descrição ufanística da terra e dos seus habitantes Caminha também cria uma certa *pornotopia*.

Comecei o meu trabalho perguntando se for possível encontrar uma visão pornográfica na Carta de Achamento do Brasil. Talvez seja um pouco forçado ver 'pornografia' na carta de Caminha, mas seria uma grande falta negar o aspecto erótico nela. Os aspectos eróticos do Canto nono d'*Os Lusíadas*, que Klobucka classifica como pornográficos, são bastante menos "picantes" e "objectificantes" que as muitas descrições na Carta. Isto apoia a tese que a obra de Caminha tem um certo conteúdo pornográfico. As descrições deitam alguma luz sobre as práticas correntes durante os primeiros contactos, e como os portugueses "desejavam" dominar novas terras e novos povos. Também descrevem como os marinheiros funcionam como um tipo

de “agente” imperial que realizam o poder através de praticas sexuais. Acho necessário de estudar em pormenores o efeito das descrições sexuais nos discursos oficiais mesmo que nem sempre fossem descritos em tanto pormenor. Neste sentido o texto de Caminha é curioso, e por isso não se pode deixar de lado analisar o que significam as suas descrições “pornográficas”.

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New Women for the New Republic: Feminist Politics in Emile Zola's *Gospels*

Gina Zupsich¹

Fin-de-siècle feminine politics were a problem, if not a complete contradiction in terms for patriotic writers like Emile Zola. Women like Marguerite Durand and the journalists for her feminist daily newspaper *La Fronde* (*The Slingshot*), transformed this apparent contradiction into an effective political strategy. For Durand and her *frondeuses* (slingshooters), femininity and feminism were not only compatible, they were intimately linked. Debates about professional, economic and legal rights were often grounded in the improvement of women's condition as mothers, and even wives. As Mary Louise Roberts has argued, Durand consciously labeled *La Fronde* a women's and feminist newspaper in order to encourage broad readership by which a variety of contemporary women's issues, including feminist issues, would be heard without the stigma of negative stereotypes. Well before the publication of Joan Rivière's psychological theory on the feminine masquerade in 1929, the *frondeuses* demonstrated a keen awareness of various masks of femininity that they used for professional and political gain.

Although as Zola specialist Jacques Noiray insists, Emile Zola's notes deny the feminist character of *Paris'* heroine who is "very womanly, very tender, above all not a virago, is neither *bas-bleu* nor for the rights of women," her speech is ideologically feminist (*Paris* 401, n.1).² Yet for Noiray, and perhaps for Zola too, Marie cannot be "feminist" in

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² All translations are original. I wish to thank Sonia Birocheau for her help in translating the original French text into English for this article.

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spite of the intellectual and social privileges she enjoys because she is not a political activist. Marie is a successful product of republican and feminist reform while at the same time, a truly feminine symbol of Zola's bourgeois republican values. She is, I contend, something altogether inconceivable for republican men: a feminine feminist. Marie's liberal behavior—her candor, political zeal, and athleticism—make her an unmistakable, albeit conservative version of the energetic "New Woman" that was emerging everywhere in fin-de-siècle culture, often portrayed as a bicycle zealot.

The term "New Woman" was nevertheless as politically charged as "feminist" even if the former was not as systematically denigrated as feminist. Mary Roberts makes an important distinction between the terms feminist, the New Woman, and her own term new women. She juxtaposes the New Woman, a the cultural image or cliché, with "new women" who represent the sociological phenomenon of real women whose professional and personal choices actively resisted traditional gender norms (Roberts 7). Feminists and new women in fin-de-siècle France, she argues, did not mean the same thing; in fact, they differed most in their perspective on domesticity. As Roberts explains, "Feminists in this period often grounded their demands for legal political rights precisely in their role as domestic wives and mothers. By contrast, the new women ... only rarely invoked a domestic self in their writings" (8).

Zola's sporty and outspoken Marie invokes New Woman clichés while maintaining a traditionally feminine, domestic identity. However, Zola takes great pains to avoid pigeonholing her as a New Woman precisely by emphasizing her traditional femininity. Instead of identifying Marie as a capricious young woman who flirts with feminist thought, *Paris'* narrator focuses on her dynamic nature, alternately active and enlightened, and womanly and demure. The scene in which Marie becomes frightened by a spider makes her virile intelligence and courage virtually disappear. The narrator's description of

Marie's scream reveals her shifting avatars explaining, "all womanliness had just reappeared in her" (*Paris* 453). Another episode in which Marie and the former priest Pierre go on a bike ride is a pivotal moment in the novel during which Pierre experiences the first blush of love for Marie. This "engagement morning" was a revelation, the narrator tells us, not only of love, but also of Pierre's return to manhood after leaving the priesthood. According to *Paris'* narrative, Marie wears her political and physical modernity like a garment to put on or take off at her convenience; on the other hand, her lack of self-mastery exposes her as a partially modern woman. Both characteristics enable her to retain traditional feminine attractiveness so crucial to Zola's foundation of the new republican family. Because of her uniquely modern femininity Marie is able to transform a lost priest into Zola's ideal republican citizen: "she remade him a man, worker, lover and father" (*Paris* 453). Indeed, only a real woman, however modern in spirit and upbringing, would effectively produce a family of secular evangelists.

By contrast to the representations of new women and feminists that we have examined in literature and the press, *Paris's* heroine Marie is neither conservative nor radical. However, in *Les Quatre Evangiles (Four Gospels)*, which followed *Paris*, Zola's new republican women increasingly demonstrate greater social, intellectual and financial independence. *Fécondité's (Fruitfulness)* prophecy of a balanced republican family, its revision of paternal investment notwithstanding, presents the least progressive roles for women of the *Gospel* novels, and yet this novel received a good deal of feminist acclaim. Zola's first gospel prescribes maternity for all women regardless of marital status and even surrogate maternity in service of women incapable of procreation. As Karen Offen maintains, "[Zola's] vision of women in the new social order was summed up by *La Fronde's* reviewer: 'les hanches larges et un grand cœur' (broad hips and a big heart)" (664). This quote attempts to expose Zola's contribution to the denial of women's reproductive rights in the name of national repopulation. By citing May-Armand Blanc's review from *La*

Fronde, Offen implies that feminist response to *Fécondité* was one of general disapproval, in order to reinforce more recent feminist critiques of the novel.

Blanc's words are however, taken out of context. In her article, Blanc celebrated rather than condemned Zola's female figures. Alluding to *Fécondité*, Blanc marvels at his organic representation of women:

Without there being any question of "feminism," have we not here what can sum up in two words the feminine ideal (body and soul) of the great writer Emile Zola? He wants *broad hips* and a *big heart* for women—that is to say all the health and joy in the world. Isn't that a magnificent dream? And having never ceased to present and represent to the crowd in such strong and sweet, simple figures, isn't that the most beautiful action (in a great corpus) of such a dream?³

Once again, feminism seems to interfere with Zola's ideal woman, this time, from the point of view of a contemporary woman journalist and novelist. Blanc clarifies her admiration in a comparative definition, writing that Zola's feminine ideal "not the great violent and wavering flame that illuminates—but which may also burn and destroy;—it's the even, unwavering and certain light of the silence of the mute female." It is a more revolutionary figure that Blanc understands to be a "feminist" ideal of women, whereas Zola's women are as equal and constant, albeit silent companions to men. Blanc furthermore commends Zola's unique ability to depict realistic women: "There is the image of a strong woman devoid of whimpering and subtle seductions that bind and hold her back and nevertheless, she knows how to hold back and cling." Unlike other

³ Sans qu'il soit question de « féminisme » ici n'est pas en deux mots que peut se résumer l'idéal féminin (corps et âme) du maître écrivain Emile Zola ? Il veut à la femme « les » *hanches larges* et un *grand cœur* — c'est-à-dire toute la santé et la joie du monde. N'est-ce pas là un rêve magnifique ? Et de l'avoir sans relâche présenté et représenté à la foule sous de simples, si fortes et si douces figures, n'est-ce pas là la plus belle action (en une si grande œuvre) d'un tel rêve...

novelists, Zola imagined strong, progressive yet bourgeois new women in contrast with more sensationalized revolutionary feminist figures. Indeed, the slow transformation of domestic angels into educated, intelligent and skilled citizens so prominent in *La Fronde*, is perfectly consistent with steady institutional reform in the *Gospels*. It was Zola's very feminine heroines that a published *femme de lettres* like May-Armand Blanc and her fellow *frondeuses* genuinely admired.

Feminist Evolution in *Travail*

Whether or not journalists like Blanc may qualify as feminists by today's standards, scholarly work on the *Four Gospels* has too often dismissed its positive critical reception by arguing that Zola's bravery in the Dreyfus affair had clouded critical perspective. Praise of these novels, however, cannot simply be explained as an effect of their romantic idealism, nor as a function of fin-de-siècle feminists' social conservatism. What is clear in this critical disjunction is that contemporary admirers of *Fécondité*, *Travail*, and *Vérité* (*Fruitfulness*, *Work*, and *Truth*) were able to appreciate his new social gospels because they read Zola's fiction differently than scholars today. As we shall see, the *Gospels* appealed to literary and political critics as well as average readers. The degree of praise, disappointment or contempt in critical reviews of these novels depends upon whether Zola's readers concentrated on either the broad symbolism of the novels' heroes, or on his prophesy of a progressive, yet realistic egalitarian social system, that is to say, whether their focus was on the *Gospels'* literariness or its social politics.

While the 1899 publication of *Fécondité* was met with a wide variety of critical opinions in the press, the majority of the *frondeuses* saw in Zola's novels, and his *Gospels* in particular, characters and stories resonant with the struggles that they sought to expose in their own writing. Zola's admirers in *La Fronde* included women novelists and

self-professed feminists such as Harlor (aka Jeanne Perrot), Louise Marlaud, Parrhisia (aka Blanche Cremnitz) and Manoël de Grandfort (pseud. Mme de Fontenay). Shortly after *Travail's* publication in 1901, *La Fronde* printed a survey on Zola's ideal future women in which respondents critiqued the *Gospels'* vision of women of the future. Those who responded negatively to the question, "Do the types of women presented by Zola in *Work* realize the ideal of the woman of the future?" attacked the novel's three main female protagonists: Josine, Suzanne, and Sœurette (little Sister), arguing that they are simplistic fools, whose only purpose is to further deify Luc Froment, the mastermind behind the new industrial city La Crêcherie (The Nursery-Maker). As respondent "M. Bailly" put it, "'They do not think for themselves and are still under the intellectual domination of men, existing only for him who remains the hero the we admire, that we love not as an equal but as a humble student, as an inferior.'" Another respondent under the name "Liberta" charged that

The ignorant and submissive women, placid, apathetic, carefree and perverse women in Zola's reading are in no way different from those that oppression and male vice have commonly fashioned or deformed up until now. (...) The only female figure that is worth anything in this work is Madame Mitaine, the baker-woman, a type that is barely sketched out.⁴

While radical feminist and abortion rights activist Nelly Roussel recognized Zola's attempt at inventing a progressive, liberated woman, she lamented that "'Zola isn't truly a feminist" because his heroines remain subordinate to men, and are not emancipated in their own right. Invoking *Fécondité's* Marianne, Roussel explains that what Zola's female figures lack most in terms of feminism is

⁴ Les femmes ignorantes et soumises, placides, apathiques, insouciantes et perverses du lire de Zola ne diffèrent en rien de celles que l'oppression et les vices masculins ont communément façonnées ou déformées jusqu'ici (...) La seule figure de femmes qui vaille en cet ouvrage est celle de Mme Mitaine, la boulangère, et ce type est à peine ébauché.

agency and individuality. However, Marianne did express a certain degree of sexual agency; in fact, it was she who demanded sexual intimacy and children from Mathieu, not the contrary.

With regard to the following *Gospel*, Zola's feminist critics like Roussel were most likely thinking of passages in *Travail* such as Luc had an adored and fertile spouse who gave him children of his own flesh, and he was to have two women friends, two companions with delicate, womanly hands who would help him in his intellectual work" (8:464-465). They perhaps also had in mind the description of Luc's common-law wife Josine as the "wife of the beloved hero, mother of beautiful children who grew up in the name of happiness (8:492). This description is intentionally reductive, not because that is how Zola's narrator exalts Josine; on the contrary, her auxiliary role is perceived through the jealous and myopic eyes of the miserable old woman La Toupe. It is perhaps moments of narrative slippage like these, from external description to omniscient narrated monologues, that penetrate a particular character's innermost thoughts and feelings rather than convey narrative judgment.

By making Luc the heroic Froment of the second gospel on worker's reform, Zola refers the reader to the Bible's Gospel According to Luke. *Travail's* three women disciples resonate with women's special function in the biblical Gospel, and reinforce a pro-feminist reading of Zola's novel. Luke's Gospel has recently drawn new feminist attention for its egalitarian social vision, specifically the inclusion of women in Christian history because of their unique assistance in spreading Jesus' social message.⁵ Moreover, Josine is the emblem of social injustice, not a realistic female figure or model of femininity. She represents Charles Fourier's belief that as long as women were

⁵ In Luke's Gospel, according to Jane Kopas "the experience of lowliness and oppression is in no way passive or self deprecatory, but is rather a hymn of human solidarity both with others who have cried for deliverance and with the compassionate God (1:46-56)." For more on women in Luke's Gospel see Kopas "Jesus and Women: Luke's Gospel."

oppressed, there would be no equality and no justice. Fourier's concern for women's special oppression was widely recognized by feminist labor reformers, and he is often attributed the first usage of the term "feminism" in France. (Rabaut, *Féministes à la Belle Epoque* 102). It is the discovery of Fourier's *Solidarité* in Jordan's library that triggers his decision to act out against social injustice.⁶ Thus, feminist disapproval of Luc's female disciples in *Travail* overlooks this special literary intertext, and the complexity of Zola's multifarious narrative.

In spite of her feminist critique, Roussel admitted that in *Travail*, Zola "drew admirable female traits," suggesting that the novel's social vision was not entirely antifeminist. Feminist admirers of the novel focused not on the novel's female trio, but instead on women's roles in the larger social picture that dominates *Travail's* last few chapters. They responded quite favorably to the feasible social reforms upon which Zola's new egalitarian city La Crêcherie was founded. Louise Marlaud, another respondent to *La Fronde's* survey, expressed her admiration for *Travail's* female characters, and heartily supported fellow *frondeuse* Harlor, who devoted a lengthy review of the second *Gospel* to *La Fronde's* front page one month prior to this survey. In "Autour du dernier poème d'Emile Zola" ("About the latest poem by Emile Zola") Harlor, daughter of the poet and feminist Amélie Hammer, defends Luc's abstract heroism as a literary device meant to inspire social change rather than present a real leader.⁷ Just as Luc's Crêcherie is inspired by Fourier's ideal industrial city *Harmonie*, Zola's social gospel

⁶ The meta-writing in this passage makes Zola's political investment explicit: "Luc, qui avait ouvert la bibliothèque, voulut choisir un de ces livres...Le titre : *Solidarité*, venait de l'émouvoir ; et n'était-ce pas ce qu'il lui fallait, les quelques pages de force et d'espoir dont il avait besoin ?... Il savait déjà toutes ces choses, il les avait lues dans les œuvres mêmes du maître, mais jamais elles ne l'avaient remué à ce point, conquis si profondément ... Le petit livre s'animait, tout prenait un sens nouveau et immédiat, comme si des faits vivants surgissaient, se réalisaient devant lui" (*Travail* 171-172).

⁷ For more on Harlor's biography and writing see Steven C. Hause and Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque*, 73-84.

likewise paints a liberated egalitarian city in broad strokes, whence vision eclipses method. *Travail* is a concerted attack on bourgeois economics, Harlor argues, the destruction of which paves the way for a new egalitarian industrial community imagined and realized by Luc and his female disciples:

But, by his very soul, if we except the virtues made up of intelligence, method and tenacity to which Luc owed his victory, the class from whence he came no longer produces but rare examples that compare to him. The economic bourgeois egotism equals in intensity Man's egotism in general against Woman: and in this respect, feminism must thank Zola who has shown in coeducation, the necessary education of a free people. Luc's triumph would be a great lesson to the bourgeoisie, if a poet's fiction could open the eyes of the willingly blind, exercise influence on a class, convert it (...) ⁸

For Harlor, feminism is indebted to Zola for his heroic portrayal of education as a means of socially and economically emancipating men and women. *Travail's* meticulous representation of la Crêcherie's educational system presents a practical model of reform, which begins with combining girls' and boys' education. This is crucial to la Crêcherie's success insofar as the two sexes will develop alongside of one another, studying the same subjects and skills, according to individual interest. The social and professional camaraderie that coeducation engenders provides the first steps towards social harmony. Harlor is cognizant of the potential misinterpretation of *Travail*,

⁸ Mais, par l'âme même, abstraction faite des vertus d'intelligence, de méthode et de ténacité auxquelles Luc doit sa victoire, la classe dont il est ne produit plus que de rares exemplaires à lui comparer. L'égoïsme économique bourgeois égale en intensité l'égoïsme de l'homme, en général, contre la femme : et, à ce propos le féminisme doit remercier Zola qui a montré, dans la coéducation, l'éducation nécessaire d'un peuple libre. Le triomphe de Lux serait une grande leçon pour la bourgeoisie, si la fiction d'un poète pouvait ouvrir les yeux aux aveugles volontaires, agir sur une classe, la convertir...

which risks being dismissed as another example of utopian delusion in spite of its clear political message:

This spirit, this goal is the liberation of the individual with liberated humanity: and the poet desires the liberation of each and every one of us, I repeat, to be intellectual and moral as well as economic: he wishes this as much for the female individual as for the male individual.⁹

This praise is reflective of Harlor's Marxist feminist standpoint, one that is powerfully represented in Zola's lyrical novel. Thus, she defends Josine, the character most intensely critiqued by Roussel, Liberta and M. Bailly. She argues that Josine's transformation from exploited *ouvrière*—"slave of slaves...the working woman, serf and victim to the working man as much as and more so than to the boss"—to protected spouse and mother symbolizes the special importance of lower-class women's working and living conditions in their path toward emancipation. *Travail* is as such, a call to praxis for blasé bourgeois socialists who should follow Luc's enlightened and optimistic reform initiatives, a bourgeois hero who "upsets nothing. He constructs and when he demolishes, it's to construct over again, always tirelessly, to introduce air and sunlight where there was night, filth and pestilence." Thus, Harlor's review lauds the revolutionary aspects of *Travail*, while simultaneously overlooking the evolutionary nature of literature as a vehicle for social change. Indeed, *Travail's* poetic call to action not only depicts a gradual, multigenerational vision of social progress, and as a novel, its social impact is necessarily slow and steady.

Like Liberta, Roussel acknowledges Zola's attempts, however limited in their view, to imagine liberated women, and yet both regret the minor role that his truly emancipated figures play in the novel. Harlor, on the other hand, reveres *Travail's* revolutionary social message, all the

⁹ Cet esprit, ce but, c'est la libération de l'individu dans l'humanité libérée: et cette libération de tous et de chacun, le poète la veut, je le répète intellectuelle et morale aussi bien qu'économique : comme il la veut pour l'individu féminin aussi bien que pour le masculin.

while overlooking the slower, evolutionary function that the novel itself emphasizes as particular to works of literature. As *Travail's* narrator explains, reading triggers Luc's epiphany and engagement, "The little book had lived in the hands of an apostle and a hero, the mission would now be fulfilled, at the hour marked by evolution" (8: 176). *Travail's* force is derived from the call for social revolution, the broad symbolism of a violent eradication of old, corrupt society, and at the very same time, the steady march towards social justice through institutional reform. Feminism went hand in hand with the worker's struggle; as the *frondeuse* Bradamante put it, "feminism is simply a parallel struggle to socialism against the powers of oppression and darkness" (Rabaut, *Marguerite Durand* 74). Indeed, though Marianne, Josine, Suzanne, and Sœurette, are clearly complimentary characters to the virile Froment brothers, *Fécondité* and *Travail* present a poetic inspiration for implementing practical institutional reforms that over time, would directly enable women's emancipation, namely, state welfare assistance for mothers and children, childrearing technologies, and most importantly, equal secular education for boys and girls.

Vérité's Full Feminism

Travail's social system fictionalized Zola's interest in the plight of workers and working mothers, yet, unlike *Les Rougon-Macquart*, this was a new kind of fiction that sought to heal the social wounds it simultaneously exposed. Up until the 1890s, this preoccupation with working-class misery had manifested itself primarily in his naturalist dissection of different working-class milieus in novels like *Le Ventre de Paris* (*The Belly of Paris*), *L'Assommoir* (*The Drunkard*) and *Germinal*. Indeed, despite Zola's essentialist remarks about "feminism" in 1896 which declared "'La femme ne sera jamais que ce que la nature veut qu'elle soit,'" his naturalist curiosity was beginning to transform into a bona fide commitment to social and professional

reform for working mothers. His 1891 article in *Le Figaro* "Aux mères heureuses" ("To the Happy Mothers"), attempts to drum up support for a Parisian Maternal Society (*Société maternelle parisienne*) founded by Mmes Charpentier (wife of Zola's editor), Sain, and Manuel. Zola takes this opportunity to publicly condemn the limitations of working women who want children because as workers, they are unable to care for their families full time. At the same time, Zola attempts to entice middle-class mothers to assist childcare initiatives for the lower classes:

But, oh happy mothers, we must protest, it is bad that work be punished, that the working woman be thereby wounded in her maternity. And it is you, happy mothers, privileged mothers, that must cry out in favor of other mothers, those unfortunates burdened with life's necessities. Hold out both hands, help Work. May each morning, the caress of your children awaken in your memory the misery of other mothers who live alone like sterile women! Have your own happiness forgiven, give a bit of this happiness to women from whom it is stolen, reestablish the great equality of women of all classes in the love and joy brought by children! (14: 826-827)¹⁰

This society is not charity, as Zola insists, but instead a necessary social assistance to women who must work. He furthermore applauds the three women responsible for this enterprise, as admirable individuals whose social interests had become real social action. By appealing to maternal empathy and no small dose of middle-class guilt, Zola

¹⁰ Mais, ô mères heureuses, il faut protester, il est mauvais que le travail soit puni, que la femme qui travaille soit par là même frappée dans sa maternité. Et c'est vous, mères heureuses, mères privilégiées, qui devez jeter le cri en faveur des autres mères, les malheureuses que les nécessités de la vie accablent. Tendez les deux mains, aidez le travail. Que, chaque matin, la caresse de vos enfants éveille dans votre mémoire la misère des autres mères, qui vivent seules comme des femmes stériles ! Faites-vous pardonner votre bonheur, donnez un peu de ce bonheur aux femmes à qui on le vole, rétablissez la grande égalité des femmes de toutes les classes dans l'amour et dans la joie de l'enfant!

presents their investment as a model for other privileged women. It seems likely that real women like these philanthropic acquaintances inspired Zola's heroic characters in *Travail*. By the end of the novel, Sœurette becomes director of the central Day Care, Josine, director of the clothing atelier, and Suzanne, head music instructor. Like Mme Charpentier and her partners, *Travail's* powerful triad are all privileged women who use their wealth, intelligence and influence to lead future generations of women in the pursuit of more active and integral social roles: "they all three together formed a sort of council, meant to discuss serious issues that involved women in the new City" (8: 530). *Travail's* social prophesy goes beyond philanthropy, imagining specific institutional methods for effectively emancipating women through domestic and professional education. Moreover, rather than men dictating women's instruction, *Travail's* heroines form an independent, influential female force within a mixed, egalitarian community. As such, advocacy and education, which had been long been prominent themes in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels, become systematized in these new secular gospels *Travail* and *Vérité*, strengthening the relationship between fiction and political action.

While Zola's preparatory notes for *Paris* may resist a feminist interpretation of his heroine Marie Froment, his notes for the *Four Gospels* conversely demonstrate Zola's positive dialogue with feminist discourse. The notes that span the years during which the *Gospels* project was conceived and realized attest to Zola's growing admiration for feminism, which was becoming an integral part of his socially engaged literary project. As early as 1898, Zola's preparatory documents reveal his concern for appealing to a specifically feminist audience. In his outline for *Fécondité's* characters he writes of Marianne Froment (Marie Froment's daughter-in-law)

Psychology. The wife, the spouse, above all, the mother. And all that from the point of view of the current issue of feminism. Feminists who want to make woman man's equal are right in absolute

justice. But woman must conserve her function (...)
 I have to show [Marianne] morally
 (psychologically) conditioned to raise [her children]
 well. (Preparatory Notes for *Fécondité* 210)¹¹

Zola imagines a kind of modern woman who would remain feminine and still promote the egalitarian family model which he perceives to be feminist. His strategy for appealing to feminist ideals is not to destroy feminine domesticity, but instead to revise and expand women's and men's domestic roles in an effort to equally distribute parental duties. Mathieu and Marianne, Zola projects, "put both of their efforts together, [they] get along with one another, encourage and console one another, which makes them always victorious." (Preparatory Notes 22-23). Thus, much like the *frondeuses*, Zola's aims are modest: to imagine the modern French woman as one whose intellectual and physical capacity surpass those of the average housewife, and yet, one who lacks the ambition to renounce her traditional role. Even as Zola explores here women's active and equal role in his fantasy of the new republican family, he is unable to articulate any clear method for achieving equality: "Do not only plunge her in the household, do not make her a mere cook, nurse, baby-machine, and nanny. Immobilized during her pregnancy, put [the children] to bed and nurse them (...) but then, the role in the household, social function..." (Preparatory Notes 27). As such, Marianne and Mathieu's domestic roles are unique; because of their mutual love and respect for one another, they do not need to become equal, rather they simply *are* equal. Readers would have to wait until *Travail's* publication to discover exactly what this "social function" meant, and more importantly, how Zola he would create socio-economic equality between men and women in his utopian industrial city. In this second *Gospel*, Zola follows

¹¹ Au moral. La femme, l'épouse, la mère surtout. Et cela au point de vue de la question du féminisme actuel. Les féministes, qui veulent faire la femme l'égale de l'homme, ont raison en justice absolue. Mais la femme doit conserver sa fonction ... il faut que je montre [Marianne] moralement conditionnée pour bien élever [ses enfants].

Fourier's formula that human liberation must include emancipating women from domestic oppression, and that this can be achieved slowly but surely through secular, free, co-education of boys and girls. Perhaps it was so evident to Zola that his utopian society was realizing feminist reform that not once does the word feminism appear in his notes for *Travail*, unlike the other *Gospel* novels.

Finally, in *Vérité*, feminism emerges as an integral part of the novel's ideology. Like *Travail*, the last published novel of the *Gospel* series, *Vérité* represents the steady progression of the Republic through social reform. In each previous gospel, spousal love, whether in legal or common law marriages, enables future generations to transcend class difference, but in this last novel, education and personal agency prove to be the most effective means of achieving social equality. *Vérité* is decidedly the most realistic and pragmatic of the utopian *Gospels*, a fact that critics have attributed to its transparent fictionalization of the events of the Dreyfus affair. Regardless of the extent to which history influenced the novel's verisimilitude, the pace of successful social reform is slower than in the other gospels, the characters are more complex, and the social dynamics of the small French town are more developed and believable.

The most surprising trajectory of social progress in *Vérité* is the explicit emancipation of women, from the Catholic Church, from marriage, and even from men. In *Vérité* religion is the enemy to social harmony because like real labor structure that Zola assiduously critiqued in *Travail*, the Church oppresses children more than adults and women more than men. Emancipation becomes possible through the adoption of state-funded, secular co-education, effectively freeing women from the superstitions and ignorance taught by the clergy. Zola presents women's gradual emancipation through five generations of a Catholic family: the strict and pious Madame Duparque, her subservient daughter Madame Berthereau, her agnostic yet practicing daughter Geneviève (Marc Froment's wife) and her baptized yet free-thinking, secularly educated daughter

Louise, and finally Louise's atheist daughter Thérèse (8: 550-551).

This genealogy of liberation culminates in Thérèse's (Marc Froment's granddaughter) refusal to reconcile with her husband François, who had abandoned his family for his mistress. When *Vérité's* hero Marc attempts to reunite the troubled couple, explaining that social harmony depends upon familial and marital harmony, Thérèse objects. Addressing Marc, she explains her choice to remain unmarried and happily raise her daughter as a single mother:

Grandfather, have no regrets, tell yourself that you have accomplished to the best of your ability, an admirable task, which will grant us all of human happiness within reason. As for the rest, as for romance, it is the love of each one that will tailor it to each individual case, even through tears. Let us live, me and François, and even suffer as we choose, since that is our concern alone. It is enough that you liberated both of us, that you made us two people aware of the possibility of a world with more truth and more justice. (8: 747)¹²

Thérèse's victory within the family and community, established by the applause ensuing the above speech, dismantles the patriarchal authority and patronizing tone of Marc Froment's formula for social justice: "It was necessary to educate women in order to give them their legitimate and equal place next to men (...) since liberated women alone could liberate men (...) enchainé himself, incapable of virile and decisive action" (8: 744-745). Thérèse boldly and calmly asserts her absolute independence, declaring a

¹² Et puis, grand-père, n'avez aucun regret, dites-vous que vous avez fait votre possible, une tâche admirable qui nous donnera du bonheur humain tout ce que la raison peut en attendre. Le reste, la vie sentimentale, c'est l'amour de chacun qui le réglera pour son cas personnel, même parmi les larmes. Laissez-nous, François et moi, vivre, même souffrir à notre guise, car cela ne regarde que nous. Il suffit que vous nous ayez libérés tous les deux, que vous ayez fait de nous les personnes conscientes d'un monde du plus de vérité et de plus de justice possible.

new phase for women's rights facilitated by Marc's struggle to create a new educational system, "'As you say, we are free, and I intend to remain so" (8: 745). Her rejection of conjugal duty furthermore challenges *Fécondité's* thesis that love between husband and wife will always triumph over poverty and emotional hardship. Of course, conjugal love remains a core value in the formation of his new republican family; in its absence, parental affection and investment is just as valuable if not more so. In this respect, Zola's conception of women's liberation resembles the maternalist-feminist agenda, to protect and honor motherhood.¹³

Had Zola been able to make final revisions to *Vérité's* manuscript before his untimely death, the feminist evolution demonstrated by Thérèse and her female elders may have been even more explicit (Morgan & Pagès 332). By 1901 the word feminist, as Zola's preparatory notes attest, was no longer a stigma he wished to avoid in his novels. In fact, the words feminist and feminism appear repeatedly throughout his notes for *Vérité*:

Mother, lover, spouse. The entire issue of feminism, such as I envision it: women liberated from men in law and in reality, but forced to remain in her function. That will be whole intimate drama for Marc... Drama in which I shall have the whole of feminism, women absolutely liberated from the Church (...) And take advantage of history in order to complete women's liberation, full feminism (...) Women completely emancipated (...) I repeat, women's entire liberation, saved and

¹³ This intention to represent contemporary feminist values is clear in his notes for Thérèse (initially called Rose): "Rose: si elle ne prend pas un autre mari, c'est qu'elle n'aime personne (...) Tout à fait engagée avec sa fille. Il ne faut plus la faire dépendre de l'homme, en faire une créature civile et sociale en soi," ("Dossier préparatoire pour *Vérité*," Centre Zola, CNRS, 227)

released from the Church. (Preparatory Dossier for *Vérité* 65, 226-229, 233, 251)¹⁴

Zola's integration of what he referred to as "full feminism" in his last literary work reveals his endorsement of contemporary feminist movements. Feminist ideology is no longer a technique for characterization as was the case with Marie Froment, as well as earlier "pseudo-feminist" traits in Zola's female characters; it had become the linchpin of *Vérité's* social victory. Unlike his fellow pro-feminist male authors, Zola's vision of women's full emancipation surpassed freedom from patriarchal labor management and the Church, to include their absolute intellectual, marital and sentimental independence. In other words, a woman did not need to rely upon a husband for a gratifying social or emotional existence. The *Gospels'* utopia distinguishes itself by imagining women with active social participation through motherhood or public service independent of men, as *Vérité's* notes indicate: "Think also about giving [women] a career. Inclined towards teaching. (...) Miss Mazeline the woman of tomorrow (feminism) (...) Against priests, the emancipated woman, working toward the deliverance of her sisters" (Preparatory Dossier 352, 133, 92). *Vérité's* schoolteacher Mlle Mazeline realized the full professional potential of liberally educated women like Marie Froment's female schoolmates. As a single woman fulfilled by her work, she proves to be a model citizen of the republic: an intelligent and dedicated worker leading women to social, economic and intellectual emancipation.

The *frondeuses'* high praise of Zola's female evangelists and his preparatory documents for the *Four Gospels* confirm the growing affinity between Zola and fin-de-siècle

¹⁴ La mère, l'amante, l'épouse. Toute la question du féminisme, telle que je l'envisage : la femme libérée égale de l'homme en droit et en fait, mais forcée de rester dans sa fonction. Cela va être tout le drame intime de Marc... Drame où j'aurai tout le féminisme, la femme absolument libérée de l'église. (...) Et profiter de l'histoire pour achever la libération de la femme, le plein féminisme. (...) La femme tout à fait émancipée. (...) Je le répète, toute la libération de la femme, sauvée, sortie de l'Eglise.

feminists. In his letter of thanks to *La Fronde's* Harlor, Zola made this mutual admiration clear:

Madame,

I am extremely moved by the beautiful and kind study that you have dedicated to *Work* in *The Slingshot*, and I send you my most enthusiastic thanks, for I prize feeling the valiant combatants of this newspaper by my side.

Gratefully and devotedly yours...

(*Correspondance* 270)¹⁵

This letter, written during the writing stage of *Vérité*, signals a pivotal moment in Zola's engagement with women writers and activists with whom he fought for the same rights and reforms in the shared dream of a more just and equal French republic.

Conclusion: Final Respects

Zola's shifting attitude toward feminism followed the major trends in feminist rhetoric and reform exemplified by writers in the feminist daily paper *La Fronde*. A giant step from his early reactionary remarks in *Le Figaro's* survey that equated feminists with *bas-bleus* and man-hating viragos, Emile Zola's socially engaged *Gospels* demonstrate a remarkable admiration and support of women's movements for social and economic emancipation.

Although Zola has been negatively compared to other pro-feminist writers like Jules Bois, Eugène Brieux, and Victor and Paul Margueritte, his writing parallels the moderate and maternalist views dear to the overwhelming majority of *La Fronde's* feminist novelists and journalists. The Margueritte brothers affiliated themselves with Zola

¹⁵ Madame,

Je suis extrêmement touché de la belle et sympathique étude que vous avez bien voulu consacrer à *Travail* dans *La Fronde*, et je vous en adresse les remerciements d'autant plus vifs, que je tiens beaucoup à sentir avec moi les vaillantes combattantes de ce journal.

Veillez me croire votre bien reconnaissant et bien dévoué.

who in his time, bravely exposed the social oppression of women in the preface to their bestselling novel of female sexual emancipation, *La Garçonne* (*The Flapper* 1922). Like Bois who declared himself “in favor of a very feminine feminism,” the naturalist’s last utopian works realized the demands of contemporary French women: the right to motherhood, equal educational and professional opportunity, and even sexual and sentimental agency.¹⁶ Emile Zola’s death in September of 1902 sparked a wave of grief for the man whose novels exposed women’s particular struggles as no other French writer had. *La Fronde* published numerous articles in honor of Zola’s special devotion to the improvement of women’s situations in the creation of a more just world.

Harlor paid homage to Zola’s simple yet powerful œuvre: If Zola’s most vigorously drawn female characters are simple-hearted, at times even basic, there are several whose contrast has something typical” (“Son Œuvre”). She ponders how one could not salute “the apostle of an ideal of social justice, of scientific truth, the apostle of *Paris*, of *Work* and of this third *Gospel*...which attested to an acuity as admirable as was his intrepid civic courage.” Zola’s prophetic humanitarian philosophy, she explains, is at once modern and timeless. Parisshia, an older feminist activist, celebrated Zola’s unique ability to combine the horrifying truth of social injustice with poetry and idealism in his depiction of women: “If [Zola’s work] was at times frighteningly realist, one must admit that there are wounds in which it is necessary to drive a red-hot poker, and

¹⁶ According to Jean Rabaut, Jules Bois declared himself in favor of a women’s emancipation that “ne renonce pas aux services que nous rendirent autrefois les dociles aieules pour la sécurité de la famille et la sécurité de la patrie.” (*Féministes à la belle époque* 118). Unlike Zola, *frondeuses* dismissed Marcel Prévost’s gynophilia, seeing his admiration as deeply macho: A vrai dire, le ‘charme féminin’ se teinte de bien des nuances entre les rédactrices de ‘La Fronde.’ Voici Marcelle Tinayre qui, rompant les lances, à propos des romancières, avec Marcel Prévost ... Il ne fait point savoir pourquoi, selon lui, ‘les romancières du XXe siècle ne seraient pas femmes tout simplement, sans affectation de cynisme et sans plus de gentillesse qu’il n’est nécessaire’” (*Marguerite Durand* 62)

Gervaise, who in *The Drunkard*, began with romantic poetry only to end up degraded and meeting a horrible death by *delirium tremens*, isn't she the most striking example of the ravages of alcoholism, that one could offer to women of the lower classes?"

Other women wrote to *La Fronde* to organize special homages to Zola's inspirational *Gospels*. Henriette Meyer called out to her fellow schoolteachers, to honor "the defender of justice and truth, the glorifier of Work and of thought." Men and women of their profession, she exclaimed, "it is our duty to accompany the genius Poet who established himself as the defender of secular schools." Another *frondeuse* reported the presence of a laundry owner who demanded that she pay her final respects: "I'm telling you that I am the boss of a laundry and I am here on behalf of my washer-women" ("Les obsequès d'Emile Zola"). According to the reporter, this real-life laundress and her female staff wished to "give final homage to the writer who made a woman like them, the heroine of one of his novels, this unfortunate and kind Gervaise, whose portrait is still lifelike." The radical feminist Caroline Kauffman summarized the extraordinary influence of Emile Zola's writing on the feminist movement:

During its October 1st meeting held at the 6th arrondissement city hall, the Women's Solidarity, a mixed feminist group, decided to send Madame Zola its respectful sympathy and condolences, on behalf of the group.

Women's Solidarity has the deepest admiration for the powerful writer who spoke in his work, without hypocrisy, about social wounds such as alcoholism and prostitution. All women, whatever their political and religious opinions may be, owe their gratitude to those who, like Zola, dared to unveil the causes of immorality today.¹⁷

¹⁷ La solidarité des femmes, groupe féministe mixte, dans sa réunion du 1^{er} octobre, tenue à la mairie du sixième arrondissement, a décidé d'adresser à Mme Zola, au nom du groupe, l'expression de sa respectueuse sympathie et ses sentiments de condoléance. La Solidarité des femmes a la plus

These testimonials from women of *La Fronde* acknowledge the exceptional attention that Emile Zola's writing paid to women's conditions in his lifelong effort to educate and inspire French readers to social action. Indeed, it seemed that Zola's fiction had brilliantly transmitted his ideals which would live on in the French social imagination long after his death.

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profonde admiration pour l'écrivain puissant qui a parlé, sans hypocrisie, dans ses œuvres, des plaies sociales, telles que l'alcoolisme et la prostitution. Toutes les femmes, quelles que soient leurs opinions politiques et religieuses, doivent être reconnaissantes à tous ceux qui, comme Zola, osent dévoiler les causes de l'immoralité actuelle.

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creative contributions

Erika Almenara¹

Curtin Hall

*Los sentidos tan jóvenes
frente a un mundo se abren
sin goces ni sonrisas,
que no amanece nadie*

Luis Cernuda

Nuestras manos se liquidan
cuando mi labio
y tu lágrima
fueron asfalto

el recuerdo
se refleja al pie del árbol
donde la ardilla agita sus patas

Florence y Mónica
ordenan restos de una Navidad prestada,
mientras yo
te escondo en el viento,
entre el silencio de la nieve

ellas ignoran que
allá en Lima
alguien se ha quedado
a solas con la muerte.

¹ University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee)

Tiresias 3 (April 2009)

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/rll/tiresias/index.html>
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
University of Michigan

Continuidad

*Ella tiene la luz, tiene el perfume,
el color y la línea,
la forma, engendradora de deseos,
la expresión, fuente eterna de poesía*

Bécquer

Siempre acabas siendo una música
cuando, este alígero sentimiento,
esto, que crece porque sí,
inicia el viaje de la sangre

el incendio ha permanecido, ligero y feroz
incluso, en aquellos momentos en los que a una se le
agolpa la vida
entonces, pienso en saquearnos y robarnos mutuamente

vahos, humos imposibles

ahora que
la noche se ha derramado,
en un brindis mudo y cerebral te nombro

no hay que preguntarse
¿cómo fue que no fue?
una ola muere en la orilla
y tú,
tú siempre acabas siendo una música.

Sex and Panic

Fabiane Borges and Hilan Bensusan¹

It was panic! That anxious disturbance showed itself like when a demon attacks. Something that desubjectifies, disturbs, explodes without leaving an inch for self-control or distraction. She had a marijuana cake that the men of the house had prepared, and the syndrome came in. Two big black guys and a little white dude playing chess in the nicest house in that favela, while the neighbors dispute the power of their banging stereos playing about cunts-on-the-asphalt, take-her-from-behind. The women lowered their hips to the ground and laughed perversely at what they could do if their asses were assaulted from behind. The group of transvestites on the corner of the alley seized a car, showing off their silicone breasts, some oversized, others only imagined. The men of the house spoke in those calm men conversations and kept playing chess. On the other side of the room, she watched it all without dedicating herself to any of it. She was bent over, certain that she was having a cumulative heart attack, an aneurysm, a stroke, or even chronic asthma. A buzzing noise took over her head, a nervous buzzing that announced imminent death. The buzzing was so loud that it competed with the giant stereos in the windows. She tried to calm herself down: it will soon be over. But she didn't believe it, she was incredulous. Between one gasp and another, she bade farewell to the things that she liked in life: eating tangerines straight from the tree; being sucked off by horny lesbians; and, most of all, reading African mythology. She was so out of control that she could hardly manage to walk up the staircase

¹ Translated by Raphi Soifer

behind her companions, which is why she tried to go up in a single leap. She fell straight into the game of chess. In three seconds, she had destroyed the harmony on the terrace. She didn't want to interfere with the men in the house, much less to go out on the street in her half-naked state, head still wet from the cold shower that hadn't helped anything. She rolled on the ground gasping, a mixture of hysterical attack and the sound of cheesy sex. She had put her head on the men's legs, on their chests, taken their hands to her heart for them to say that everything was fine, but it wasn't. They were trying to be quick in freeing themselves from all that lack of taste that was threatening to infiltrate over their elevated soirée designed to make them feel that the men had elevated themselves over animals, over the females. The rush of a ritual that mixes culture and testosterone. She was in another kind of rush, the rush of pungent pain, of the absence of gasping air, of the risk of collapse. She wanted them to pull her away from her own lack of control. In her body, the lows and the peaks of panic mixed with etiquette and with the cunt on the muddy asphalt. The combat between speeds brought its own rush: the game couldn't stay tied for very long. She pulled herself from between the fragments of their bodies. They looked at her with complacent, complicit longing. She wasn't an accomplice, and she was too complicated. But she won the battle.

Wanna play pool?

It was one of the handsome black guys, the capoeira player, who had invited everybody. All she could do was grab the white host's arm:

-You're not going to play pool, you're not going to leave here. I don't have anyone else here, and you're going to stay here with me.

The other two left. He stayed. Standing, turning back from the door.

_There you are, you just ruined my Saturday.

_Sorry.

_You're weak. You make me nauseous.

_Fine, but hold on to my heart now, press it. Just a little.

_You should know I'm not going to take this drug. This isn't my vibe, it's yours. And if this is just your game to get us to fuck – I'm not going to fuck you. Got it? You don't turn me on.

_Fine, just press me, grab my shoulders, that's all. Change your tone of voice, too. Shit, you think I want to fuck? You really think all of this is to screw you? Ow...hold on to my heart. It sucks, these peaks suck. Take me to the emergency room!

_Dude, my Saturday is sacred! I just wanted to eat my pot cake, I just wanted to smoke without stress. I'm full of problems. Go get yourself a fucking schizoanalyst.

_There are no damn schizoanalysts here, I just need your help right now. Stop talking and hug me from behind. That's right. Harder. You'll be the schizoanalyst today.

_Shit, that's all I need. This chick wants sex and comes on with a pretext of health problems. You should find someone who can help you. Go down the hill and fuck someone, there are a bunch of big black guys who'll do you.

_You're the one talking about sex here. I'm having an attack. I need your help – don't you understand anything? A chick comes to ask for your help, she's desperate, and you think she wants to give it up for you? Can't you think of anything else? You think you're that hot, think you're irresistible?

_You talk about it all the time, write about it, and think that I'm going to associate you with what? Your head's on my cock. Don't suck it – it's dirty.

_No, no, I think my glucose got screwed up from your pot cake. Take me to the hospital, I can't get there by myself. Take me to the hospital, since you can't manage to take care of me, you worthless piece of shit!

_Stop fucking screaming! You're in the most dangerous favela in Salvador. You're crazy. I'm tired of your breathing, it sounds like you're screwing. Change the rhythm – haven't you even done yoga? You should! Goddammit. Hey, can someone bring something sweet up here?

(No one responds. Everyone went to shoot pool).

_I'll have some gum.

_It's full of gasoline.

_So what am I going to eat?

_A black cock.

_Yeah, right. Give me sugar! I need something to calm me, got it? Can't you do that for me – can't you at least do that?

_Hey baby, it will pass. Calm down. I'll hug you. Come closer, but don't suck my cock.

_That's right, that's right, I just need you to press against me a little. Times like these, I need someone pressing against me, I need to feel the force around me. I need to feel it strong. You can stop a little, that's it, put your hand on my neck. That's it, that's good.

_Girl, you need to look for better hook-ups. You just have bad hook-ups. They don't do you any good. I think you have to be more selective with your love, too.

_Guess what? I'm the one who takes care of my hook-ups. And in case you're wondering, that's how my selection works: I'll go for whatever appears in front of me, instead of waiting for some poet princess college student like you. Keep your hand there, don't take it away.

_Shut your mouth. This discussion is going to turn out bad. You're going to wind up with my cock in your mouth, and it's all dirty.

_You afraid of me? What are you afraid of? You think I'm a sexual monster?

_Half the world has syphilis and the other half has AIDS. You have a lot of sex. You must have one of the two, for sure.

_And if I want to infect you, what are you gonna do? You gonna resist? I need to infect to get over this panic, baby.

This panic that you feel about anything that doesn't fit your pattern of beauty and desire. Just pretty things, cute girls, good bodies. But old, black, and toothless...no way, right? That must be what you call a bad hook-up. Of course I want to infect you. This week, I went to a pool where there was this old guy, 70 years old. He looked at me so much, he was so wrinkled and ugly that I decided to give it up for him. It turned me on so much! I made an old guy happy and came on a wrinkled-up cock with loose balls. Bad hook-up? For you, of course it would be unthinkable to have a hook-up like that with a little old grandma, a black woman with dentures here on the corner. Goddamn patterns! That makes me panic – that must be why I'm feeling this way. Press me harder! Don't let go! Don't fucking fight with me! Press me harder, stop me from jumping, contain my despair!

_I think these experiences that you keep messing in are going to wind up killing you.

_I think your prejudice is what's killing me.

_Why do you keep messing around with these things? You're weak...you can't control them.

_Everyone has a drug of choice. You'd rather be a rasta, you want to keep the good part of the revolution, the part you think is good.

_And what's your revolution? Screwing half the world with no love, with no affection. Why do you mess around with that?

_Because I need experience. Sex is a vice – it's not always bad. You go on your own way. DON'T LET GO OF ME!

_Don't shout, you whore!

_I knew that's what you were talking about! You think whores are monsters. And they are, got it? They are! If you stop pressing me, I'll kill you.

_Girl, unlike what you think, I've fucked men before. There are some I still love. It's not my scene, but I lived my experiences. They're a lot different than yours, but I lived them. You're so pretentious, thinking yours are the only ones worth anything.

_You fucked men. Good for you. I bet they were all beautiful hackers like you.

_They weren't all beautiful. But I don't fuck anyone I can't have a conversation with...

_Oh, like an ideological selection.

_No, my hook-ups are complete. They come from all part of my body.

_That way, you only find people like you. The boundaries of your puritan sex life are the boundaries of your class, probably your race...

_Could be. I try to keep sex away from power – can you understand that?

_No, power never stays away, brother. The only thing that stops is your head. PRESS HARDER!

_People complicate everything, and it's not always worth it. You should spend more time with machines than with people, people aren't worth as much as you think.

_I know. If there's room for my pain in this fucking conversation,

I'll tell you about hangovers, strains, and violence.

_There's no room. Shut up. I'm enjoying my own vibe.

_But I'll talk quietly, you only have to hear it if you want to.

_Don't talk.

_I'm going to talk! Sex has its own fluxes, it's as though you were forcing desire. When desire forces itself, the pattern doesn't matter that much. Fighting the pattern of consuming bodies is one of the weird parts of sexual desire. You, for example, are an example of my desire from ten years back. These days, I see you as a white guy with dreads, almost Christian, a good little Franciscan who just screws for love. For your love, because whoever gets involved with you doesn't count. They could want anything from you, but you're going to persist masturbating to beauty. Just like any Salesian priest who did Indian girls out of love for God. Did it matter if the Indian wanted to guy to turn into an Indian? Obviously not! That's political, my friend. That's very political.

_So you've decided to screw everyone to redeem the Tupinambá Indians! You're a revolutionary!

_It's another game. I forced some experiences for myself that amplify the panorama of my desire, and each time I turn more lesbian, even in the way I hug freely. You always think of penetration because deep down, your tactical media is hetero. It wants to fuck, to inseminate if it can. Even more, it wants to be able to get away with the least guilt possible. You and all the other dogs in the world think that way. But you'd never admit it, because it's not right for hackristians to think that way. I need to learn to love humans, all of them, with a universal, non-territorial love. The violence of prejudice is the force I have to keep going, to keep insisting.

_To keep insisting on what?

_On the life we could have in this world, without borders or patterns. Access to pleasure and to land!

_And you turn more skeptical and more alone all the time.

_Could be. Loneliness is a risk. Yes! To the point of not wanting to have any kids.

_Sometimes I feel sorry for you. Your "political experience" is leading you to a dry life.

_I wish I had a dick, so I could jack off once in a while. Your hand's on my nipple.

_I know. And my cock's hard, too.

_I want to suck you off.

_I masturbated twice today. I didn't wash my dick. It's dirty.

(She takes a condom out of her pocket, puts it on his dick, and lowers her mouth slowly, until she's taken it all in).

_You're good at this.

_Experience.

_You confuse me.

_Don't stop pressing me, please!

_I won't stop. Don't you stop, either.

_Then put your knee between my legs.

_Take off your panties.

_I've had them off from the beginning.

_Can I go inside you?

_No, I prefer your knee.

_Why?

_Because it's more free culture than your cock.

After they cum, the hacker and the girl sleep calmly. No panic. One dreaming of Indians and revolutions, the other of moving away from town the next day.

Max Ubelaker Andrade¹

Soft artifice laughs quietly back (2008)

Quevedo and Redd Foxx
liked to joke about how all the best parts
of a woman
seem to always fall off
before sex
begins.
Both restrained themselves from jumping on the couch
where the long fake eyelashes, the wig, the wet cottonballs
marked
with red and brown and sparkling silver make-up
laid in a pile
with her dentures, the dress, long wrinkled stockings,
a push-up bra, the body-cinching girdle,
shining high-heeled shoes,
and even, perhaps, an ermine stole.
These items which they were not allowed to try on
languished on the white divan, curled into a disjointed
whisper
a tempting configuration of open possibilities, soft
(for the most part)
to the touch.

It was within the joke
—told, or written down—
that they managed to take possession
of these adornments,
the strange gathering that their piling
quietly insinuated.

¹ Boston University

This was done while stripping them
of their texture, their color, their smell,
stretching them across confident phrasing,
projecting their ghosts into the empty spaces
filled nervously, happily
with little hiccups of laughter.

The double strip-tease
informed us of two surprises.

The first, and most plainly stated,
was that any woman,
despite her nearness,
is nowhere to be found.

The second surprise
is that I am nowhere
and I am also
not sure where
you are,
especially now.

Despite all pretensions
of clarity
or hilarity
something continued to ring hollow, and spread.
The jokes meant to trap the onomatopoetic language
of beguiling, soft falsehoods
had not been able lay its grammar bare.
It was an imperfect transposition,
a frustratingly inadequate theft.

The falsehoods disappeared, muted aloud.
They could no longer cover curved and
breathing bodies.
And since we cannot steal absence without hearing its echo,
everything remains caught within this great reverberation.

We imagine them

dressed in high-heeled shoes,
mascara, and a touch of lipstick
as they scribble, sweating, in their notebooks.
The blinds are drawn and the lamp is lit.
The joke was larger, different than they had anticipated.

Waiting for a makeover (2008)

There is a television show that surprises people and dresses
them up
as protagonists.

It is not uncommon around here
to see certain women, in the background, optimistically
bracing

for a pair of hands to grasp their shoulders from behind
for a voice to call out
acknowledging them with a pleasant insult.

They are practicing, imagining cameras and young men
holding lights
all around them.

It is not enough to imagine it however
the hands must fall on the shoulders
and everyone has to acknowledge that this has all been a
joke.

If they mistakenly laugh too soon, before the cameras
appear and the lights loom high above,
before the makeover is formally initiated
then the laughter will be inappropriate given that the joke
will be less obvious, less contained,
still unstated.

Instead you might hear them cautiously make other jokes
about the weather and their neighbors
that carry traces of this larger joke within them, that hint at
its unforgiving contours.

And when they scowl at the bus driver it is not because
they are impatient with his tardiness

it is because no one has arrived yet,
because the messenger is absent and unsent.
And they would rather wait
than attempt an imperfect metamorphosis
in the quiet and uncut territory of the everyday.
They know that it could just as easily fold itself into the
shape
of their current condition,
which isn't really all that deplorable thank you very much.

We are in a precarious position, you see.
Balancing on the nonexistent edge of the familiar
makes for a particularly exhausting funambulism.
There's nowhere to fall,
each step lands precisely where it needs to,
and the spectators wander away,
realizing that this is no show.
This is not a performance.
These are not protagonists.
This is not a comedy and laughter, as we have previously
stated,
is uncomfortable and inappropriate.
My teeth are lightly clenched, of course.
My shoulders have imperceptibly rolled up into an anxious
hunch.
I am waiting, bracing, and my stomach is feeling unwell.
Do not cheer or point or smile or
insult me.
Unless, of course, there is a cameraman behind you.
Three young men carrying lights,
microphones on poles.
Because then I will be happy to laugh along
with all of you, all of us will
be elsewhere
laughing together.

Tiresias

Culture, Politics and Critical Theory

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**By other means:
The politics of sex and sexuality**

University of Michigan
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/rll/tiresias/index.html>

