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The Sickly Ornament:
Illness and Temporality from *Modernismo* to the Neobaroque

By

Johnathan J Vaknin

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Comparative Literature
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

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Professor Francine Masiello, Chair
Professor Judith Butler
Professor Barbara Spackman
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Abstract

The Sickly Ornament: Illness and Temporality from *Modernismo* to the Neobaroque

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Francine Masiello, Chair

This dissertation asks how aesthetic objects—novels, poems, literary nonfiction, and sculptures—register the temporal effects produced by the experience of illness. I stage a series of encounters between writers and artists from the Caribbean basin and Argentina, along with their European interlocutors, in order to glean what we might broadly call a *tempo* of illness. What these figures have in common, I contend, is a tendency to deploy ornamentation as a textual strategy whose aim is twofold: first, ornamentation effectuates temporal shifts by appearing to freeze the mobile flow of time; and second, it functions as a cipher through which the ill body is simultaneously obscured and revealed. Indeed, for each of the writers I study, the language of embellishment—associated with jewels, gems, and stylistic “frivolity” writ large—intersects so extensively with the language of sickness that the two become nearly indistinguishable. In this regard, they at first appear to vindicate a longstanding critical tradition that pathologizes all things decorative—a lineage that reached its apogee in *fin-de-siècle* medical and criminological treatises by Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso. Against the forward-leaning drive towards a given *telos* so forcefully expounded by positivist rationality, however, these writers privilege dissipation and stasis, and the immediacy of affect over the distance of action. The thick descriptions of ornate scenes that abound in texts by Colombian José Asunción Silva—like those that become emblematic of the neobaroque decades later—delay, but do not completely halt, our steady movement through the narrative, and it is precisely this technique that allows these writers to inscribe illness formally and thematically into their works. Just as the ill body slows down, or oscillates between bouts of paralysis and intense hyperactivity, so too do these texts stall their reader’s progress. This dynamic, I argue, yields an altered sense of time and thus offers a new point of entry into debates about queer temporalities, which have tended to emphasize *either* the past *or* the future, without attending to conditions that might disorient us to the present.

My first chapter, “Diving for Pearls: José Asunción Silva’s Etiophilia,” examines Silva’s vexed relationship to the problem of etiology. On the one hand, I show, Silva was immensely drawn to the virulently anti-Decadent writing of Nordau and Lombroso, who sought to locate the origins—the causes—of pathology and criminality in literary works they deemed “deviant.” On the other hand, his own aesthetic style is marked by excess and an abundance

of ornamentation, features that one typically associates with the work of Wilde and Huysmans. Tracing how this ambivalence constrains the poet's writing, I take as my case study his only novel, *De sobremesa*, and demonstrate how he experiments with narrative time by re-organizing the temporal order of cause and effect. Chapter Two, "Too Tired to Write: Severo Sarduy's Fatigue," shifts our attention to the latter half of the twentieth century in order to trace how illness circulates in and shapes the form of neobaroque writing. My focus here is on the trope of fatigue in Cuban novelist and playwright Severo Sarduy's final novel *Pájaros de la playa*. Set in a clinic that brings to mind Cuba's AIDS sanatoriums of the late 1980s and early 90s (the so-called "sidatorios"), the novel, as critics have tended to agree, can be read obliquely as a meditation on HIV/AIDS; while the ward's patients suffer from an illness referred to only as "el mal," they exhibit symptoms that include skin lesions (a clear allusion to Kaposi sarcoma) and, most frequently, an almost paralyzing lack of energy. My argument is that the fatigued body, needing to exert maximal force in order to perform the most minimal gesture, becomes the guiding trope through which Sarduy attempts to counter the linear passage of time. I claim, moreover, that this reversal mimics the mechanism by which Retrovir—one of the earliest AIDS medications (the most common side effect of which was a debilitating muscle fatigue)—neutralizes the virus' replication in the host's body. This unresolved tension between retrograde and forward-leaning motion ultimately leaves us in a temporal mode that, toward the end of his life, Sarduy called the "prepóstumo," a time that marks the ambiguous threshold between life and death. Chapter Three, "*Nomadismo en la fijeza*: Suspended Flow in Perlongher and González-Torres," reads essays and poems by Argentine poet and anthropologist Néstor Perlongher in tandem with sculptures by Cuban-American visual artist Félix González-Torres, both of whom turned to art to register their experiences with HIV/AIDS. I identify in their work what I call a poetics of suspended temporal flow. This, I show, is a warped form of temporality that emerges through movement in stasis; it bears the markers of what Perlongher, reading Deleuze and Guattari, identified as a kind of "nomadismo en la fijeza," a nomadism in fixity. In a Coda, finally, I explore the interplay between chronic and terminal temporalities by focusing on the shifting terrain of HIV/AIDS discourse in the era of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and "undetectability."

In memory of my mother, Mina, and my grandmother, Simona.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sickly Ornament: Illness and Temporality from *Modernismo* to the Neobaroque

Neo-classical aesthetics is imbued with the residues of the rhetorical imaginary, a sexist imaginary where the ornamental is inevitably bound up with the feminine, when it is not the pathological—two notions Western culture has throughout its history had a great deal of trouble distinguishing.

-Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987)

The *Ritmo* of Illness

In the first few lines of *Paradiso* (1966), José Lezama Lima's narrator tells us that a five-year-old José Cemí, the novel's protagonist, has probably been bitten by an ant lion. The bite provokes an allergic reaction that in turn triggers an asthma attack and causes the child's entire body to break out in painful welts. The young José lies recumbent in bed while his caretaker, Baldovina, carefully reads his symptoms: his chest and genitals are covered in dark red sores; his legs tremble with bursts of icy chills that run from his feet up to his thighs; and his torso rapidly inflates and contracts ("se abultaba y se encogía"¹) as he gasps for air, arduously attempting to recover a "ritmo natural." Fearing for the child's safety as well as the reaction of the family patriarch—a military colonel who, at present, is out at the opera with his wife—Baldovina frantically rushes to the opposite end of the house in order to alert the other servants, Zoar and Truni. The couple, enlisting the aid of "soluciones ancestrales," performs something of an exorcism on the young boy. Zoar picks the child up, presses him forcefully against his chest, and with his arms makes a cross on the boy's back, which the hooded Truni then kisses repeatedly. Ultimately, the ritual does nothing to assuage little José's pain or mitigate his symptoms, once more leaving Baldovina alone to attend to the child. In accord with the couple's recommendations, she applies a number of alcohol swabs to the boy's welts and decides to soothe them with sperm-oil wax; José's "asthmatic panting," the narrator adds, "no tenía importancia, que eso se iba y venía, y que durante ese tiempo el cuerpo se prestaba a ese dolor y que después se retiraba sin perder la verdadera salud y el disfrute"² ["And his asthmatic panting was not important, it came and went, it might even alleviate the pain; anyhow, it always went away and his good health always returned"³].

José's body thus makes visible the effects of his indeterminate malady—indeterminate because we don't know for certain what bit him, or whether he's actually been bitten at all. Furthermore—and this point is key to Lezama Lima's aesthetic project—

¹ José Lezama Lima, *Paradiso*, ed. Cintio Vitier (Nanterre: ALLCA XX, 1993), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ José Lezama Lima, *Paradiso*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 4.

it also lends a palpable form to the rhythm (the “ritmo”) that coordinates the scene. As José inhales and exhales⁴, we trace the up-and-down movement of his torso, which in turn records the *tempo*, the motion-in-time, or the speed, of the narrative.

In the scene that immediately follows, however, time appears to come to a standstill. Imagining the barrage of questions with which her employer will likely bombard her upon his return home, Baldovina, like Dante’s poet, envisions herself slowly retreating into the “selva oscura” [“forest so dark”] of the house’s outer corridors. This reverie diverts the narrator’s attention, and therefore ours, away from the action of the previous lines and toward the interior of the Cemí household. Over the course of the next few pages, the narrator suspends the motion of the plot in order to detail with meticulous precision the house’s architecture. “El teatro nocturno de Baldovina era la casa del Jefe” [“The Colonel’s house was Baldovina’s nocturnal theater”], he remarks, before describing each of the several rooms that comprise the building. He pays particular attention to the Colonel’s study, which he compares to a “naturaleza muerta,” a still life whose stillness is, of course, only an illusion (for even though time appears to freeze, it nonetheless continues passing as the narrator continues narrating and we continue reading). The room’s contents include piles upon piles of books (ranging from spy novels set during World War I to the fiction of Spanish *modernista* physician-writer Felipe Trigo) as well as a stack of boxes containing hats adorned with peacock feathers belonging to the Jefe’s wife. It’s only after giving us this intricate blueprint that the narrator then returns to the young José and his ailments.

In the first of these two scenes, to reiterate, Lezama Lima zooms in on the sickly body of the asthmatic José. The child’s torso, as I mentioned above, registers the visible markers of his unidentified illness, but it also sets up the temporal flow that the reader is invited to follow as we observe its wheezing motion. In the second scene, meanwhile, the Cuban novelist—whose text will come to emblemize what will be called the neobaroque sensibility, *tout court*—cultivates an image anchored in the ornamental embellishment: in the Colonel’s study, as in the myriad other settings described in intricate detail (think of the sumptuous dinner that lies at the novel’s center), our attention is channeled from one object to the next (from the books crammed onto the room’s shelves, to the assortment of things lying on the Colonel’s workdesk, to the iridescent feathers of the matriarch’s hats), none of which, it seems at first sight, effectuates any change in the plot other than to put it on pause. Our focus, I want to suggest here, therefore toggles between these two temporalities—between motion and the cyclical passage of time on the one hand (which, crucially, emerges through the ill body), and (illusory) stasis on the other.

Through their close juxtaposition, these two planes bring into sharp relief a longstanding connection first theorized by Naomi Schor in her seminal *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987). Here, Schor charts a trajectory extending from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* to Barthes’s writings on photography in order to demonstrate the recurring association between the detail and femininity. In an illuminating chapter on Decadence, she

⁴ Some critics have read the novel’s protagonist as an analog of the asthmatic Lezama Lima himself. On both the rich possibilities and crucial pitfalls of biographical readings of the novel, see Klaus Müller-Bergh, “José Lezama Lima and *Paradiso*,” *Books Abroad* 44, no. 1 (1970): 36-40. See, too, William Rowlandson, “Asthma and its Symbolism: The Respiratory Aesthetics of José Lezama Lima,” in *Latin American and Iberian Perspectives on Literature and Medicine* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

focuses on the work of French novelist and art critic Francis Wey. Like many of his contemporaries, Wey was highly suspicious of the realist “cult of details”: “The taste for and the close attention to details characterizes young and strong literatures,” he wrote, clarifying that “the abuse, the profusion of details signals decadent literatures...”⁵ Thus, for Wey, the problem lay not so much in the use of details, per se, but in their *abuse*, a seemingly quantitative factor that distinguished between “young and strong” literature on the one hand and “decadent” (i.e. “weak,” “feeble,” “sickly,” and “feminine”) literature on the other hand. With this in mind, Schor goes on to observe that the “ornamental is inevitably bound up with the feminine, when it is not the pathological—two notions Western culture has throughout its history had a great deal of trouble distinguishing.”⁶ The parameters of “Western culture” notwithstanding,⁷ I want to propose here that *Paradiso*’s opening scenes correspond in striking ways to the paradigm that Schor assembles: Lezama Lima, in other words, in conjoining José’s sick body with a detailed description of the interior of the Colonel’s study, affiliates the pathological with the ornamental, but—and this is important—he does so not in order to echo, but rather to undermine (if indirectly), the critiques that we find in writing by figures such as the Austrian architectural theorist Adolf Loos (who, as the title of his 1913 essay “Ornament and Crime” makes clear, famously deployed theories of evolution to effectively moralize and criminalize the use of ornamentation)⁸.

My dissertation, *The Sickly Ornament: Illness and Temporality from Modernismo to the Neobaroque*, draws its inspiration from Schor’s immensely helpful analyses. I proceed from the premise that, like *Paradiso*, a remarkably copious number of literary and artistic works affiliate illness with ornamentation. Thus, for instance, we might think of Peruvian-Mexican novelist Mario Bellatín’s *Salón de belleza* [*Beauty Salon*, 1994], which, as its title indicates, is set in a beauty salon that we quickly learn doubles as what appears to be an

⁵ Francis Wey, *Remarques sur la langue française au dix-neuvième siècle*, trans. Naomi Schor (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1845), quoted in Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 47.

⁶ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail*, 49. Anne Anlin Cheng, in her recent *Ornamentalism*, adds another layer to Schor’s analysis by demonstrating how the ornament—which for Schor, again, is inherently gendered and pathologized—is also racialized through the figure of the Asiatic “yellow woman.” Cheng argues that “there is a distinct kind of human figure whose endurance and enchantment entail a fusion between synthetic objecthood and organic personhood in ways that demand a fundamental reconceptualization of what Frantz Fanon has named the ‘racial epidermal schema.’” She goes on to ask, “What happens when we consider ornamental forms and fungible surfaces, rather than organic flesh, as foundational terms in the process of race making?” Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1-4.

⁷ Although Schor’s primary corpus is limited to Anglo-European traditions, I would nonetheless contend that Lezama Lima’s works—and, indeed, all of the texts I study in this dissertation—also reinforce her central claims.

⁸ Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1998).

AIDS clinic (the illness is never identified explicitly); at the center of the novel is the recurring image of a fish tank whose decor and cleanliness the book's protagonist obsesses over. Or, to turn to the earlier *fin de siglo*, we might recall the Decadent art of tubercular Cuban poet Julián del Casal, in whose poetry, not unlike that of some of his European counterparts, one encounters dazzlingly ornate descriptions of hospital rooms (see for instance "Tras una enfermedad" and "La canción de la morfina"). Against the sterility and austerity that we often associate with clinical settings and biomedical discourse writ large, these writers and artists privilege the excess of embellishment and ornamentation. In this regard, they challenge—or, indeed, re-appropriate—the pejorative condemnation of "sick art"⁹ proclaimed by figures such as Max Nordau and his mentor Cesare Lombroso in the 1890s, and later Loos and Lukács in the early decades of the twentieth century.

But this dissertation isn't limited to simply identifying additional examples of the alliance between pathology, femininity, and embellishment. Rather, I ask how aesthetic objects—novels, poems, literary nonfiction, and sculptures—enable us to glean what we might broadly call a poetics of illness. In particular, I trace how these works take the ill body as a mobilizing trope through which to reorganize their readers' and audience members' experience of time. Put differently, I show how these works are structured around a *ritmo*—a rhythm, a *tempo*—particular to the experience of being ill, such as we find in the case of José Gemí.

In the following pages, I stage a series of encounters between artists and writers from the Hispanic Caribbean basin, the Southern Cone, and their European interlocutors to contend that ornamentation becomes the primary textual device by which these figures refuse pervasive notions of linear "progress," a term intrinsic to the discourse surrounding illness (one's illness "progresses"; the sickly, unproductive, body obstructs the "progress" of a healthy society, etc.). My readings reveal a common tendency to deploy ornamentation as a textual strategy through which to simultaneously mark and obscure the ill body. Indeed, for each of the writers I study—from *modernistas* such as José Asunción Silva to late-twentieth century neobaroque and *neobarroso* authors Severo Sarduy and Néstor Perlongher—the language of embellishment, associated with jewels, gems, and stylistic "frivolity" writ large, intersects so extensively with the language of sickness that the two become nearly indistinguishable. To this end, as I alluded to above in my discussion of Lezama Lima, they at first appear to vindicate a firmly entrenched critical tradition that pathologizes all things decorative—a lineage that reached its apogee in *fin-de-siècle* medical and criminological treatises by Lombroso and Nordau, and which we can also find traces of in Latin American and Peninsular *naturalismo* (Manuel Zeno Gandía in Puerto Rico and Emilia Pardo Bazán in Spain). Against the forward-leaning drive towards a given *telos* so forcefully expounded by positivist rationality, however, these writers privilege dissipation and stasis, and the immediacy of affect over the distance of action. The thick descriptions of ornate scenes that abound in texts by Silva, for instance—like those that become emblematic of the neobaroque decades later—delay, but do not completely halt, our steady movement through the narrative, and it is precisely this technique that allows these authors to inscribe illness formally and thematically into their works. Just as the ill body slows down, so too do these texts stall their readers' progress.

⁹ I discuss Nordau's work and its later reception in greater detail in Chapter One.

Illness as Defamiliarization

Before I go on, I want to clarify how I am using some of the key terms that have underpinned my discussion thus far. A primary text to which I take recourse throughout this dissertation is Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (first published as *Discours du récit* by Éditions du Seuil in 1972). The French structuralist's analyses give us a set of tools with which to understand the relationship between temporality and literary form, broadly, and narrative, in particular. Drawing largely on German film theory, Genette opens the first chapter of his book with a lucid discussion of what he calls the "temporal duality" of narrative. Citing theorist Christian Metz, he identifies two planes that constitute this duality: on the one hand, we have "story time" (*erzählte Zeit*) and on the other hand we have "narrative time" (*Erzählzeit*); where the former names the "time of the thing told" (the time of the signified), the latter marks the "time of the signifier."¹⁰

These distinctions, Genette goes on to note, are applicable primarily to cinematic and oral narrative. Written narrative, however, presents us with a set of challenges. Genette frames the problem in the following passage, which bears being cited in full:

The status of written literary narrative in this respect is even more difficult to establish. Like the oral or cinematic narrative, it can only be "consumed," and therefore actualized in a *time* that is obviously reading time, and even if the sequentiality of its components can be undermined by a capricious, repetitive, or selective reading, that undermining nonetheless stops short of perfect anorexia: one can run a film backwards, image by image, but one cannot read a text backwards, letter by letter, or even word by word, or even sentence by sentence, without its ceasing to be a text. Books are a little more constrained than people sometimes say they are by the celebrated *linearity* of the linguistic signifier, which is easier to deny in theory than eliminate in fact. However, there is no question here of identifying the status of written narrative (literary or not) with that of oral narrative. The temporality of written narrative is to some extent conditional or instrumental; produced in time, like everything else, written narrative exists in space and as space, and the time needed for "consuming" it is the time needed for *crossing* or *traversing* it, like a road or a field. The narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading.

This state of affairs, we will see below, has certain consequences for our discussion, and at times we will have to correct, or try to correct the effects of metonymic displacement; but we must first take that displacement for granted, since it forms part of the narrative game, and therefore accept literally the quasi-fiction of *Erzählzeit*, this false time standing in for a true time and to be treated—

¹⁰ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York, 1974), 18, quoted in Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 33.

with the combination of reservation and acquiescence that this involves—as *pseudo-time*.¹¹

The main issue here has to do with the fact that, as Genette underlines, we simply cannot ascertain how much quantifiable time is involved in any given instance of reading—we cannot know, that is, how much time is required for the text to be “consumed” because “nothing allows us to determine a ‘normal’ speed of execution.”¹² Two people can read the same work, but because of differences, say, in situational circumstances (what’s going on around them), or in cognition (variations in attention span, etc.), that work could require vastly different amounts of time to get through. Furthermore, unlike a film, which can be played backwards and forwards, written texts depend on the linearity of the signifier (not to be confused with temporal linearity) without which, Genette seems to suggest, they risk falling apart completely. How, then, might we study the temporality of written narrative? In order to address this quandary, Genette comes up with the notion of “pseudo-time,” a kind of placeholder that allows us to think about narrative temporality even while we acknowledge the impossibility of measuring time with any accuracy: “We must thus give up the idea of measuring variations in duration with respect to an inaccessible, because unverifiable, equality of duration between narrative and story,” the French critic affirms at a later moment.¹³

With these coordinates in place, Genette then proceeds to shift our attention away from the almost insoluble problem of duration and “reading time” and instead emphasizes what he calls “steadiness in speed.” He defines “speed” here as “the relationship between a temporal dimension and a spatial dimension (so many meters per second, so many seconds per meter):

the speed of a narrative will be defined by the relationship between a duration (that of the story, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years) and a length (that of the text, measured in lines and in pages). The isochronous narrative, our hypothetical reference zero, would thus be here a narrative with unchanging speed, without accelerations or slowdowns, where the relationship duration-of-story/length-of-narrative would remain always steady. It is doubtless unnecessary to specify that such a narrative does not exist, and cannot exist except as a laboratory experiment: at any level of aesthetic elaboration at all, it is hard to imagine the existence of a narrative that would admit of no variation in speed—and even this banal observation is somewhat important: a narrative can do without anachronies, but not without *anisochronies*, or, if one prefers (as one probably does), effects of *rhythm*.¹⁴

¹¹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

My aim in this dissertation is not to assume a singular reader whose “reading time” we can quantify with any certainty; and I definitely do not intend to count the number of lines that comprise each of the works on which I focus (a feat that even Genette describes as “wearying and devoid of all real rigor”¹⁵). Nevertheless, I do think that Genette’s notion of speed is an especially helpful way of gauging the constraints that the ill body places on textual form; these constraints, I show in the chapters that follow, can be acutely perceived in terms of anisochrony, or rhythm. If, as Genette puts it at an earlier point, isochrony marks the (unattainable) perfect overlap between story time and narrative time, anisochrony and rhythm then characterize a relationship of disharmony, or flux. To return to *Paradiso* once again, we might say that this is precisely what Lezama Lima’s narrator has in mind when he refers to José’s deviation from “un ritmo natural”: the five-year-old’s chest inscribes the temporal effects, the rhythm, of the experience of illness, an experience that, notably, is rendered “unnatural.” To be sure, I am not claiming that anisochrony is *only* a feature of illness; indeed, Genette tells us in no uncertain terms that *all* narrative, independent of its content, “can do without anachronies, but not without *anisochronies*.” I am contending, though, that anisochrony is a useful heuristic for perceiving how illness, at least in certain cases, produces effects that are registered predominantly in terms of temporal experience.

A central premise on which these initial remarks are based is that the experience of illness instantiates something of a rupture or a transformation vis-à-vis an individual’s naturalized, and therefore invisible, habits, behaviors, and sensory perceptions. Indeed, a number of recent philosophical studies have echoed this claim. In *Phenomenology of Illness* (2016), for instance, Havi Carel writes that “through its pathologizing effect illness distances the ill person from taken-for-granted routines and habits and thus reveals aspects of human existence that normally go unnoticed.” She adds that “we have a tacit sense of bodily certainty that only comes to our attention when it is disrupted by bodily doubt.”¹⁶ Even though Carel takes as her primary objects other philosophical studies as well as first-person non-fiction memoirs, the novels, poetry, and even visual art that I examine in this dissertation thematize and are structured around similar forms of distancing. In this regard, I hold, they shed light on the points of intersection between the phenomenology of illness and certain theories of aesthetic experience. What I am suggesting here, to put it more directly, is that, like the experience of illness, which produces what Carel refers to above as a disruption marked by “bodily doubt,” aesthetic experience also disorients and reorients us vis-à-vis the surrounding world. The works that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 5. See, too, the book’s fifth chapter, which focuses on the phenomenology of breathlessness. For additional studies in the phenomenology of illness, see James Aho and Kevin Aho, *Body Matters: A Phenomenology of Sickness, Disease, and Illness* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008); Gayle Salamon, “The Phenomenology of Rheumatology: Disability, Merleau-Ponty, and the Fallacy of Maximal Grip.” *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012): 243-260; and S.K. Toombs, *The Meaning of Illness: A Phenomenological Account of the Different Perspectives of Physician and Patient* (Amsterdam: Kluwer, 1993).

I examine in the following pages foreground this shift in terms of anachronism, a sensation of being temporally off-kilter (which isn't to say, of course, that temporality is the *only* axis through which illness is registered).

This distancing effect brings to mind Viktor Shklovsky's well-known theory of "defamiliarization." In his essay "Art as Technique" (1917), Shklovsky assembled nothing short of a phenomenological account of aesthetic experience, one attuned to the sensorial dynamic between the reader and the text.¹⁷ A few points in particular stand out in Shklovsky's piece. First, he provides us with an explicit definition of "the work of art": "In a narrow sense," he writes, "we shall call a work artistic if it has been created by special devices whose purpose is to see to it that these artifacts are interpreted artistically as much as possible."¹⁸ Shklovsky thus emphasizes the self-reflexive way in which the work of art exposes the means of its own construction: its artifice. The goal of the artistic object is to defamiliarize—or disorient us to—the common-sense world in which we live. What this means, precisely, is that the work of art should wrest us out of the terrain of the everyday. Art achieves this end, Shklovsky holds, by appealing to—and provoking—our bodily senses. In a rather provocative passage, Shklovsky further elucidates the steps of this dynamic:

And so, held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war. If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had never been. And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "enstranging" [sic] objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.*¹⁹

Art reinvigorates the sensorium against the sterilized, anesthetized, and mechanized monotony of modern life. As Shklovsky indicates—and this brings us back to the main focus of my dissertation—this defamiliarizing effect requires a kind of *slowing down* of time. Objects in the phenomenal world, heretofore taken for granted and barely noticed (if at all), acquire "complicated" forms that force their beholders to pause and reflect.

Shklovsky's views on the estranging role of art, I want to emphasize once more, enable us to think about the bodily experience of illness in new ways. It seems to me that, like the "complicated" art that thrusts its beholder out of her habitual mode of constant

¹⁷ One could also add to this list the effect of a song on its listener, or a visual work on its beholder.

¹⁸ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

forgetting and unawareness, so, too, does the experience of illness instantiate a rupture that is at once epistemological and corporeal (indeed, this rupture appears to illuminate the ways in which certain embodied experiences attain a kind of epistemological valence, and vice versa). A crucial assertion that Shklovsky makes above is that art brings “us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition.” According to him, recognition entails the comfort of habit: insofar as we’re able to perform certain actions habitually, we know them by heart and don’t need to spend time perceiving or pondering them; indeed, recognition makes such perception or noticing impossible.

Virginia Woolf, too, gives us a description of the experience of illness that resonates in striking ways with Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization. In her essay “On Being Ill” (1926), Woolf bemoans the apparent dearth of representations of illness in art. Despite how common an experience it is, illness, she claims, “has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature.”²⁰ My aim here isn’t to determine whether Woolf’s assessment is valid (though she does seem to overstate the case quite a bit). Rather, what I want to emphasize is that she understands illness to mark a radical rupture from one’s habitual mode of being. “Ordinarily,” she writes,

to look at the sky for any length of time is impossible. Pedestrians would be impeded and disconcerted by a public sky-gazer. What snatches we get of it are mutilated by chimneys and churches, serve as a background for man, signify wet weather or fine, daub windows gold, and, filling in the branches, complete the pathos of dishevelled [sic] autumnal plane trees in autumnal squares. Now, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little shocking. This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it!²¹

Modern life, with its buildings and its city streets jam-packed with pedestrians, makes it impossible to regard, *calmly and slowly*, one’s surroundings. To stop and notice the sky would mean to obstruct the normal flow of traffic and to disrupt the automatized movement of the anonymous mass of bodies. When the modern pedestrian does notice the sky—in “snatches”—she reads it as a sign of the impending change in weather. The ill person, recumbent in her bed, gazing out of the window of her sick room, on the other hand, is able to *perceive* the sky in a new way, and thus experience the phenomenal world differently. Woolf thus identifies a link between illness and new forms of knowledge: through illness, one is able to *know* the truth about what “has been going on all the time.” Illness, then, doesn’t mark a continuation of a habitual mode of life, but rather a rupture, something “a little shocking.” Of course, one could argue that Woolf’s framework is too reductive and too deterministic; after all, it’s not *only* in being sick that we (or at least some of us) are able to rest for a bit and contemplate our surroundings. Additionally, along these lines, Woolf’s division between the ill and the healthy on the basis of access to the public sphere (the bustling streets) seems to be too rigid or exaggerated (which is perhaps part of

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* (Ashfield: Paris Press), 3-4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

her rhetorical strategy). Nonetheless, what I want to highlight here is that Woolf understands illness an experience that *abates* and indeed *restrains* the steady flow of time.

Chapter Outline

With this scaffold in mind, each of the three chapters that comprise my dissertation focuses on a different temporal effect produced by a specific illness. Chapter One, “Diving for Pearls: José Asunción Silva’s Etiophilia,” locates us in the whirlwind of the late-19th century. In the midst of burgeoning, if uneven, projects of capitalist modernization, industrialization, and rationalization (à la Weber²²), writers on both sides of the Atlantic turned to the ill body in order to render the effects of the transformations they were witnessing. I open with an analysis of a letter from Colombian poet José Asunción Silva to his friend Pedro Emilio Coll. Here, Silva offers what amounts to a prescriptive outline of aesthetic method. He tells his friend that, in order to produce a true work of art—one capable of withstanding the test of time—he must practice good hygiene and proper study. Silva then alludes to his “*fanatismo determinista*,” before comparing the act of literary production to genetic reproduction; just as neuroses engender sickly children, he explains, the ill writer transmits his pathology into the literary work. At first glance, Silva’s aesthetic theory appears to align him more with the naturalist writers of the nineteenth century than with the decadents with whom he’s usually affiliated. The poet even seems to wholeheartedly embrace the virulently anti-decadent “rhetoric of sickness”²³ that characterized the pseudo-scientific literary criticism of figures like Nordau and Lombroso. Against this reading, though, I hold that rather than position Silva neatly within either the decadent or anti-decadent camps, we must linger with the ambivalence that marks his larger literary and essayistic corpus. That is, Silva was as fascinated by late-nineteenth century positivist science and medical phenomena as he was repulsed by the anti-decadent pathologization of “deviance.”

This chapter examines how this ambivalence constrains Silva’s writing by centering on the poet’s only novel, *De sobremesa* [*After-Dinner Conversation*] (1896/1925). I organize my discussion around the trope of “pearl diving” to which the novel’s protagonist, José Fernández, refers time and again. Entailing at once both submersion and extraction, the act of “diving for pearls,” I argue, maps onto another recurring issue at stake in the text: the question of etiology, or the study of causes. In a scene that plays out multiple times throughout the novel, Fernández meets with doctors who never succeed in diagnosing his illnesses, the symptoms of which include bouts of frantic hyperactivity interspersed with long periods of absolute paralysis. Both tropes mobilize the dialectic between surface and depth, between what is exposed and what is hidden; the juxtaposition also illuminates the points of contact between illness and ornamentation. Like a diver hunting for pearls, the physicians whom we meet in the novel scan Fernández’s body for any visible symptoms of

²² See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002). See, too, Ericka Beckman, *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America’s Export Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

²³ See Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

his illness, attempting to arrive at its cause. I show that *De sobremesa* leads us to ask what it means to dwell with indeterminacy: José's search for Helena, the embodiment of the Ideal form and the figure who catalyzes the plot, ends in failure (he even suggests that she might never have existed to begin with); similarly, the numerous doctors whom he sees throughout his erratic journey eventually fail to identify the cause of his ailments. What we're left with is a text that resists the teleological temporal progression characteristic of contemporary naturalist novels, which typically abide by an overtly linear model of causal connections; instead, *De sobremesa* prioritizes immediate presence and split temporalities, and it does so by throwing into flux the temporal order of causality.

In Chapter Two, "Too Tired to Write: Severo Sarduy's Fatigue," I shift our attention to the latter half of the twentieth century in order to trace how illness circulates in and shapes the textual form of neobaroque writing. As critics such as Àngel Rama have pointed out²⁴, the neobaroque remobilizes some of the most characteristic tropes that we find in *modernista* texts of the previous *fin de siglo*: writing from both periods is replete with scenes of ornate interiors jam-packed with sumptuous décor that produces a synesthetic blend of senses. My focus in this chapter is on the aesthetics of fatigue in the work of Cuban novelist, dramaturge, and essayist Severo Sarduy. I take as my case study *Pájaros de la playa* [*Beach Birds*], Sarduy's last novel, published shortly after his death from AIDS-related complications in 1993. Set in a clinic that brings to mind Fidel Castro's controversial AIDS sanatoriums of the late 1980s and early 90s (the so-called "sidatorios"), the novel, as critics have tended to agree, can be read obliquely as a meditation on HIV/AIDS; while the ward's patients suffer from an illness referred to only as "el mal," they exhibit symptoms that include skin lesions (a clear allusion to Kaposi sarcoma) and, most frequently, an almost paralyzing lack of energy. Moreover, at one point in the story Sarduy's "cosmólogo," a longtime resident of the clinic, recounts the patients' daily routine: included in the long list of medications they're required to take, we find mention of Retrovir (AZT), one of the first drugs used to treat HIV/AIDS.

My argument is that the fatigued body, needing to exert maximal force in order to perform the most minimal gesture, becomes the guiding trope through which Sarduy experiments with narrative time; just as fatigue slows us down, so too does the narrative curtail our progress, instantiating what, in *The Neutral*, Roland Barthes referred to as "the endless process of ending." This regressive motion, I claim moreover, also mimics the mechanism by which Retrovir (the most common side effect of which was a debilitating muscle fatigue) obstructs the virus' replication in the host's body.

Chapter Three, "*Nomadismo en la fijeza*: Suspended Flow in Perlongher and González-Torres," builds on some of the questions I address in the previous chapter. Here, I read writing by Argentine poet, anthropologist, and activist Néstor Perlongher alongside visual installations by Cuban-American artist Félix González-Torres. Both Perlongher and González-Torres bore witness to the immense losses brought about by the first wave of the AIDS crisis, and both, too, turned to art in order to register the reality of their own diagnoses and imminent deaths. My analyses identify in their work what I call a poetics of suspended temporal flow. This, I show, is a warped form of temporality that emerges through the combination of movement-in-stasis; it bears the markers of what Perlongher,

²⁴ See Àngel Rama, *Rubén Darío y el modernismo* (Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1985).

reading Deleuze and Guattari, identifies as a kind of “nomadismo en la fijeza,” a nomadism in fixity.

I go on to suggest that this form of doubled temporality adds a new dimension to our understanding of both the neobaroque and its River Plate variant, Perlongher’s so-called *neobarroso*. While both aesthetic sensibilities are rightly associated with fluidity and constant movement (which usually takes the form of seemingly endless streams of metonymic signifiers that inundate the blank page), I demonstrate how certain texts nonetheless also inscribe counter-gestures that impede these flows; what we’re left with is a kind of toggling *now* that is both mobile yet static and that, I argue throughout this chapter, allows us to glean a poetics of suspension that marks the temporality of AIDS witnessing.

In a coda, finally, I offer a few remarks about illness and chronic temporality. As I will show throughout this dissertation, the texts I examine constrain our experience of temporal progression such that we’re positioned in a fluctuating—or, maybe, *queered*²⁵—present. Nevertheless, in nearly all of these works, the “end,” which most frequently takes the form of death, looms on the horizon, even if it is only nebulous and is never attained within the text’s diegesis. A few years after his diagnosis with HIV and shortly before his death, Sarduy for instance understood his temporal experience in terms of what he called the “prepóstumo,” an ambivalent position tucked somewhere between life and death but occupying fully neither of these two poles; and in one of his later poems, Néstor Perlongher returned to the refrain “Ahora que me estoy muriendo” in order to capture the rhythm of the *ongoing* process of dying.

In the concluding pages of my dissertation, however, I ask how the transformation of a medical condition such as HIV/AIDS from a so-called “death sentence” to a “manageable chronic illness”²⁶ adds new dimensions to the types of temporalities I have been examining in this project. Here, I take my cue from and respond to literary critic Eric Cazdyn’s *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (2012), where Cazdyn identifies a “new chronic mode, a mode of time that cares little for terminality or acuteness, but more for an undying present that remains forever sick, without the danger of sudden death.”²⁷ My coda evaluates Cazdyn’s assertions by examining a selection of entries from *We Who Feel Differently*, an online forum dedicated to contemporary queer culture run by Colombian visual artist Carlos Motta. In one of the journal’s most recent issues, “Time is Not a Line” (guest-curated by critic Ted Kerr), artists and critics discuss the shifting terrain of HIV/AIDS activism in the era of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and

²⁵ On queerness, (spatial) orientation, and phenomenology, see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁶ Allison Webel, “How HIV became a treatable, chronic disease,” last modified December 2, 2015, <http://theconversation.com/how-hiv-became-a-treatable-chronic-disease-51238>. To be sure, this is not to suggest that HIV/AIDS is experienced in the same way everywhere and by everyone. Even though fatalities have decreased sharply since the early years of the epidemic (thanks to the advent of new drug therapies), people continue to die from AIDS-related complications; we should thus always consider the factors that affect one’s access and adherence to treatment.

²⁷ Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

“undetectability.” Here, I read their insights alongside Cazdyn’s remarks about what we might call the “chronicity” of HIV. While many of the contributors to the journal do reinforce some of Cazdyn’s claims, I show, they also suggest that the transformation of HIV/AIDS into a chronic condition (for some individuals) doesn’t necessarily exclude or deny the lingering shadow of terminality.

This dissertation, then, takes the ill body as a mobilizing trope around which we might re-organize the oft-cited trajectory stretching from the *modernistas* of the late-nineteenth century to the *neobarroco* writers of the more recent *fin de siglo* and into our contemporary moment. What unites the artists and writers whom I examine—from Asunción Silva and his European interlocutors to Sarduy and Perlongher—is a recurring emphasis on the ornamental detail. Each of these writers (and, again, there are numerous others whom we might add to this list), furthermore, turns to ornamentation as a primary textual strategy by which both to experiment with temporality and to alternately expose and disguise the effects of illness. As I will make clear in the chapters that follow, it is in these temporal effects that we can best glean the various *ritmos* specific to the experience of being ill.

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CHAPTER ONE

Diving for Pearls: José Asunción Silva's Etiophilia

...me entretengo en describir, poseído de mi eterna manía de convertir mis impresiones en obra literaria, los síntomas de la extraña dolencia.

-José Asunción Silva, *De sobremesa* (1896)

Introduction: "Mi fanatismo determinista"

Toward the end of a letter addressed to his friend Pedro Emilio Coll—founder of the Venezuelan literary magazine *Cosmópolis*—the Colombian poet José Asunción Silva offers what amounts to a prescriptive outline of aesthetic method:

Puesto que usted ha vuelto a consagrarse al feo vicio literario, conságrese de lleno. Escriba, estudie mucho, viva con todo su espíritu la más amplia y profunda vida intelectual que pueda vivir, recuerde que hay un deber superior a todos los otros, que es desarrollar todas las facultades que uno siente en sí, en el dominio del arte. No extrañe que en mi fanatismo determinista, insista en mis consejos de siempre: higiene y estudio. Para hacer obra literaria perfecta es necesario que el organismo tenga la sensación normal y fisiológica de la vida; las neurosis no engendrarán sino hijos enclenques, y sin un estudio profundo, estudio de las leyes mismas de la vida, estudio de los secretos del arte, gimnasia incesante de la inteligencia, esfuerzo por comprender más, por deshacer preconcebidos, por analizar lo más hondo, la obra literaria no tendrá los cimientos necesarios para resistir el tiempo...¹

[Given that you have begun once more to dedicate yourself to that ugly literary vice, dedicate yourself fully. Write, study a lot, live with all of your spirit the most ample and deep intellectual life that you can, remember that there is one duty superior to all others, and that is to develop all of one's faculties toward the dominion of art. Do not be surprised that, in my deterministic fanaticism, I insist on the same advice as always: *higiene and study*. In order to create a perfect work of art it is necessary for the organism to have the normal and physiological sensation of live; neuroses do not engender but sickly children, and without a profound study, a study of the

¹José Asunción Silva, *Obra completa*, ed. Héctor H. Orjuela (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 1996), 702. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

very laws of life, a study of art, an exercise of the intelligence, an effort to understand more, to undo preconceptions, to analyze that which is deepest, the literary work will not have the foundation necessary for resisting time...]

Proper hygiene and sustained study, Silva advises his friend, set the terms for producing not just *any* literary work, but a *perfect* one (“obra literaria perfecta”). The Colombian poet’s recommendations immediately beg two complementary questions. The first is ontological: what *is* a literary work? And the second is practical: how does one create it? By way of a response, Silva takes recourse to a lexicon stemming predominantly from the domain of biomedicine. He warns Coll that, just as neuroses can be passed on from one generation to the next, engendering “sickly children,” so too can a writer’s pathology be transmitted into his text. Where a healthy work of art possesses the necessary bedrock for withstanding the test of time, a sick one constantly confronts the imminent threat of its own dissolution.

That Silva’s advice intertwines art with medicine should come as no surprise to any reader familiar with his critical essays or fictional writing. In a *semblanza* (obituary, or biographical sketch) dedicated to Rafael Núñez, for instance, Silva praises the Colombian statesman’s poetry for its complete refusal of the “sickly preoccupation” (“preocupación enfermiza”) with form and style that marked contemporary decadent and symbolist texts. He writes:

Espiritualista convencido y lector asiduo de los grandes maestros, los primores de la forma no lo tentaron, despreció las *fiorituras* habilidosas y así lo dijo en una de sus más hermosas composiciones: ‘No es la norma del arte el cauce estrecho/Que opio en la copa cincelada vierte,/Que arma de nuevo de Procasto el lecho/Y en el ritmo sensual halla la muerte.’²

[Devout spiritualist and dedicated reader of the great masters, he was not tempted by the delicacies of form, despised artistic *fiorituras*, and put it thus in one of his most beautiful compositions: ‘The narrow bed is not the norm of art/That pours opium into the chiseled glass/That arms anew Procrustes’ bed/And in sensual rhythm finds death.’]

Silva’s use of the Italian *fioritura* here is striking in light of the term’s multiple valences; it can simultaneously signify a growth or an expansion (broadly construed), the blossoming of fruit trees, or any type of artificial ornament or flourish. In each instance, the word suggests supplementation and excess. That is, an offshoot—be it a fruit or a jewel, for example—alters and transgresses an object’s original surface boundaries while it nonetheless remains fixed to those boundaries. Thus, what Silva ostensibly admires in Núñez’s art is its austerity. Considering the earlier remark about the decadents’ “sickly” preoccupation with formal flare, we might read stylistic barrenness as a sign of well-being. The “healthy” text is one stripped of any superfluous or distracting details, one that retains its “natural” formal edges. Taken to its extreme, this alignment between ornamentation and

² Silva, *Obra completa*, 382-383.

pathology culminates in death; as Núñez's poem puts it, "en el ritmo sensual halla la muerte" ["And in sensual rhythm finds death"].

These two pieces at first appear to cement Silva's position within a longstanding critical tradition that deploys the language of illness as a rubric for appraising literary texts. In the context of the European *fin de siècle*, whose writing Silva consumed voraciously,³ this lineage reached its apogee in the works of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso and his pupil, the Hungarian physician Max Nordau. Nordau summarizes the key elements comprising this line of thought at the outset of *Degeneration* [*Entartung*, 1892], his highly influential and massive blend of positivist pseudo-science and literary criticism. In the book's dedication to Lombroso, he frames his project thus:

Now I have undertaken the work of investigating (as much as possible after your method) the tendencies of the fashions in art and literature; of proving that they have their source in the degeneracy of their authors, and that the enthusiasm of their admirers is for manifestations of more or less pronounced moral insanity, imbecility, and dementia.

Thus, this book is an attempt at a really scientific criticism, which does not base its judgment of a book upon the purely accidental, capricious, and variable emotions it awakens—emotions depending on the temperament and mood of the individual reader—but upon the psycho-physiological elements from which it sprang.⁴

Nordau's "really scientific criticism" might best be understood as something of a failed too-close reading—to echo D.A. Miller⁵—that falls into the trap of biographical determinism that Barthes so acutely warns against in "The Death of the Author."⁶ He quickly bypasses the reader (whose affective response to the text he deems merely "accidental") and draws a direct causal link between textual symptoms and writerly pathologies. He keeps the author "alive," so to speak, only to diagnose his sickness, which might end up killing him, anyway. Barbara Spackman places Nordau in dialogue with his (mostly) French and Italian contemporaries—from Baudelaire and Huysmans to D'Annunzio and Croce—and identifies a distinctive feature of what she refers to as a pre-Freudian "rhetoric of sickness." Crucially, she points out, both decadent writers—who "valorize physiological ills and alteration as

³ In 1884, the poet toured Europe, where he met the likes of Stéphane Mallarmé and Oscar Wilde, key figures who would play a pivotal role in the development of his own aesthetic.

⁴ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

⁵ See D.A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁶ In "The Death of the Author," Barthes proposes to remove the author from any consideration of textual meaning. He writes: "As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins." Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

the origin of psychic alterity”⁷—and their most virulent opponents similarly activate this discursive mode. In each instance, it entails a critical move through which

the diagnosis of “sickness” reduces the work of the intellect to the twitches of a body jolted by nerve spasms, poisoned by disease. The literary text, rather than a work of sign production, becomes a set of symptoms not (*not*, rather than *un-*) consciously produced. In its concern for cure, such a critical discourse traces the symptoms back to the subjects who display them and finds those subjects off-center, contaminated by physiology, irrational, and even criminal. Yet the question asked is not *who* produced a text but *what*—what disease, what atavistic deformity, what hereditary fault.⁸

Silva’s advice to Coll seems to echo almost verbatim the conception of literature that Spackman outlines here, and thus locates him firmly on the side of the anti-decadent medico-legal apparatus. Like Lombroso, Nordau, and, even decades later, Lukács⁹, Silva draws on contemporary medical knowledge in order to detect the origins of a “sickly” text. He authorizes himself as an expert in aesthetic theory, binding one command to the next in a series of statements that leaves no room for doubt: “conságrese de lleno. Escriba, estudie mucho, viva con todo su espíritu la más amplia y profunda vida intelectual que pueda vivir...” He continues: “No extrañe que en mi fanatismo determinista, insista en mis consejos de siempre.” The fundamental element here is “fanatismo determinista” [“deterministic fanaticism”], and it is this phrase that organizes not only the letter, but also the vast majority of Silva’s work.

What exactly constitutes the poet’s “fanatismo determinista,” and why is determinism so integral to his art? If we hone in on the earlier comparison between the act of writing and the transmission of neuroses, we can glean more precisely the contours of Silva’s aesthetic praxis. Both the act of literary composition and genetic reproduction—the two figures that Silva juxtaposes here—imply causal relationships based on heredity:

⁷ Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies*, vii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹ Georg Lukács’s essay “Healthy or Sick Art?” establishes a rather stark dichotomy between the two terms comprising its title. Healthy art, Lukács writes, “fixes those moments of our development—otherwise transitory—that point ahead and enhance man’s self-consciousness and are thus lasting and because perfected forms allow the re-experiencing of these moments, great and healthy works of art remain an ever-renewing treasure for mankind.” We can sense here an eerie echo of Silva’s letter to Coll: both texts distinguish a “sick” text from a “healthy” text on the basis of temporality and, we might say, canonicity. A healthy text is ultimately one that can transfix the ephemeral march of “progress” into a permanent form. It is important to note, however, that Lukács opens his essay with the disclaimer that “sickness and health are being considered [...] primarily not from a biological but from a social and historical point of view. From such a standpoint, they prove to be factors in aesthetics.” I take his point, although part of my attempt in this chapter—and this dissertation more broadly—is to trouble the neat distinction between the “biological,” on the one hand, and the “social and historical,” on the other. Georg Lukács, “Healthy or Sick Art?,” in *Writer & Critic, and Other Essays* trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971), 103-109.

neurotic parents transmit their neuroses to their children, and in a similar fashion, the ill writer transfers his pathology into the text. A specifically aesthetic brand of determinism, then, subtends the notion that an art object emerges as the effect of a set of given causes that both prefigure it and dictate its conditions of possibility. Furthermore, these causes (what Silva associates above with “las leyes mismas de la vida,” “the very laws of life”) impose a set of constraints on the writer, who must identify them in order to produce a work of art immune to time’s destruction. Silva thus reenacts the anti-decadent gesture—so frequently performed by some of his European counterparts, especially in the wake of Darwin’s theories of evolution—that shifts its gaze away from the writer and toward a presumed “atavistic deformity” or “hereditary fault,” to invoke once more Spackman’s formulations. The writer’s body gets figured as (and, according to certain diagnostic criteria, literally *becomes*) a conduit that channels disease into the written text. To this end, Silva elaborates a theory of art that resonates to an extent with nineteenth-century realist and naturalist writing on both sides of the Atlantic, in which character construction rests on the tropes of genetic heredity (Zola) or geographic determinism (Sarmiento).

This understanding of literary production as being fundamentally deterministic—reducible to a group of causes that determine the work’s final form—appears to strip the artist of agency. The writer, in other words, becomes almost exclusively a vehicle for transmitting a series of stable and external laws governing life. These laws establish the difference between “healthy” and “sick” art, which means that the writer is bound to them insofar as his goal is to create a long-lasting (read: healthy) work. If we examine the letter to Coll more closely, though, we notice that Silva’s apparently firm commitment to the anti-decadent stance quickly begins to unravel. On the one hand, the poet affirms that the literary work exists beyond its writer’s grasp or volition; it originates not so much in the writer’s own agentive creative capacities as in the terms laid forth by the “leyes mismas de la vida,” laws whose authority is never challenged. In this respect, he adheres to critics such as Nordau for whom the literary text is a compilation of symptoms “not consciously produced,” as Spackman puts it. On the other hand, Silva repeatedly urges his companion to perform a series of exercises in order to ensure that his work possesses “los cimientos necesarios para resistir el tiempo” [“the necessary foundations for resisting time”]. One of these exercises is physical: “es necesario,” he writes, “que el organismo tenga la sensación normal y fisiológica de la vida.” The other is to “undo preconceptions” [“deshacer preconcebidos”]. Thus we find a key paradox that, I would maintain, underpins much of Silva’s textual corpus. At first, the poet espouses a strict determinism that posits a set of immutable rules integral to life. Here, though, he affirms the need to constantly undo these very rules and challenge both their naturalization and their ineluctability.

We are thus left wondering: Is the writer a mere vessel through which the work passes before it takes shape, or does he actively create it? Both. Or, at least Silva would seem to say so. It is precisely this liminal position—at once embracing and refusing a deterministic model of artistic production—that distances him from Nordau and Lombroso, even as he is drawn to their teachings. Silva situates us at the junctures between these poles in order to ask what it might mean to linger with indeterminacy when

determinacy reaches its limit. He consequently also asks us to envision the aesthetic forms that might emerge from this undecidable¹⁰ position.

As another instantiation of this theory, consider “Suspiros” [“Sighs”], one of Silva’s numerous essays on art and literature. Like the letter to Coll, “Suspiros” sketches an outline of aesthetic praxis aimed at producing a work of art fortified against time-induced decay. In it, Silva lays out the steps he would take, were he a poet, to create “un maravilloso poema” [“a marvelous poem”]:

Si fuera poeta y pudiese fijar el revoloteo de las ideas en rimas brillantes y ágiles como una bandada de mariposas blancas de primavera con alfileres sutiles de oro; si pudiera cristalizar los sueños en raras estrofas, haría un maravilloso poema en que hablara de los suspiros, de ese aire que vuelve al aire, llevándose consigo algo de las esperanzas, de los cansancios y de las melancolías de los hombres.¹¹

[If I were a poet and were able to transfix fluttering ideas into brilliant and agile rhymes like a swarm of white spring butterflies with fine golden pins; if I were able to crystallize dreams into unusual stanzas, I would compose a marvelous poem in which I spoke of sighs, of that air that returns to air, taking with itself something of the hopes, of the weariness and of the melancholy of men.]

To crystallize dreams: such is the accomplishment of a truly “marvelous poem.” We might recall here Giorgio Agamben’s observation that “stanza,” in its circulation among thirteenth-century European poets, denoted “a ‘capacious dwelling, receptacle,’ because it safeguarded, along with all the formal elements of the canzone, that *joi d’amor* that these poets entrusted to poetry as its unique object.”¹² Silva’s stanzas serve a similar function: like the naturalist pinning his butterflies down in order to examine them, the poet transfixes in stanza form that which threatens constantly to vanish. It thus comes as no surprise that the poet takes as his *materia prima* the sigh, that intangible and ethereal, but also material and corporeal, gesture. His “rara estrofa” [“unusual stanza”] encloses the “aire que vuelve al aire” [“air that returns to air”] and therefore encapsulates movement without necessarily halting it. This is perhaps what a poetics of indeterminacy looks like formally: a

¹⁰ My use of the term “undecidable” here invokes its deconstructivist valences. In his reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Derrida hones in on the term *pharmakon* to demonstrate that it can signify both “remedy” and “poison,” and writes against a common tendency to align it with either of the two meanings at the expense of the other. In a sense, textual undecidability thus asks us to hold onto indeterminacy—the text cannot be reduced to a determinate meaning or set of meanings, but remains open-ended. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹¹ Silva, *Obra completa*, 360-361.

¹² Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvi.

non-teleological, or non-linear type of movement, one more cyclical and repetitive than progressive. His reference to the “melancolía de los hombres” in the passage above further supports this link between indeterminacy and aesthetic form; like the melancholic who attempts to absorb the lost object, the poetic stanza, as Agamben notes, supplies a form with which to contain “what must in every case remain unappropriable.”¹³

Critics have not overlooked these dualities in Silva’s writing. Both Clara Fortún¹⁴ and Benigno Trigo, for instance, argue that the tensions arising from the poet’s stance with respect to either the decadents or their most hostile adversaries cannot be resolved into neat categories. In his analysis of the letter to Coll, Trigo illuminates Silva’s tacit fascination with turn-of-the-century positivist science. He demonstrates that Silva’s appropriation of medical knowledge failed on two fronts: first, the poet’s audience was quick to unmask his almost farcical posturing as a “medical expert”; and second, because even he felt a certain degree of unease about contemporary medicine’s ethics.¹⁵ Treatises such as Nordau’s *Degeneration* and Lombroso’s *Criminal Man* [*L’uomo delinquente*, 1876]—which buttressed a theory of the “born criminal” (*delinquente nato*) on the basis of phrenological cranial measurements—certainly provided Silva with the terms around which he would organize his aesthetic theory and praxis, but they simultaneously repulsed him with their rabid pathologization of decadent art in the name of “rational progress.”

This chapter aims to chart the ways in which determinacy, indeterminacy, and the medical language that they take as their object get inscribed both formally and thematically into Silva’s literary work. In terms of reading practice, this means that we must remain closely attuned to what Aníbal González has described as “una profunda y corrosiva ironía” [“a deep and corrosive irony”] that pervades the pages of the Silvaean corpus.¹⁶ A master of ventriloquism and pastiche—manipulating and repurposing European texts, crafting out of them an artistic style tinged with what we might loosely call a “Spanish American” hue but

¹³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁴ As Clara F. Fortún remarks, however, we should probably take the *semblanza* (biographical sketch or obituary) with a grain of salt: “Estamos en presencia del envés de la concepción elegíaca que del mundo tenía el autor y de la sugerencia de su mejor prosa. El retorcimiento del lenguaje nos hace presumir que, en verdad, lo que quería era ofrecernos la sátira de un poeta mediocre. La semblanza del doctor Rafael Núñez sería citable así como ejemplo de sátira moderna, con ribetes barrocos.” [“We are in the presence of the inverse of both the author’s elegiac conception of the world and the suggestions laid forth in his best prose. That he twists his language leads us to presume that, in reality, what he wanted was to offer us a satire of a mediocre poet. One could read the *semblanza* of Doctor Rafael Núñez, then, as an example of modern satire with a touch of the baroque.”]. Silva, *Obra completa*, 381.

¹⁵ Benigno Trigo, “Enfermedad y escritura: El impacto de la decadencia y de la degeneración en cuatro escritores modernistas hispanoamericanos” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1992), 110-116.

¹⁶ Aníbal González, “‘Estómago y cerebro’: *De sobremesa*, el *Simposio* de Platón y la indigestión cultural,” *Revista Iberoamericana* vol. LXIII, nos. 178-179 (January-June 1997): 233-248.

also singularly his own—Silva never lets us ascertain a final *telos* toward which his aesthetic project inclines, or a solid foundation upon which it is built.¹⁷

Taking as my case study the poet's only novel, *De sobremesa* [*After-Dinner Conversation: The Diary of a Decadent*] (1896/1925), I begin by sketching a series of debates regarding the work's genre—is it *really* a novel? —and then examine how its overt treatment of illness binds its formal features. My focus is principally on the question of etiology, or the study of causes. As I discuss below, etiology brings into sharp relief the formal pressures that the subject of illness places on narrative because, as a hermeneutic framework, it allows us to discern both overt and implicit causal connections that inflect the shape of a plot. When it comes to illness specifically, the question of determinacy and the ability to detect causes have immense implications, the most obvious of which concerns the possibility of being cured. Thus, in examining the novel's treatment of these problems, we can better understand how the refusal to locate a cause (or, the insistence that we linger with indeterminacy) might also be a political gesture that valorizes “deviance” against a medical gaze that seeks constantly to pathologize and erase it.

To be sure, the novel's semiosis of etiology is crucial to its aesthetic and ideological project. However, my intention here is to adopt a more phenomenological approach, and to ask how the texture of etiology helps illuminate aspects related to illness that a heuristic of symbolic representation might not capture. *Contra* Nordau's quick dismissal of the reader's “capricious, and variable emotions,” in other words, I maintain that the novel manipulates questions concerning causality and narrative structure in order to alter our experience of time; at its core, after all, etiology concerns temporality, since it allows us to organize the temporal sequence of cause and effect.

Two questions in particular coordinate *De sobremesa*'s aesthetic project: can one write a novel without causal relationships, and if so, what form might such a novel take? I argue that Silva's use of effusive ornamentation—a trope that ties him both to other *modernista* writers in Latin America as well as to the Decadents across the Atlantic—is the main strategy by which he attempts to subvert and transgress the principle of causality, typically understood to be one of *the* most vital elements of the novel as a form. Ultimately, *De sobremesa* neither fully adopts nor totally rejects an etiological framework. This tension,

¹⁷ No other text thematizes this pervasive sense of irony and parody as explicitly as “La protesta de la musa” [“The Protest of the Muse”] (1890). Here, a satirical poet (“el poeta satírico”) encounters an angelic muse who charges him with having sullied the platonic ideals (“Virtud” and “Amor,” Virtue and Love) that she embodies: “Yo conozco tu obra. En vez de las pedrerías brillantes, de los zafiros y de los ópalos, de los esmaltes policromos y de los camafeos delicados, de las filigranas áureas, en vez de los encajes que parecen tejidos por las hadas, y de los collares de perlas pálidas que llenan los cofres de los poetas, has removido cieno y fango, donde hay reptiles, reptiles de los que yo odio [...] Yo inspiro los idilios verdes, como los campos florecidos, y las elegías negras, como los paños fúnebres, donde caen las lágrimas de los cirios..., pero no te he inspirado. ¿Por qué te ríes? ¿Por qué has convertido tus insultos en obra de arte?” [“I know your work. Instead of brilliant jewels, sapphires and opals, polychromatic enamel and delicate cameos, of golden filigrees, instead of lace sewn together by fairies, and necklaces of pale pearls that fill the chests of poets, you have tossed around mud and dirt, full of reptiles, reptiles that I detest [...] I inspire verdant idylls, like blossoming fields, and black elegies, like funereal cloth, where the tears of the altar candles fall..., but I have not inspired you. Why are you laughing? Why have you transformed your insults into a work of art?”] Silva, *Obra completa*, 356.

I show, produces temporal effects that provide us with a glimpse into the phenomenology of illness. As my readings will reveal, the ill body experiences a kind of time “out of joint,” to invoke Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The first temporal mode bifurcates toward the past and future, and is bolstered by what I call an “etiological impulse.” The second is the perpetual present of bodily affects. The ornament catalyzes the interplay between these two registers.

Novel Causes

Before I move into my analysis of *De sobremesa*, a few words are in order about why I have chosen to privilege this text over Silva’s other writing. An immediate justification is the obvious fact that *De sobremesa* is the poet’s only published novel.¹⁸ Thus, if we want to examine Silva’s experiments with causality and etiology, *De sobremesa* offers a better lens through which to study his aesthetic praxis than any of his other works, which brings me to my next point. As I mention briefly above, it generally has been taken for granted that, unlike poetry (for which Silva is arguably better known), the novel form—and narrative more broadly—relies fundamentally on principles of causality for its condition of possibility. In other words, without being fastened by some relation of cause-and-effect, the novel risks disintegrating. It is in the novel form, then, that deviations from or subversions of causal schemes are displayed most prominently.

In *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative*, Brian Richardson examines the vicissitudes of narrative style since Romanticism, paying close attention to the various philosophical strands of causality that modern narratives set into motion. These include, for instance, determinism, chance, fate, probability, coincidence, and the “logically impossible.” Even when narrative works violate the laws of causal relationships governing, say, the biological determinism of naturalism by asking readers to abandon hereditary schemes, they nonetheless still abide by some mode of causality or another. Richardson goes so far as to hold that “the most fundamental interpretive questions we may ask of narrative are causal ones. The frequent tensions between motive and action, word and deed, and intention and result are familiar to every student of fiction and drama.”¹⁹

The historian Stephen Kern’s work on causality offers another important account of the centrality of causal thinking to our understanding of the world. At the outset of his *A Cultural History of Causality*, he reinforces several of Richardson’s observations by affirming that causality is “so fundamental to human understanding and so universal in its explanatory function that it would seem to transcend any historical development.”²⁰ The task he sets forth in his book, interestingly enough, is precisely to historicize that

¹⁸ Biographers agree that he had written several other manuscripts that were lost—and never rewritten—in the *Amérique* shipwreck, which I discuss in detail at a later moment.

¹⁹ Brian Richardson, *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), 35.

²⁰ Stephen Kern, *A Cultural History of Causality: Science, Murder Novels, and Systems of Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

development. Limiting his study to the act of murder, he canvasses a range of materials—literary, philosophical, biological, psychological, etc.—in order to outline an epistemology of causality. His argument brings to light a paradox underpinning the shifting terms surrounding causal thinking: namely, that from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, “causal understanding moved in the direction of increasing specificity, multiplicity, complexity, probability, and uncertainty.”²¹ Thus, while different epistemic fields have by and large arrived at a more nuanced comprehension of the relationship between cause and effect (and a more precise catalog of specific causes), this increased knowledge production has ultimately revealed just how little, in fact, we know.

Modern writers, Kern notes, departed from the earlier causal schemes that dominated for much of the nineteenth century. The publication of the French philosopher Auguste Comte’s *Course in Positive Philosophy* in 1830 inaugurated a deep-seated tradition that privileged the determinism of rational and empirical explanation over metaphysics. Originally a strictly philosophical concept, determinism quickly made its way into literature. As Honoré de Balzac once put it in relation to his own novelistic practice, “in this world, every effect has a cause and every cause a principle, every principle dependent upon a law. The principles which have created extraordinary men can be studied and known.”²² In the Latin American context, Sarmiento turns to determinism in order to construct *Facundo*, in which he sketches life in the Argentine pampas: his *gaucho* typology (“rastreador,” “baqueano,” “minstrel,” and “outlaw”) rests on a direct causal link between the natural environment and one’s personality traits.

Richardson and Kern both address the need to expand our understanding of causality beyond a linear or sequential model. Each meticulously demonstrates that, from the early nineteenth century onwards, writers and thinkers manipulated causal configurations to encompass new varieties and potentialities. Nevertheless, to diversify a field is not the same as to leave the field entirely. That is, although these works prove that causality has undergone numerous permutations, as an organizing principle it still holds its force; we seem to be unable to disrupt altogether the monopoly that causality claims over our organization and understanding of the world. As Peter Brooks succinctly puts it in *Reading for the Plot*, “plot is the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative [...]” That “we cannot do without” plot is an interesting—and probably true—claim. Still, we might want to question its premises in light of novels such as J.K. Huysmans’s *À rebours*, the work that, as some critics have interpreted it, Oscar Wilde’s narrator in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* alludes to as a “novel without a plot.” Even if it is true that these novels ultimately cannot “do without plot,” their insistent reticence to abide by the traditional rules of emplotment casts a bright light upon those elements that Catherine Gallagher, in her review of Fredric Jameson’s recent *The Antinomies of Realism*, has referred to as the “unmapped continent of nonnarrative novelistic features”: these include, for instance thick scenes of description that accumulate around affect.²³ In focusing on *De*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² Honoré de Balzac, quoted in Stephen Kern, *A Cultural History of Causality*, 6.

²³ Catherine Gallagher, “Affective Realism,” *Novel* 48, no. 1 (2015): 126-130.

sobremesa—another “novel without a plot,” as Sylvia Molloy has held²⁴—we gain a better glimpse into the significance and effect of these often-overlooked extra-narrative features.

Like its explicit European intertexts, *De sobremesa* also asks us to ponder what it might mean to decouple the novel from its ties to plot and causality. If we were to take Silva’s letter to Coll as a condensation of his aesthetic praxis *tout court*, we could easily place him on a linear trajectory extending from Comte, through the Romantics and the Naturalists, and ending at the *fin de siglo*. But a more expansive analysis of his work with an eye toward *De sobremesa* draws forth a more complicated picture, one in which we begin to glimpse signs of an aesthetic that emerges out of an attempt to break free both of causality generally and of causal determinism more specifically.

Lost at Sea

If a hallmark of any true literary work, as Silva affirms both in his letter to Coll and in “Suspiros,” is its ability to persist through time—its potential canonicity, we might say—then it would seem that *De sobremesa* came incredibly close on numerous occasions to failing its author’s test. As Kelly Washbourne, the novel’s English translator, tells us, the work’s tumultuous publication history has accorded it something of the ontological status of a “lost novel.”²⁵ What follows is a brief sketch of this history.

Sometime around 3:30 a.m. on January 28, 1895, *L’Amérique*, a French steamship that Silva was on at the time, crashed into a rock and ran aground in Bocas de Ceniza, an estuary that connects the Magdalena River to Colombia’s Caribbean shore. Described by one of its passengers as “uno de los más bellos, grandes y cómodos que vienen a nuestras costas” [“one of the most beautiful, largest, and comfortable (vessels) that come to our coasts”], the ship had set sail a week earlier from the Venezuelan port of La Guaira and was headed toward Barranquilla on its way to Europe. The series of events that transpired over the following six days could only be described as a “vaudeville de mer,” to invoke Fernando Vallejo’s sardonic phrase.²⁶ Two separate rescue missions failed. First, led by captain William Holley, the crew spotted the incoming vessel *La Popa* and signaled for help by raising a red flag (a maritime warning of imminent attack) and firing five cannons. Unbeknownst to anyone on board, however, a civil war had broken out in Colombia a few days earlier; *La Popa* consequently took the *Amérique* to be a rebel warship and quickly fled the scene. Second, a schooner attempted to reach the ship, but was unable to overcome the high tide. Under the pretense of seeking help, Holley and a few of his companions escaped, leaving those on board to fend for themselves. The forty-two passengers resolved

²⁴ Sylvia Molloy, “Voice Snatching: ‘De sobremesa,’ Hysteria, and the Impersonation of Marie Bashkirtseff,” *Latin American Literary Review* 25, no. 50 (1997): 11-29.

²⁵ José Asunción Silva, *After-Dinner Conversation: The Diary of a Decadent*, trans. Kelly Washbourne (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 3. Hereafter cited as Washbourne.

²⁶ Fernando Vallejo, *Chapolas negras* (Bogotá: Alfaguara, 1995), 172.

to squeeze onto the only remaining lifeboat—a shoddy watercraft built to hold up to twenty-five people—and made their way toward land.²⁷

Like the ship itself, the stories surrounding the *naufragio* quickly sank into oblivion. Whenever the tale did continue to circulate, it centered principally on Silva and another celebrated survivor, the Guatemalan *modernista* novelist Enrique Gómez Carrillo. Gómez Carrillo eventually arrived to safety in Barranquilla, where he spent some time before leaving for Paris, the hub from which he would publish a number of chronicles recounting his world travels, and where he would die in 1927. Silva's destiny, though, took a more calamitous turn. Baldomero Sanín Cano—literary critic, linguist, and close friend of the poet—remarked years later that those who treated Silva after the disaster had noted “antecedentes de un desequilibrio de sus facultades” [“antecedents of an imbalance in his faculties”]. A witness named Aurelio de Castro, moreover, recalled the poet's disheveled appearance upon arriving on land: “Estaba demacrado, casi moribundo. El terror, el hambre, la sed y, sobre todo, el dolor que le causaba la pérdida de un baúl que contenía ‘lo mejor de mi obra,’ como él decía, le habían quebrantado de modo cruel” [“He was emaciated, almost dying. Terror, hunger, thirst, and, above all, the pain caused by the loss of a trunk containing ‘the best of my work,’ as he put it, had broken him down in a cruel way].²⁸ As de Castro observes, what was most devastating for Silva was the loss of a trunk containing the majority of his written work. Among the materials that submerged with the ship—collections of short stories and poems, critical essays on topics as varied as energy and will, letters from friends—was the original manuscript of *De sobremesa*.

According to several commentators, the confluence of a number of factors, chief among them the loss of his literary corpus, the financial ruin to which he had driven the family import business, and his younger sister's death a few years earlier, ultimately led the poet to commit suicide at the age of thirty.²⁹ Prior to his death, Silva frantically rewrote *De*

²⁷ As suggested by one passenger's account of the lifeboat's escape, published in the Medellín-based newspaper *El Esfuerzo*, the episode was as farcical as it was tragic: “El aspecto de aquella embarcación era verdaderamente curioso; a pesar de la terrible impresión que producía verla en aquella batalla, era de causar risa fijarse en aquel conjunto de tipos diversos, metidos en la lancha como cigarrillos en paquete; en trajes cómicos: niños, señoras, jóvenes, viejos, médicos, literatos, periodistas, desterrados, ladrones, comerciantes, políticos, franceses, ingleses, italianos, españoles, alemanes; todos hablando diferentes lenguas, remedando una verdadera torre de Babel.” [The appearance of that boat was truly curious; despite the terrible impression left by seeing it in its battle, there was something laughable about that motley group, squeezed together on the boat like cigarettes in a box; wearing funny outfits: children, women, youngsters, old people, doctors, literati, journalists, exiles, thieves, businessmen, politicians, French, English, Italians, Spaniards, Germans; all speaking in different tongues, mimicking a veritable tower of Babel]. Enrique Santos Molano, *El corazón del poeta: Los sucesos reveladores de la vida y la verdad inesperada de la muerte de José Asunción Silva* (Bogotá: Presidencia de la República, 1997), 1123.

²⁸ Vallejo, 174.

²⁹ On the night of May 23, 1896, Silva asked a doctor friend to trace on his chest the exact location of the heart during a dinner party. Once his guests had left, he shot himself with a Smith & Wesson revolver in the precise spot that his friend had outlined. The poet did not leave a suicide note; on his

sobremesa from memory at the behest of his friends. However, it wasn't until three decades later that the novel was finally published.

The novel's belated appearance onto the literary scene motivated a second kind of loss. By the time the text was finally published in 1925, *modernismo* had all but died out, and the *vanguardia*—associated with figures such as Borges, Huidobro, Guillén, Quiroga, *et. al.*—was in full bloom. Given its outmoded style and thematic content—and in particular its quintessentially *modernista* profusion of ornament—the novel garnered almost no critical attention in the decades immediately following its publication. Indeed, it was only in the 1960s that this “novela desconocida del Modernismo” started to receive serious critical attention in the field of modernist Latin American literary studies for its portrayal, as Juan Loveluck put it, of “una asistemática teoría del hombre finisecular y de sus conflictos básicos” [“a nonsystematic theory of fin-de-siècle man and his basic conflicts”].³⁰

In an eerie way, then, the work's history enacts the very gestures that undergird its author's aesthetic theory: it brings forth questions concerning the permanence and evanescence of art objects; it exemplifies the *modernista* attempt to solidify and concretize the ethereal; and it allows us to theorize what it might mean for a work of art to emerge out of lost or indeterminate origins (or in this case, *originals*). I would like to turn now to the text itself in order to trace how it inscribes the very terms that organize Silva's broader project.

Diving for Pearls

De sobremesa is comprised of several distinct but often overlapping narrative frames, each of which pivots around a specific scene of reading. In the extradiegetic frame, we find a third-person omniscient narrator situated in the present and oriented toward the past. In the novel's opening scene, the narrator organizes our field of vision around a series of objects that could easily be lifted from any turn-of-the-century Decadent novel:

Recogida por la pantalla de gasa y encajes, la claridad tibia de la lámpara caía en círculo sobre el terciopelo carmesí de la carpeta y, al iluminar de lleno tres tazas de China doradas en el fondo por un resto de café espeso y un frasco de cristal tallado de lleno de licor transparente entre el cual brillaban partículas de oro, dejaba ahogado en una penumbra de sombría púrpura, producida por el tono de la alfombra, los tapices y las colgaduras, el resto de la estancia silenciosa.³¹

nightstand, however, were Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Il trionfo della morte* [*The Triumph of Death*] (1894) and Maurice Barrès's *Trois stations de psychothérapie* (1891).

³⁰ Juan Loveluck, “*De sobremesa*, novela desconocida del Modernismo,” *Revista Iberoamericana*, XXI, no. 59 (1965): 25.

³¹ José Asunción Silva, *Poesía; De sobremesa*, ed. Remedios Mataix (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006), 295. Hereafter cited in-text.

[Secluded by the shade of gauze and lace, the warm light of the lamp fell in a circle over the crimson velvet of the tablecloth, and as it lit up the three china cups, which were golden in the bottom from the traces of thick coffee, and a cut-crystal bottle full of transparent liqueur shining with gold particles, it left the rest of the large and silent chamber awash in a gloomy purple semidarkness, the effect of the cast of the carpet, the tapestries, and the wall hangings.]³²

The beauty of this initial tableau lies in its almost ekphrastic depiction of movement approaching stasis, a steady slowing down that gestures toward, but does not achieve, complete paralysis. We are left in a state of suspended animation—our senses dulled by the impact of the synesthetic blend of scents and textures, our gaze shifting calmly and deliberately from one object to the next. From the novel’s very first word, the past participle “recogida,” we become aware that we are inhabiting the time of the trace: a state-of-being produced by a prior action either removed from the immediate grammar of the sentence or deferred to a later moment. The “resto de café espeso,” the “penumbra de sombría púrpura, producida por el tono de la alfombra”: these ornamental objects become partial vestiges carried from the past into the present. The narrative thus leaves us with a set of effects whose causes, like those producing the past participles, are totally absent or relegated to secondary and subordinate clauses. The narrator, furthermore, withholds any information concerning the agents behind these actions—we do not know to whom the three china cups belong, for instance, or at what point the coffee was made, or when it was drunk. Thus, both in terms of grammar and imagery, the dense description leads us to linger with objects completely decoupled from subjects, and to ask what it might mean for objects to become subjects: the narrative focalizers here are the things themselves.

In a vivid discussion about his first encounter with *De sobremesa*, Gabriel García Márquez describes Silva’s narrative style in terms of its cinematic qualities, paying particular attention to the novel’s opening passage:

El método narrativo de Silva, desde las primeras páginas de su libro—y a diferencia de cualquier novela anterior—hace pensar en una influencia imposible: el cine. La descripción inicial, en efecto, como en un movimiento de la cámara apenas perceptible, descubre poco a poco una sala en penumbra donde algo está a punto de ocurrir.³³

The book’s inaugural scene, Márquez shows, emerges piecemeal (“poco a poco”), just as a camera might reveal the elements comprising a film’s *mise-en-scène*. If we follow his turn to a cinematic vocabulary, we might say that the movement here entails a kind of panning: the narrator fixes us in one position and gradually rotates our line of sight horizontally in order

³² Washbourne, 50.

³³ [Silva’s narrative method, from the first pages of his book—and unlike any other novel that came before it—leads one to think of an impossible influence: the cinema. The initial description, in effect, like the barely perceptible movement of a camera, reveals little by little a dimly lit room where something is about to happen.] Silva, *Obra completa*, xxiv.

to scan—and thus compose, or bring into existence—the entire visual field. But this description also turns on another kind of motion, one that Márquez does not account for: zooming. While our gaze seems to move linearly along a series of objects that appear in succession (producing the temporal effect that I describe above), it also zooms in and out. In other words, the objects that the narrator traces at first appear to occupy the same visual plane, but if we look at the passage more closely—if we “zoom in” on it, so to speak—we begin to discern Silva’s formal manipulation of focus and magnitude. We move from the expansive “estancia silenciosa” and “los tapices y las colgaduras” to the “licor transparente entre el cual brillaban partículas de oro.” The macro and the micro blend, leaving the reader in a state of temporal-spatial flux. These techniques accord the text an impressionistic quality that requires that we position ourselves at a precise distance from the work—neither too far, nor too close—in order to visualize and follow its movements, its lexical “brushstrokes.” In a sense, then, the scene asks us to enact the very gesture of close reading that, as I show, will accentuate the novel’s treatment of etiology. But here, just as with any work of impressionistic art, the trick lies in knowing exactly where to situate oneself.

It is not until a few paragraphs later that the narrator introduces the novel’s main characters, bringing us to the second diegetic level: “Una mano de hombre se avanzó sobre el terciopelo de la carpeta, frotó una cerilla y encendió las seis bujías puestas en pesado candelabro de bronce cercana a la lámpara. Con el aumento de luz fue visible el grupo que guardaba silencio” (296). [“A man’s hand ran along the velvet tablecloth, struck a match and lit the six candles arrayed in a heavy bronze candelabra beside the lamp. With the brighter light the group that sat in silence came into view.”]³⁴ “Una mano de hombre”: once again, Silva teases the reader’s “epistemophilia,” our desire to know. He refuses to grant us a complete image, and instead slowly inserts the detached hand—gendered male (a detail that I will discuss at a later moment)—into the narrative. The hand, furthermore, guides the narrative by lighting the candles and revealing the identity of the individuals whom we expect to populate the story. Peter Brooks offers a deft account of this phenomenon in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. He demonstrates how modern narratives entwine a desire to know with an erotic desire, a textual strategy that configures the body as a rich “site of signification.”³⁵ Narrative impulses, like erotic impulses, propel us toward the body, which functions both as a subject and object of desire (the body produces the very desire that takes it as its object). In a similar fashion, Silva uses the detached hand here in order both to ease us gently into the narrative and to sustain the narrative impulse—we want to know to whom the hand belongs, and are forced to continue reading in order to find out.

³⁴ Washbourne, 50.

³⁵ Brooks writes: “The desire to know is constructed from a sexual desire and curiosity. My subject is the nexus of desire, the body, the drive to know, and narrative: those stories we tell about the body in the effort to know and to have it, which result in making the body a site of signification—the place for the inscription of stories—and itself a signifier, a prime agent in narrative plot and meaning.” Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 5-6.

When the narrator finally introduces the characters, he continues to use the passive tense: “con el aumento de luz fue visible el grupo que guardaba silencio.” He thus positions the group of friends as passive recipients of a preliminary action: the candlelight having illuminated their faces. To this end, he figures them among the other objects in the room, which, as I suggest above, seem to emerge as effects whose causes we cannot identify with any certainty. Thus we meet José Fernández—the anti-bourgeois and hypersensitive decadent poet on whom the novel’s overlapping narratives turn—his friend Juan Rovira, and Óscar Sáenz, a medical doctor who perfectly embodies the scientific positivist *logos* of the *fin de siglo*.

The scene that unfolds centers on a heated debate between Fernández and Sáenz about the former’s refusal (or inability) to continue producing poetry (he has not written a single verse since his last book was published seven years ago). Sáenz, the man of reason and voice of progress, is quick to diagnose his companion’s idleness. The doctor reads the heap of objects piled on the poet’s desk—metonyms of the multiple projects he is presently juggling—as symptoms of a possible latent illness. He declares, “El aspecto de tu escritorio ayer por la mañana daría que pensar en un principio de incoherencia a cualquiera que te conociera menos de lo que te conozco” (301). [“The look of your desk yesterday morning would lead one who did not know you as well as I do to think you suffer the onset of incoherence.”³⁶] That the physician pathologizes “incoherence” is no surprise, given the linear model of rationality and productivity that he so fervently espouses. Shortly afterwards, he adds to his diagnosis a rather morbid prognosis: “Te dispersarás inutilmente. No sólo te dispersarás, sino que esos diez caminos que quieres seguir al tiempo, se te juntarán, si los sigues, en uno solo” (302) [“You will dissipate yourself in vain. Not only will you spread yourself thin, but those ten paths you wish to follow all at once, will come together on you, into a single one.”³⁷] Against the potential threat of depletion and dispersion, Sáenz urges Fernández to channel his pursuits more linearly and sequentially; that is, his prescription calls for him both to focus, and to focus on one thing at a time in order to avoid imploding.

The argument between Fernández and Sáenz mirrors an insoluble conflict that lies at the heart of the novel’s form: the tension between circuitous and vagrant narratives, on the one hand, and streamlined and linear narratives, on the other. Indeed, soon after the novel was written, critics frequently pointed to its alleged “incoherence” as a technical flaw that rendered it incomprehensible and thus unworthy of any literary merit. Even Silva’s friend Baldomero Sanín Cano once termed the work “una obra de construcción defectuosa, de análisis arbitrario y de verdad puramente subjetiva”³⁸ [“a work with defective construction, arbitrary analysis, and purely subjective truths”]. The Colombian poet, lawyer, and literary critic Rafael Maya, too, critiqued the novel on the basis of its stylistic ornamentation: “Hay demasiado adorno y fantasía en ella, demasiada música, demasiado

³⁶ Silva, *After-Dinner Conversation: The Diary of a Decadent*, 53.

³⁷ Washbourne 53.

³⁸ Rafael Maya, *Los orígenes del Modernismo en Colombia* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1961).

color”³⁹ [“There is too much adornment and fantasy in it, too much music, too much color”], he proclaimed, at once echoing Sáenz’s aversion to “doing too much” and curiously performing with his own repetition of “demasiado” the very excessive gesture for which he faulted Silva’s text.

Part of the novel’s problem, according to these critics, is that, as I mention briefly above, it is comprised of multiple frames whose boundaries refuse to line up neatly, leaving the reader with the task of sorting out one narrative level from the next in order to follow the plot’s vagaries. Since the early 1990s, however, critics have countered this reading by showing how the plot’s “incoherence” and fragmentation reveal Silva’s larger—and more nuanced—experimentations with form and style. Aníbal González, for instance, argues that the novel’s numerous framing devices produce a series of gradations that attempt to lead us to an unattainable “marco trascendente, un límite absoluto”⁴⁰ [“a transcendental frame, an absolute limit”]. Nicolás Fernández-Medina has expanded González’s analysis by pointing to one other important but neglected frame: the original manuscript that was lost with the *Amèrique* shipwreck. Contending that the novel’s form is modeled on a kind of “structure of crisis” that plays out in the figure of the protagonist, Fernández-Medina tells us that “the *khaos*, literally the gapping void referenced implicitly by the missing text, displaces any move towards a textual center.” He further qualifies his position: “The fact that the novel is a reconstruction of an unknown original that pushes the formal envelope without ever completely surrendering its referentiality to absolute abstraction, will always call trust, reality and Silva’s own authorial intentions, into question.”⁴¹ Sylvia Molloy provokes us to “see *De sobremesa* as a novel of male neurasthenia and, yes, hysteria, a novel in which gender unease and dissipation are the primary concerns.”⁴² And most recently, Ericka Beckman has read the novel’s cyclicity—and the way it manifests in Fernández’s psyche—as a metaphor of *fin-de-siglo* Colombia’s boom-and-bust political economy.⁴³

These critics make valid points about the novel’s fragmented and “chaotic” form. They all accurately show how Silva’s manipulation of framing devices ultimately serves to withhold something from his reader. For Fernández-Medina, this “something” has to do with the original text, a lacuna around which the novel revolves and which can never be filled, or what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s might call a “crypt.”⁴⁴ I want to suggest,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Aníbal González, quoted in Nicolás Fernández-Medina, “The Modern Self as Subject: The Structure of Crisis in José Asunción Silva’s ‘De sobremesa,’” *Latin American Literary Review* 34, no. 68 (2006): 62.

⁴¹ Ibid., 62-76.

⁴² Molloy, 24.

⁴³ Ericka Beckman, *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America’s Export Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 121-157.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

however, that the novel itself dramatizes this gap both thematically and structurally in terms of etiology: the text's epistemic ruptures—staged time and again—largely hinge on the impossibility to locate causes.

Following Sáenz's tirade, Fernández retorts with a lengthy and impassioned speech about the meaning of life. Against the sterility, emotionlessness, and numbness of the turn-of-the-century bourgeois class, he affirms a form of vitality linked to the bodily senses and affects. He proclaims:

¿Tú crees que yo me acostumbro a vivir? No. Cada día tiene para mí un sabor más extraño y me sorprende más el milagro eterno que es el Universo. La vida, ¿quién sabe lo que es? Las religiones, no puesto que la consideran como un paso para otras regiones; la ciencia, no, porque apenas investiga las leyes que la rigen sin descubrir su causa ni su objeto. Tal vez el arte que la copia...tal vez el amor que la crea...⁴⁵

[Do you think I get accustomed to living?...No, with every passing day the savor of life grows stranger to me, and the eternal miracle that is the universe astonishes me more. Life. Who knows what it is? Not religions, since they consider it a step toward other regions; not science, since it merely investigates the laws that govern it without discovering its cause or purpose. Perhaps art, which copies it...perhaps love, which creates it.]⁴⁶

Here, Fernández calls into question the authority of a scientific paradigm that purports to fully understand life. While science, he tells his friend, might be able to discern the laws governing biological processes and phenomena, it nonetheless fails to explain the *causes* from which life emerges. This passage also resonates clearly with the letter to Coll. Both Fernández and Silva allude to etiology and determinacy only to trace their limits: both seem to find themselves drawn to the principle of causality—in regards to life and aesthetic production, respectively—precisely because it marks the outermost edge of knowledge. Following Brooks, we might even understand this discursive mode as a form of *etiophilia*, a desire not just for knowledge, but also for the knowledge of the causes that might produce knowledge. It is important to note that the main assumption underlying both the letter to Coll and Fernández's rejoinder is that these causes exist—they just need to be found.

Fernández quickly goes on to supply a further qualifier:

¡Ah, vivir la vida!, eso es lo que yo quiero, sentir todo lo que se puede sentir, saber todo lo que se puede saber, poder todo lo que se puede...Los meses pasados en la pesquería de perlas, sin ver más que la arena de las playas y el cielo y las olas verdosas, respirando a pleno pulmón el ambiente yodado del mar;" (308).

⁴⁵ Silva, *Poesía; De sobremesa*, 308.

⁴⁶ Silva, *After-Dinner Conversation: The Diary of a Decadent*, 56.

[Ah! To live life...that is what I want, to feel all that can be felt, to know all that can be known, to do all things possible...The months spent diving for pearls, not seeing the sand on the beaches and the sky and the greenish waves, breathing deep the salty steep of the sea.]

This is the first time Fernández refers to the metaphor of “diving for pearls,” but it will not be the last. Indeed, on at least three other occasions, the poet mentions “pearl fishing” (366), pearl buttons (431) and a pair of identical pearls that Balzac worked a year to acquire (497). That the figure recurs so frequently should give us pause. As part of this chapter’s heuristic, I want to align the act of pearl diving here with another motif: the persistent etiological quest that lies at the novel’s center. Mobilizing at once the act of submersion and excavation, both the trope of diving for pearls and etiology put into play the dialectic between surface and depth: just as a diver swims beneath the water’s surface in order to extract pearls, so, too, does the physician read the superficial symptoms of illness in order to then locate its cause. At a later point in the novel, the poet apostrophizes the gems lying dormant in the “entrañas del planeta” (497) [“bowels of the planet”⁴⁷], further revealing how the two tropes inflect one another.

This analogy draws a clear structural comparison between pearls (and ornaments more broadly) and pathogens. But I want to take the comparison further and echo Naomi Schor to posit that the ornamental and the pathological do not just resemble each other or serve similar structural purposes, but also blend *into* one another, to the point where the ornament quite literally *becomes* the pathogen.⁴⁸ We should remember, for instance, the *semblanza* dedicated to Núñez, in which Silva reduced (if satirically) the symbolists’ excessive use of *fioritura* to “una preocupación enfermiza.” Sáenz also draws our attention to the affinities between adornment and illness: recall his reading of the objects on his friend’s desk as potential symptoms of the “onset of incoherence”; the doctor at one point also refers to the salon’s “lujo enervante” [“enervating luxury”]. What is striking, however, is that despite how frequently Fernández invokes the trope of pearl diving, he never actually retrieves any pearls. As in the passage above, he appears to be preoccupied not so much with the final product, but with the method by which that product might be attained: he foregrounds the sensorial aspects of pearl-diving (“respirando a pleno pulmón el ambiente yodado del mar”) without discussing whether he has actually found the object.

The analogy between pearl diving and etiology, then, provides us with a number of useful points of entry into understanding the creative strategies that Silva deploys in *De sobremesa*: these include both the thematic treatment of ornamentation and illness as well

⁴⁷ Washbourne, 180.

⁴⁸ In her seminal *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Schor reads an array of late-nineteenth century texts in order to chart the ways in which the aesthetic detail becomes gendered as feminine. In a chapter on European Decadence and the Austrian architect Adolf Loos’ “Ornament and Crime,” Schor shows how “the decadent style is inherently ornamental. Decadence is a pathology of the detail: either metastasis or hypertrophy or both.” Importantly, for the most hostile critics of decadence (such as Francis Wey), the detail itself was not the problem, but rather its profusion. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

as their impact on the novel's structure. Both etiology and pearl diving require that we pass through a set of layers—a web of possible cause-effect relationships and multiple narrative frames, or various depths of water—in order to arrive at a given endpoint: the first cause, or the pearl. Like the ornaments that stall our movement in the novel's opening scene, the multiple frames organize the reader's experience of time and space and produce an effect that García Márquez deems “dos tiempos paralelos,” “two parallel times.”⁴⁹ This asynchronicity characterizes the split mode-of-being that, as I suggest earlier, the novel allies with the experience of illness.

À la recherche des causes perdues

Once the argument between Sáenz and Fernández has blown over, two other friends enter the scene: Máximo Pérez and Luis Cordovez. The conversation that ensues centers on each character's attempt to get Fernández to read one of his pieces. Reluctant at first, the poet eventually reaches for his diary: “Era un grueso volumen con esquineras y cerradura de oro opaco. Sobre el fondo de azul esmalte, incrustado en el marroquí negro de la pasta, había tres hojas sobre las cuales revoloteaba una mariposilla con las alas forjadas de diminutos diamantes” (319-20) [It was a thick volume with dull gold locks and corners. Over a background of enameled blue, encrusted in the black morocco of the covers, there were three green leaves on which fluttered a butterfly with its wings wrought in tiny little diamonds.”]⁵⁰ Once again, Silva mobilizes the image of a butterfly in order to blend the natural and the organic with the ornamental and the artificial. Here, as in “Suspiros” and the novel's opening paragraph, the image produces the *illusion* of motion—the butterfly is emblazoned on the book's cover, frozen in time and space, and yet continues to flutter.

The diary comprises most of the novel we have at hand. In it, a younger Fernández details his escapades through Europe that took place some years before the present of the novel's outer diegetic frame. The opening entries recount scenes in which the poet finds himself reading together Nordau's *Degeneration* and the diary of Marie Bashkirtseff, the Russian painter whose death from tuberculosis, Fernández suggests, indexed her genius.⁵¹ These two texts coordinate one of the central dichotomies that structure the novel more broadly: in the poet's words, it includes “comprensión intuitiva” [“intuitive comprehension”] and “incomprensión sistemática” [“systematic comprehension”]. The plot's main action turns on Fernández's quest to find Helena, a woman with whom he exchanges a fleeting glance in Geneva. As her mythical name suggests, Helena invites an obvious allegorical reading: she embodies Beauty in its most pristine and ideal form (the poet tells us immediately after the encounter that he was “spellbound” by her “ideal figure”). But, as in other *modernista* texts (most famously Rubén Darío's “Yo persigo una forma”), Fernández's pursuit culminates in failure, disappointment, and dissatisfaction. In

⁴⁹ Silva, *Obra completa*, xxv.

⁵⁰ Washbourne, 64.

⁵¹ As Susan Sontag reminds us in *Illness as Metaphor*, this alignment between tuberculosis and genius was commonplace in the nineteenth century. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

the final entry of the diary, which takes place in the “última hora del año” [“final hour of the year”], the poet recounts the moment when he comes across a tombstone engraved with his beloved’s name:

¿Su tumba? ¿Muerta tú? ¿Convertida tú en carne que se pudre y que devorarán los gusanos? ¿Convertida tú en un esqueletito negro que se deshace? No, tú no has muerto [...] ¿Muerta tú, Helena? No, tú no puedes morir. Tal vez no hayas existido nunca y seas sólo un sueño luminoso de mi espíritu; pero eres un sueño más real que eso que los hombres llaman la Realidad. Lo que ellos llaman así es sólo una máscara oscura tras de la cual se asoman y miran los ojos de sombra del misterio, y tú eres el Misterio mismo. (548)

[Her tomb? Dead, you...You, turned to flesh that rots and that the worms will eat?...You, turned into a black little skeleton that decomposes? No, you have not died [...] You, dead, Helen?...No, you cannot die. Perhaps you never have existed and you are but a luminous dream of my spirit; but you are a dream more real than what men call Reality. What they call thus is but a dark mask behind which the eyes of mystery loom up and look out, and you are Mystery itself.]⁵²

At first, the poet refers to Helena in the third person (“¿Su tumba?”) only to quickly shift his orientation toward an absent “tú.” This sudden shift from third-person reference to second-person apostrophe serves to conjure the beloved’s spirit, beckoning her into the present. Thus, for an instant, the object of desire seems to have been attained, and the plot of the diary (which is also the plot of the novel) seems to have come to some type of closure. However, it is only in death that Helena is rendered material: her ethereal traces, which have propelled us toward the present scene, acquire the materiality of flesh and bones only once they begin to decompose. Like Darío’s poet, who seizes “la palabra que huye”—the fugitive word that can be grasped solely in the moment of its disappearance—Fernández caresses his beloved for a brief second before losing her again. In a series of questions that border on denialism (or, perhaps, a kind of melancholic attachment), Fernández refuses to acknowledge the possibility that his “object of love” (to recall Freud) has died; to do so would be to confront as well her reality. Thus, in order to completely disavow the loss and therefore keep the Ideal (and desire) alive, the poet must conflate Helena with Mystery (“tú eres el Misterio,” he proclaims).

Helena is arguably one of the novel’s central catalysts, the figure that drives the main narrative forward. In this respect, we might read her as a cause whose effect is precisely the action that constitutes both the diary and the novel as a whole. As this concluding sequence makes abundantly clear, however, this cause remains a “Mystery.” “Tal vez no hayas existido nunca y seas sólo un sueño luminoso de mi espíritu,” Fernández concludes. The subjunctive here renders the diary’s ending even more ambiguous; Helena might not have existed to begin with, and as far as we can tell, it is quite possible that the tomb Fernández comes across does not even bear her name at all. The novel’s final scene

⁵² Washbourne, 216-217.

thus inscribes the indeterminacy that the text has thematized all along. Silva helps us trace the forms that might emerge out of absent origins, and asks us what it might mean to linger with effects decoupled from the causes that prefigure and produce them.

The path that Fernández takes to arrive at this final moment—which we might read as an anti-cathartic withdrawal and refusal of closure—is erratic and similarly abounds with scenes that dramatize the problem of lost causes. Indeed, as the novel makes explicit, the quest for Helena is superimposed onto another quest, one that revolves around the semiosis and phenomenology of illness and etiology. In order to find Helena, Fernández must first pass through a number of stages involving an encounter with a medical doctor. To this end, as critics have long commented, the novel demonstrates how certain forms of desire get pathologized when confronting the medical gaze.⁵³

Before I move on, a disclaimer: I mention above that Helena is the principle catalyst that drives the plot. However, I need to qualify this assertion a bit. A crucial detail that the novel almost invites us to overlook is that it is not so much Helena who propels the narrative, but a particular object with which she is affiliated: a cameo that she drops shortly after making eye contact with Fernández. Once we put the pieces together, we realize that this cameo is the same one that adorns the cover of the poet's diary: both the text (the diary and the novel) and the ornament, then, are infused with desire. Rae Beth Gordon has made a similar argument in regards to the functions of ornaments in the French *fin-de-siècle*. Focusing on works by Nerval, Gautier, Mallarmé, and Huysmans, among others, she shows how the use of profuse ornamentation in these writers' texts has to do with what Freud calls sublimation: the mechanism by which libidinal impulses get channeled away from one set of objects and toward another as a result of repression. She holds:

Ornament becomes the privileged location for the expression of desire because it is peripheral. Peripheral perception, writes Ehrenzweig, 'serves no better purpose than to be repressed from the surface memory image and to feed dream-like hallucinations of which we hardly ever become aware.' The highly valorized appearance of movement in ornament has its corollary in unconscious thought processes.⁵⁴

Fernández's quest is motivated by the pretense of returning Helena's lost object to her. The novel thus leaves us with a set of clues that subtend a series of syllogistic chains: first, the cameo stands in as a metonym for Helena, who stands in as a metonym for Beauty, so it follows that the cameo bears some direct relationship to Beauty (Beauty is thus

⁵³ Taking insights from Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, Alejandro Mejías-López has argued rather deftly that the novel posits desire both as a productive and creative force and, in the face of a medico-legal apparatus, as a marker of illness. Alejandro Mejías-López, "El perpetuo deseo': esquizofrenia y nomadismo narrativo en *De sobremesa* de José Asunción Silva," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 31, no. 2 (2007): 337-357.

⁵⁴ Rae Beth Gordon, *Ornament, Fantasy, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 19.

rendered concrete in the form of a physical ornament); second, if it is indeed true, as I am suggesting here, that what impels the plot is an *object* and not a subject, then we can start to sense the function that ornaments perform in Silva's writing. For Silva, things are defined by their agency, their capacity to produce a set of effects. And as Beckman has astutely observed, the novel's profusion of ornament brings into relief the inner logic of Marx's "commodity fetishism," the process by which an "ordinary, sensuous thing" acquires agency and conceals the labor that went into its production.⁵⁵ What I want to highlight is that, both for Marx and for Silva, the ornament might best be understood not so much in terms of its ontological qualities (which, to be sure, accord it important symbolic weight), but for the effects that it might produce. In other words, Silva seems to be concerned less with the things themselves and more with their effects. In this respect, he once again subverts the pervasive positivist etiological impulse that focuses our gaze on hidden causes.

Perhaps no other scene parodies this impulse as forcefully as one in which Fernández consults with a certain Doctor Rivington, the author, interestingly enough, of a book entitled *Causas naturales de apariencias sobrenaturales* [*Natural Causes of Supernatural Appearances*]. In an attempt to attach a name to an indeterminate ailment from which Fernández has been suffering, Rivington asks the poet to describe his symptoms and to recount what amounts to an origin story: he wants to know about his family, his country and city of birth, (etc.). He then asks him to perform a series of ridiculous tasks requiring, among other exercises, that he search for the "incógnita de una ecuación y traducir por escrito un texto de Aristófanes del original griego" (415) ["the variable in an equation, and translate a text by Aristophanes from the original Greek"⁵⁶]. Rivington then examines Fernández's translation and remarks, "Hay aquí un error [...] estos adjetivos se refieren a la acción que denota el verbo y no al sujeto de la frase..." (415) ["There's a mistake here [...] These adjectives refer to the action the verb describes and not to the subject of the sentence"⁵⁷]. As farcical as this scene is, it nonetheless equips us with a set of hermeneutic tools with which to better decipher the novel's design. The problem for Rivington is that Fernández's (mis)translation emphasizes the verbs themselves rather than the subjects performing those verbs. The patient transgresses the laws of grammar in order to flip the subject-verb hierarchy, and in doing so, privileges the latter over the former. Importantly, this focus on the verb also entails a concomitant focus on time, since it is the verb that expresses the sentence's temporal register.

Shortly afterwards, Fernández explains to Rivington what he thinks is the motive behind his malady: he recounts his erratic fits of the past several months, during which he vacillated between, on the one hand, episodes of opium-induced hyperactivity and orgiastic mania and, on the other hand, complete abstinence and asceticism. The doctor prescribes a course of action that might locate a middle ground between these two extremes, one that entails a form of moderation:

⁵⁵ Beckman, 31.

⁵⁶ Washbourne, 124.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

Haga un esfuerzo, triunfe usted de sí mismo, regularice su vida, dele usted en ella el mismo campo a las necesidades físicas que a las morales, que llama usted, a los placeres de los sentidos que a los estudios, cuide el estómago y cuide el cerebro, y yo le garantizo la curación. (416)⁵⁸

[Make an effort, triumph over yourself, get your life into a routine, give the same reign in it to the physical needs as to the moral ones, as you call them, the same to the pleasures of the senses as to the study, care for the stomach and care for the brain, and I guarantee you will be cured.]⁵⁹

Rivington echoes Sáenz's earlier vehement insistence that Fernández corral his multiple and diverging pursuits into a linear model of productivity, one that entails attending both to his physical and intellectual needs. Like Sáenz, Rivington also proposes a course of action that emerges in the form of a list of commands. Structurally, then, we can see how both doctors' recommendations resonate as well with the advice that Silva offers in his letter to Coll, with which I open this chapter: all three are modeled on a series of imperatives whose aim is to reconcile the tension between one's visceral impulses and scholarly pursuits. Nevertheless, a crucial element distinguishes the author of letter from his characters. Rivington and Sáenz advocate a moderate lifestyle, one in which deviance is controlled principally through bodily regulation.⁶⁰ Silva, on the other hand, although he encourages

⁵⁸ Aníbal González has traced the linkages between this scene and the novel's broader *fin-de-siècle* milieu by elucidating how the tropes of cultural indigestion and dyspepsia circulated in texts such as Huysmans's *À rebours*, one of *De sobremesa*'s key intertexts. Like Fernández, Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* suffers from "cólicos estomacales y de una náusea casi existencialista, que son la expresión metafórica de su incapacidad de asimilar—de armonizar en una totalidad coherente—todo el exquisito arte y la fina literatura que ha consumido" ["stomach cramps and almost existential nausea that is the metaphorical expression of his inability to assimilate—to harmonize into a coherent totality—all of the exquisite art and refined literature that he has consumed."]. "Estómago y cerebro": *De sobremesa*, el *Simposio* de Platón y la indigestión cultural," *Revista Iberoamericana* vol. LXIII, nos. 178-179 (January-June 1997): 242.

⁵⁹ Washbourne, 125-126.

⁶⁰ In this respect, Rivington and Sáenz both promote a mode of living that resembles an Aristotelian model of *sophrosyne*. Reading Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Foucault tells us that *sophrosyne*—nearly but not quite exactly synonymous with *enkrateia* (broadly, "moderation," according to Plato)—is characterized by "the fact that the subject deliberately chooses reasonable principles of action, that he is capable of following and applying them, that he holds to the "right mean" between insensitivity and excess (a middle course that is not equidistant between the two, because moderation is actually much further away from excess than from insensitivity), and that he derives pleasure from the moderation he displays. The opposite of *sophrosyne* is the immoderation (*akolasia*) that is expressed by deliberately choosing bad principles, following them of one's own accord, surrendering even to the weakest desires, and taking pleasure in bad conduct: the immoderate individual is shameless and incorrigible." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 64-65.

his friend to practice good hygiene and meticulous study, is an advocate of excess: “conságrese de lleno,” he urges.

This scene comes to a close after Rivington retrieves an oil painting depicting a woman whom Fernández is convinced is Helena. Bewildered, the poet asks:

Pero, ¿cómo se explica este misterio que rodea todo lo que a ella se refiere, que me hace encontrar aquí ese lienzo que es su retrato la noche en que vengo a hablarle a usted de ella? ¿Cómo me hizo encontrar el ramo de rosas y la mariposilla blanca la noche en que fui a buscar otra mujer para olvidarla por unas horas? ¿Cómo se explica usted todo eso? (419)

[It is she, Doctor, but how to explain this mystery that surrounds everything about her, that has me find this oil painting here, which is her portrait, the night I have come to talk to you about her, as it had me find the bouquet of roses and the white butterfly the night I went to seek out another woman to forget her for a few hours? How do you explain all that?]⁶¹

To which the doctor responds: “Vuelve usted a ver el fantasma y a soñar con lo sobrenatural [...] Aplíquese usted a encontrar causas y no a soñar” (419) [“You are again seeing the ghost and dreaming about the supernatural,” he answered with an almost harsh gravity. ‘Apply yourself to finding causes and not dreaming.’”⁶²] Rivington’s almost tautological rejoinder plays on the double meaning of “causes”: the term indexes both a thing that produces an effect or gives rise to a situation, and a principled or moral stance that one might defend. The irony here, of course, is that the doctor has written a book about this very problem: *Causas naturales de apariencias sobrenaturales*. His retort thus undoes the foundations that legitimize him as a medical expert: that is, to the contrary of what his book’s title suggests, he does not in fact seem able to locate the “natural causes of supernatural appearances.” The dialogue’s form, moreover, remobilizes the circular movement that marks the novel’s plot as a whole: Fernández wants to know what caused him to arrive at the present situation, and the doctor replies by insisting that he find causes. In its structure, the scene thus enacts the very critique of linear progression that lies at the center of the novel’s poetics, a poetics that privileges stasis or abeyance over movement both in terms of physical activity and rhetorical gestures.

De sobremesa teems with numerous other parodic encounters in which Fernández at once defers to medical expertise while remaining baffled and dissatisfied by it. I want to turn now to one final episode—from an entry dated December 26—in which Fernández meets with Dr. Charvet, a figure whom critics typically read as a stand-in for Jean-Martin Charcot, the French neurologist whose work on hysteria and neuroses influenced a generation of scientists and thinkers, including most notably Freud. Charvet begins by asking Fernández to describe his symptoms. The poet in turn responds:

⁶¹ Washbourne, 128.

⁶² *Ibid.*

¿Le ha sucedido a usted, doctor, correr, ya en retardo, a una cita urgente, contar los minutos, los segundos, abrir el reloj, no ver la hora, volverlo a abrir, ver que el instantáneo se mueve, verificar si el cronómetro funciona aplicándole el oído, creer que se ha parado, buscar la hora en los relojes de la calle, sentir que el tren o el coche no caminan, y no descansar de la horrible impresión que le hacer correr sudor frío por las sienas y le aprieta el epigastrio sino después de estar en el lugar convenido? Prolongue usted eso por seis días, exacérbelo, hágalo más insoportable *quitándole la causa* y tendrá usted idea de lo que siento. (448, italics mine)

[Has it ever happened to you, Doctor, that you're running late to a pressing engagement, you're counting the minutes, the seconds, opening your pocket watch, not seeing the time, opening it again, seeing that the second hand is moving, checking to see if the timepiece is working by pressing your ear to it, thinking it has stopped, looking for the time on the clocks in the street, feeling that the train or the coach is not running, and having no respite from the horrible impression that sends and icy sweat down your temples and chokes your epigastrium until you have reached your agreed-upon place?...Prolong that for six days, exacerbate it, make it more intolerable by *removing its cause*, and you will have an idea of what I feel.]⁶³

Shortly after this scene, Fernández consults another group of doctors—colleagues of Charvet—who bombard him with an exhaustive list of physiological and mental conditions whose symptoms he exhibits: vertigo, epilepsy, catalepsy, lethargy, chorea, railway brain and railway spine, neuralgias, neuritis, painful tics, the fear of open spaces and closed spaces, of filth and animas, of the fear of the dead, of disease, and of the stars, (etc.). This haphazard catalog of maladies is obviously meant to parody and critique positivist medicine.⁶⁴ The dense list—like the hoards of ornaments strewn throughout the novel's pages—serves, moreover, to counter the *horror vacui*, the fear of emptiness, that permeates the text. But the profusion of names here—whose purpose is to render illness controllable identifiable and controllable through language—quickly implodes: the doctors tell Fernández that “sería aventurado un diagnóstico en estos momentos en que la indecisión de los síntomas y las escasas nociones que poseemos sobre la etiología del mal impiden la precisión requerida” (457) [“A diagnosis at this time, in which the irresolution of the symptoms and the scant notions we possess of the etiology of disease prevent the necessary precision, would not be safe to say.”]⁶⁵ Indecision, indeterminacy: textual

⁶³ Washbourne, 147 (italics mine).

⁶⁴ See Gabriel Giorgi, “Nombrar la enfermedad: Médicos y artistas alrededor del cuerpo masculino en *De sobremesa* de José Asunción Silva” (http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v1n1/ens_04.htm) for an astute interpretation of the ways in which this scene purges any trace of homoeroticism in order to figure the male body as a site free of “zonas ambiguas” (“ambiguous zones”).

⁶⁵ Washbourne, 153.

accumulation, rather than bringing us toward a more clear diagnosis, hinders our progress and collapses on itself.

The episode recounted above similarly registers the discursive limits confronted by illness. When asked by Charvet to describe his ailments, Fernández draws on an analogy, as if to underscore his inability to find the words that might align perfectly with his experience (to this end, he brings to mind Elaine Scarry's discussion of the "fragmentary language of pain"⁶⁶). Strikingly, the analogy itself displays this misalignment in terms of temporality. The scene that the poet depicts impresses on its reader something akin to the feeling of being out of time, both in the sense of not having any time left (running late), and not being in sync with a linear model of time (measured by pocket watches, clocks, minutes, and seconds). This disjointed temporality is felt most immediately in terms of its somaticized effects: icy sweat dripping from one's temples, stomach cramps.

There is something strikingly paradoxical about this passage, a way in which the words pull themselves apart, come undone at the very instant of their enunciation. The problem that lies at the heart of this scene is the possibility that the surrounding world has come to a standstill: the doctor is asked to picture a scenario in which time has stopped, and in which he feels "que el tren o el coche no caminan" ["that the train or the coach is not running"]. The printed words, paralyzed on the blank page, provoke us to imagine a scene where time and the social world it organizes have come to a complete halt. But the frenzied pace with which we read these words completely undoes this feeling of suspension. To understand the experience of illness, then, we must first imagine a new kind of temporal register, one that emerges out of the split between the teleological movement of modernity (figured here in the instrumental pocket watch and the trains and coaches) and the immediate presence of the bodily affects. What enables us to experience this sensation even more acutely, Fernández concludes, is the separation of causes from their effects.

Conclusion: Dancing Atoms

By the time Fernández has finished reading his diary, we have traveled from London and Paris to Geneva, Whyll, and Interlaken—without moving at all. With the exception of Juan Rovira who, at a point in the novel where one diegetic level merges with another, leaves because he cannot follow the diary's causal scheme (he wonders what one event in the poet's disjointed narrative has to do with the next), the group of friends has remained intact, and not much seems to have happened in the salon. Here, as in the novel's opening scene, the narrator directs our attention toward the densely ornate space:

Los cuatro amigos guardaron silencio, un silencio absoluto en que se oía el ir y venir de la péndola del antiguo reloj del vestíbulo, el murmullo de la lluvia, que sacudía las ramazones de los árboles del parque, el quejido triste del viento y el revoloteo de las hojas secas contra los cristales del balcón. Adormecía en la semioscuridad carmesí del aposento. El humo tenue de los cigarrillos de Oriente ondeaba en sutiles espirales en el círculo de luz de la

⁶⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

lámpara atenuada por la pantalla de encajes antiguos. Blanqueaban las frágiles tazas de china sobre el terciopelo color de sangre de la carpeta y en el fondo del frasco de cristal tallado, entre la transparencia del aguardiente de Dantzig, los átomos de oro se agitaban luminosos, bailando una ronda fantástica como un cuento de hadas. (548-549)

[The four friends stayed silent, an absolute silence in which could be heard the oscillations of the pendulum in the old hall clock, the whisper of the rain, which shook the thick branches of the trees in the garden, the mournful moan of the wind, and the fluttering of the dry leaves against the terrace windows. The crimson semidarkness of the room grew drowsy. The tenuous smoke from the Oriental cigarette curled in subtle spirals in the circle of lamplight, dimmed by the old lace lampshade. The fragile china cups were whitened against the blood-red velvet of the rug, and in the bottom of the cut-crystal bottle, amidst the transparency of the Goldwasser, the gold-leaf particles stirred, dancing all in a luminous ring, as fantastic as a fairy tale.]⁶⁷

Silva—the sly master of parody and irony—has tricked us into thinking all along that we have been progressing toward some type of closure or resolution. And as if to make us even more blatantly aware of his cunning, he draws our attention here toward circles—the circle of friends, the spirals of the cigarette, the circle of lamplight. But in order to notice these subtle sleights of hand, it seems we must first zoom in to the microscopic level: Silva channels our attention toward the barely perceptible atoms dancing in a ring. This final moment brings into sharp relief, then, what I have been calling Silva’s etiophilia: the inclination toward causes. The notion of cause supplied the poet with the material with which to craft an aesthetics of indeterminacy, one that, like the stanza that contains the “aire que vuelve al aire” or a “cuento de hadas,” would ask us to dwell with the open-ended temporality of the play between movement and stasis, progress and decline, and health and illness.

⁶⁷ Washbourne, 217. Note: Washbourne chooses to translate “átomos” here as “particles”; the more literal translation—“atoms”—aligns more closely with my reading of the original passage.

CHAPTER TWO

Too Tired to Write: Severo Sarduy's Fatigue

Cada hombre, desde que se conoce su traza, con los primeros atisbos de escritura, sospecha que le ha tocado vivir un mitigado apocalipsis y que sus días preceden los del fin del mundo; cada escritor, que el libro que laboriosamente compagina, con lo poco que escapa a tachonazos y borrones que siempre terminan restituyendo la palabra inicial, es el último que le permitiría su energía, o esa alambicada metáfora del narcisismo que no empeñamos en llamar inspiración.

-Severo Sarduy, "Cuatro puntos de sutura en la ceja derecha" (1995)⁶⁸

Yo diría que barroco es aquel estilo que deliberadamente agota (o quiere agotar) sus posibilidades y que linda con su propia caricatura.

-Jorge Luis Borges, *Historia universal de la infamia* (1954)⁶⁹

...hallaba en la fatiga como un desmayo delicioso, y a veces verdadero júbilo.

Manuel Díaz Rodríguez, *Ídolos rotos* (1901)⁷⁰

The exhausted is the exhaustive, the dried up, the extenuated and the dissipated.

-Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted" (1995)⁷¹

⁶⁸ Severo Sarduy, *El Cristo de la rue Jacob* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores Latinoamericana, 1994), 13. (emphasis mine). Henceforth cited in-text as *Cristo*. ["Every writer, from the time his bent becomes apparent, with the first faint signs of talent, suspects that it falls to his lot to live a lesser apocalypse preceding the days that will end the world. Every writer suspects that the pages so laboriously put together—with whatever manages to escape the erasures and drafts that always end up restoring one's original word—constitute the last book his energy, or the distilled metaphor of narcissism we call inspiration, will grant him." Severo Sarduy, "Four Stiches in My Right Eyebrow," in *Christ on the Rue Jacob*, trans. Suzanne Jill Levine and Carol Maier (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1995), 9-10. Henceforth, I will cite the translation in-text as *Christ*.]

⁶⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, "Prólogo a la edición de 1954," *Historia universal de la infamia*, in *Obras completas I* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2005), 307. ["I should define as baroque that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities and which borders on its own parody" (trans. qtd. in José Eduardo González, *Borges and the Politics of Form*)]. Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

⁷⁰ ["...he found in fatigue something like a delightful fainting, and at times a veritable jubilation."] Manuel Díaz Rodríguez, *Ídolos rotos*, ed. Almudena Mejías Alonso (Madrid: Cátedra, 2009), 64.

⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," trans. Anthony Uhlmann, *SubStance* 24, no. 3 (1995): 3-28.

Bodies at Rest

In “*Una imagen del ‘tránsito’*” [“An Image of Christ’s Ascent”], a short piece gathered in his collection *El Cristo de la rue Jacob* [*Christ on the Rue Jacob*], Severo Sarduy charts a brief history of iconographic representations of the soul’s passage from life to death. He opens his text—an *epifanía* (“epiphany”) or “inventory of [mnemonic] marks,” as he clarifies in the book’s preface—by commenting on a series of stone sculptures adorning the tombs of three medieval European clergymen. Sarduy observes in these examples a tendency to portray the soul as “*un enanito blancuzco y tieso*” [“a stiff whitish little dwarf”] expelled from the mouth of the deceased and suspended over his head. Skipping a few centuries, he goes on to recount the more recent anecdote of two French mountain climbers who, trapped in their tent under an avalanche, survived the three-week burial by eating only suntan lotion and snow. The Cuban writer is especially struck by the vivid imagery in one survivor’s later account:

Vieron elevarse sobre sus cuerpos entumecidos y rígidos, ya casi congelados, algo que era como un doble, o como una imagen sin peso del propio cuerpo, que se aliviaba con la expulsión de ese simulacro, ajeno ya al dolor y al hambre.

Flotaban—dijo ella—serenos sobre ese residuo, calmos y reposados, en medio de un espacio neutro desde el que podían, sea ascender y alejarse—no sabe hacia dónde—, sea regresar a sus penosas apariencias, a sus vaciados “continentes.”

Decidieron volver a animarlos, a pesar de las intolerables punzadas musculares y de una fetidez que se desprendía—aseguró él—“del cuerpo dirigiéndose a sí mismo.” (“Cristo” 70)

[Over their numb, stiff, and soon almost frozen bodies, they saw rise something like a double, or like a weightless image of the body itself, which was relieved by the expulsion of that simulacrum and detached already from pain and hunger.

Calm and rested, she said, they floated serenely over that residue at the center of a neutral space from which they could either ascend—she doesn’t know to where—or return to their pitiful appearances, to their emptied “continents.”

They decided to animate those continents again, despite intolerable muscle spasms and the foul smell that, according to the man, emanated from “the body addressing itself.” (“Christ” 92)

The near-death experience described here entails a doubling that leaves us with two distinct but entwined bodies: the first is reduced to the absolute weight of its materiality and is stripped of its capacity to register sensation (no surprise given the anesthetizing effect of ice); the second, meanwhile, takes the form of an indeterminate “*algo*,” “*una imagen sin peso*,” a virtual “weightless image.” Positioned somewhere between life and death, the climbers are faced with a choice (a choice that, to be sure, requires an active

decision—“*decidieron*,” Sarduy tells us): either to ascend to some celestial domain or to reanimate their now emptied terrestrial bodies.

Sarduy figures the physical body, moreover, as a “*continente*,” a metaphor that indexes both landmass and container (from the Spanish *contener*, to contain). Indeed, in “*Cicatriz*” [“Scar”], another piece included in the collection, he even goes so far as to conceive of his own body in the same way. He recalls a memory from his childhood in which, awaiting an appendectomy, he observes an eerie similarity between his body and the ornate bottles of viscous liquids organized along the operating room’s shelves: “*mi propio cuerpo se me presentó como un continente, un envase opaco y frágil siempre presto a romperse: vaso rebosante de vísceras*” (Cristo 18) [“My body seemed like a continent to me, an opaque, fragile container always quick to break: a glass overflowing with viscera” (Christ 21)]. Here, the phrase “*se me presentó*”—literally “it presented itself to me”—renders the body separate from the speaker (in this case, Sarduy himself), and affords it a degree of agency; but it also suggests, importantly, a split subjectivity, insofar as the body and the speaker are not united.

Let me put forth a first claim: these two texts offer a rumination on aesthetic production, broadly, and the act of writing, more specifically. I will explore the implications of this link in greater detail at a later moment. For now, suffice it to say that there is perhaps no figure more emblematic of Sarduy’s corpus—notorious for its densely wrought ornamentation and its constant threat of implosion—than the “*envase opaco*” overflowing with viscous, visceral substances. Indeed, as this chapter will elucidate, one could even take this a step further to make a broader argument about the neobaroque, the aesthetic and philosophical tradition with which Sarduy is most often affiliated. At this point, though, I want to return to the tale of the mountain climbers and investigate its terms more closely.

Note that although both the *epifanía*’s title and its first section allude to properly Catholic associations with the afterlife (such as the Ascension), Sarduy is careful not to ascribe the same meanings to the space inhabited by the climbers; nowhere, for instance, does he refer to Limbo or Purgatory. Instead, he figures the boundary separating life from death as a “*residuo [...] en medio de un espacio neutro*” [a “residue at the center of a neutral space”]. What exactly does this neutral space look like for Sarduy? The figure of the double is again important here. As I mention above, Sarduy’s neutral delineates a zone where the body replicates, forming a duality in which each part acquires a distinct set of qualities: on the one hand, the pure physicality of the flesh and, on the other hand, the immaterial appearance of an unidentified “*algo*.”⁷² But this does not capture the full picture. Let me pose another question: what does it *feel* like to inhabit this space? By way of an answer, “*Una imagen del ‘tránsito’*” offers a few clues. Sarduy tells us that, having entered the neutral space, the mountain climbers feel “*serenos*” (“serene”), “*calmos y reposados*” (“calm and rested”). Surprisingly, confronting what must have looked like the imminence of their own death, the climbers are anything but nervous or frantic; to the contrary, they experience a kind of tranquility bordering on complete bliss.

“*Una imagen del ‘tránsito’*” thus situates us somewhere along a continuum that takes “life” and “death” as its endpoints. The *epifanía*’s closing lines certainly intimate as much:

⁷² Although he uses the term “soul” in the piece’s first section in reference to the sculptures on the medieval tombs, at this point Sarduy chooses instead to invoke an ambiguous “algo,” so I am holding onto his terminology here.

“Nuestra iconografía de la vida, como es de sobra conocido, es vasta, prolífica, variopinta. La de la muerte, o la del Tránsito, se agota, como puede verse, en una sola imagen” (“Cristo” 70) [“Our iconography of life, as everyone knows, is vast, prolific, and colorful. Death, or the Ascent, is exhausted, as you can see, in a single image” (“Christ” 92)]. The iconography of the *tránsito* is “exhausted” (a play on *agotarse*—signifying both to weary and to use up). The mountain climbers are in a state of restful serenity. Exhaustion and rest: for Sarduy, the neutral outlines a liminal space defined by its relation to energy. It toggles, that is, somewhere between vigor and enervation, between plenitude and depletion, and between excess and lack; it emerges in and through the body *qua continente* or *envase opaco*. A second proposition, then: in order to understand the neutral in its particularly Sarduyean inflection, we must take into account the question of energy and the affects. And as this chapter will demonstrate in more detail, I would even venture the more emphatic claim that fatigue, rather than simply bodily affect writ large, becomes the predominant quality of Sarduy’s neutral (my hunch is that the inverse is also true—neutrality becomes the distinguishing trait of Sarduy’s understanding of fatigue).

I want to clarify one final point about *“Una imagen del ‘tránsito.’”* In the text’s conclusion, Sarduy counterposes life to both death and the ascent, and thus draws a connection between the latter two terms. This link leads us to wonder whether the *espacio neutro* he has just described might also refer to the space of death, *per se*. In other words, it is unclear whether the climbers have already “died” upon entering the *“espacio neutro”* or whether they are hovering in some other formless realm—not quite life, but not yet death. *“El cielo y la tierra”* (“Heaven and Earth”) and *“Sueño”* (“Dream”), also gathered in *El Cristo de la rue Jacob*, help us sift through this ambiguity.

“El cielo y la tierra” is a meditation on enigmas and the method by which one might procure their solution. Sarduy recounts a visit to an art gallery in the French city of Carnac, where he came across a painting by the Argentine Antonio Seguí. Similar to El Greco’s *El Entierro del Conde Orgaz*, Seguí’s canvas is divided horizontally into upper and lower parts that the viewer is led to read as heaven and earth, respectively (hence the title of Sarduy’s piece). Unlike the earlier work, however, Seguí’s painting depicts heaven as a baroque and compressed space invaded by *“una horda sin sosiego de hombrecillos atareados y nerviosos”* (Cristo 61) [“a restless horde of busy, nervous little men” (Christ 80)], while it renders earth completely austere save the presence of a makeshift ladder. Sarduy compares this scene to the one just outside the gallery’s walls, where the city’s famous stone sculptures—monuments whose origins remain a mystery, much like the Nazca geoglyphs of Peru or the pyramids of Mexico—saturate the terrain with indecipherable markings, forming a kind of terrestrial writing system, or *geo-graphy*. *“La tierra de los alineamientos”* he observes, *“no deja intersticio, reposo, a la significación que es hoy una interrogación: todo está marcado por el hombre y adquiere categoría de símbolo”* (Cristo 61) [“The alignment-covered earth grants no space, no rest to the question that was once an answer: everything is marked by man and acquires the status of a symbol” (Christ 62)]. Sarduy remarks earlier in the text that heaven is “truly” an empty space, and earth is “truly” rife with markings. In this regard, the painting and its geographic environs point us to an enigma insofar as their juxtaposition crisscrosses the real with the symbolic.

Note here that Sarduy once again mobilizes the trope of rest (*“reposo”*), this time in order to describe the movement of knowledge through a relay between questions and answers. Near the end of his piece, he goes on to claim that *“el saber no avanza obteniendo*

respuestas, sino, paradójicamente, añadiendo nuevas preguntas que son siempre otras preguntas” (Cristo 62) [“Knowledge is not advanced by the attainment of answers, but paradoxically by the addition of new questions, which are always further questions” (Christ 83)]. We can never solve an enigma, but we can understand how, in their messy and infinite accumulation, one enigma might elucidate another through juxtaposition and opposition. In the gap created by one question and the next, “*lo inscrito, remite, como a lo esencial, al lugar de lo neutro, a su vacío*” (Cristo 62) [“the inscribed refers, as if this were the essential thing, to the place of things neutral, to the void” (Christ 83)]. Inscription, a form of writing, indexes neutrality, which Sarduy in turn aligns with the void. It is critical not to overlook the “*como*” [“as,” or “as if”], a term that Sarduy uses time and again throughout his work. The preposition forges a break as if (“*como si*”) to detach the inscription from anything that might seem to be an essence. That is, Sarduy calls into question the self-evident and taken-for-granted relationship of identity between signifier and signified, between the word and the thing it names, a gesture that had long undergirded his philosophical and aesthetic praxis.⁷³ He ultimately leaves us here with a slightly more refined definition of the neutral: it points to a void or lacuna that lies at the heart of writing. What is essential, if anything, about writing is a kind of absence (or, adopting Sarduy’s own terminology, neutrality) from which it emerges and which gets preserved in the form of a trace (to recall Derrida, who posited a similar claim in *Of Grammatology*). But how is this related to the question of death that “*Una imagen*” raises? Let us turn now to “*Sueño*,” which gives us something in the way of an answer.

In the dream referred to in the piece’s title, Sarduy imagines himself in bed with none other than fellow writer Italo Calvino. Dazed and enervated by the humid air permeating the room, the pair drifts into a deep sleep-like trance (or *sueño*, a play on both “dream” and “sleepiness,” as in “*tener sueño*”). But unlike the more familiar “*torpeza asidua de la siesta insular*” (Cristo 91) [“assiduous sluggishness of a tropical siesta” (Christ 119)] (reminiscent of Sarduy’s native Cuba), this stupor causes them to experience an “*apagón espiral del pensamiento...muerte simulada*” [“spiraling blackout of thought...a simulated death.”]. Diminished to the point of lethargy, likened to “*una ausencia más ciega*” [“a blinder absence”], the tranquilized body throws linear thought and logic into complete disarray. This state of being resonates in striking ways with the early twentieth-century French

⁷³ This anti-essentialism is a recurring tenet in Sarduy’s writing. See, for instance, his *La simulación*, a section of which he devotes to the question of gender essence and transvestism, positing that “*el travesti no imita a la mujer. Para él, à la limite, no hay mujer, sabe—y quizás, paradójicamente sea el único en saberlo—, que ella es una apariencia...*” Severo Sarduy, *Ensayos generales sobre el barroco* (México: Fondo de cultura económica, 1987), 55. [“The transvestite does not imitate women. For him, *à la limite*, there is no woman, he knows—and perhaps, paradoxically, he might be the only one who does—that she is just an appearance”]. As Oscar Montero has put it in an illuminating essay on queerness in Sarduy’s writing: “There are few commonplaces of contemporary queer theory that are not dramatized, represented and at once deconstructed in Sarduy’s works: the ambiguous foregrounding of the subject’s enunciative position; the implicit, yet consistently dramatized questioning of historical categories, specifically ‘homosexual,’ and their correlative polarities, such as gay and lesbian; the constructivist emphasis on the cultural venues that nurture the many illusions of gender differentiation; the very questioning of identity categories.” Oscar Montero, “The Queer Theories of Severo Sarduy,” in Severo Sarduy, *Obra completa* eds. Gustavo Guerrero and François Wahl (Madrid: Galaxia Gutenberg, 1999), 1783.

filmmaker Jean Epstein's notion of fatigue. In his essay *La Poésie d'aujourd'hui, un nouvel état d'intelligence* (1921), Epstein expounds the effects of fatigue—or rather fatigues (as he puts it, “*il y a autant de fatigues que d'individus*”⁷⁴)—on our intellect. He puts forth his theory of coenesthesia, a quintessentially modern experiential mode that, like synesthesia, is distinguished by a blending of the senses:

Nous arrivons à un nouveau “perpetuum mobile.” La fatigue crée la coenesthésie, la coenesthésie augmente la fatigue, obligeant le cerveau à s'occuper non plus uniquement du monde extérieur, occupation pour laquelle il a été fait, mais aussi de son monde intérieur, souci supplémentaire.

La fatigue intellectuelle crée une certaine confusion d'idées. Non que le penseur fatigué dise “crocodile” pour “tabac,” mais il tend à comprendre toutes les notions qui se présentent à lui, sur un même plan intellectuel. Les frontières, les limites de séparation des classes et des ordres lui échappent. Il perd plus ou moins la notion du relief avec ses premiers plans et ses fonds de toile. Il voit plat. Toutes les règles artificielles qui lui servaient à classer ses images intellectuelles, lui paraissent négligeables. Je ne veux pas dire qu'il bafouille, mais la notion de certaines différences le frappe moins vivement. Déjà on songe à la littérature moderne qui est à un seul plan intellectuel et qui refuse de se plier aux règles de la logique.

L'esprit fatigué tend au contraire partout à voir des ressemblances, à reconnaître plutôt qu'à connaître.⁷⁵

Fatigue, for Epstein, disrupts the stable division between inside and outside, and blurs the taxonomic boundaries separating one thing from the next; foreground and background merge, leaving objects and ideas to occupy otherwise discrete planes. Here, fatigue is less a matter of knowing and marking as radically incongruous than perceiving resemblances, and in this regard, it carves out a new terrain of experience and perception (or experience-as-perception). It is important to note that Epstein is not suggesting that fatigue produces a monolithic domain of totally indistinguishable things or thoughts, but that the weary mind is capable of seeing connections that might have remained invisible. In this regard, Epstein

⁷⁴ [“There are as many fatigues as there are individuals.”] Jean Epstein, *La Poésie d'aujourd'hui, un nouvel état d'intelligence* (Paris: Éditions de la Sirène, 1921): 192

⁷⁵ [“We arrive at a new “perpetuum mobile.” Fatigue creates coenesthesia, and coenesthesia augments fatigue, forcing the brain to occupy itself no longer just with the external world—the activity for which it was made—but also with its internal world, an additional worry. Intellectual fatigue creates a certain confusion of ideas. It is not that the fatigued thinker says “crocodile” instead of “tobacco,” but he tends to comprehend all of the ideas presented to him along the same intellectual plane. Borders, the limits of separation between classes and orders, escape him. He loses more or less the notion of depth with its foregrounds and backgrounds. He sees flatness. All of the artificial rules that used to help him classify his intellectual images now appear negligible. I do not want to suggest that he mumbles, but the notion of certain differences strikes him less vividly than before. One thinks of modern literature, which exists on a sole literary plane and which refuses to bend to the rules of logic. The fatigued spirit tends, on the contrary, to see resemblances everywhere, to recognize rather than to know”]. *Ibid.*, 197-198.

figures fatigue as a generative condition, one capable of expanding our worldview. Finally, the fatigued intellect defies the laws of logic, leaving it in a state akin to the one depicted in Sarduy's dream, where lethargy ultimately produces an intellectual blackout, and the individual encounters what Sarduy calls a "*muerte simulada*."⁷⁶ In a similar vein, we might also remember the Venezuelan *modernista* novelist Manuel Díaz Rodríguez's protagonist Alberto Soria. Having renounced an engineering career in pursuit of a humanistic education, Soria finds in this new, fatiguing labor of love a "veritable jubilation" (not unlike, perhaps, the feeling of bliss experienced by Sarduy's mountain climbers).

Let me return to the *sueño*: if fatigue brings us to a "simulated death," we are left wondering what a more genuine or real death might be. By the end of the *epifanía*, Sarduy offers something in the way of a definition:

La muerte, entonces, era eso: una proximidad a la vez familiar e inútil, la cercanía afectuosa de lo incomprensible. Letargo diferente: ni la euforia sonámbula del alcohol, poblada de imágenes y arqueos, ni el tajante coste barbitúrico, ni la instantánea ausencia del goce, ni el vacío, ni el olvido; sino la seducción discreta del no-ser, el magnetismo blando de lo informulado y no manifiesto, como si el cuerpo cediera a una facilidad o a una pereza. (Cristo 92)

[Death, then, was this: a closeness at once familiar and futile, the affectionate proximity of the incomprehensible. A different lethargy: not the euphoric sleepwalking of alcohol, inhabited by images and heavings, nor the definitive penalty of barbiturates, nor the instantaneous absence of orgasm, nor the void, nor oblivion, but instead the discreet seduction of nonbeing, the bland magnetism of the unformulated and nonmanifest, as if the body were yielding to a facile or lazy state.] (Christ 122)

"Ni...ni...ni...ni...ni": this passage accrues meaning through negation; it adds just as it subtracts. Sarduy leads us toward a better understanding, but ultimately shows that death marks the outermost limit of our comprehension; it is a different, more profound lethargy, one that lures us into a state of nonbeing whose precise terrain remains nebulous and absolutely indecipherable. We can perhaps begin to envision its outline only once we have relinquished any desire for mastery or activity (the body must yield to the seduction of a non-possessive form of laziness, Sarduy notes). What is certain, however, is that death is not identical to the void ("*ni el vacío*"), a distinction that will be crucial in the pages that follow.

We now have the terms with which to lay the groundwork for a more capacious understanding of Sarduy's neutral: first, it bears some kind of relationship (be it one of causality, identity, or similarity) to the void; second, it is a dimension of energy and fatigue; third, it floats listlessly through space and time, and thus slows us down to the point of near

⁷⁶ For an illuminating discussion of the reception of Epstein's work among Latin American *vanguardista* writers and artists, see Francine Masiello's "Collective Synesthesia: The 1920s Avant-Garde" in *The Senses of Democracy: Perception, Politics, and Culture in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

stasis; fourth, its vicissitudes become most evident in the form of the body-cum-*envase*; fifth, it is a feature of inscription and writing; and sixth, it drifts somewhere between life and death without fully occupying either of these two poles.

Keeping these coordinates in mind, this chapter follows the helical movement of the void and the neutral in Sarduy's thought in order to glean their impact on his aesthetic praxis. The void has long been an object of inquiry for scholars of Sarduy. The title of Alicia Rivero-Potter's edited book, *Between the Self and the Void: Essays in Honor of Severo Sarduy* (1998), is an obvious testament to this tendency. In that collection, Gustavo Guerrero even goes so far as to characterize Sarduy's writing in terms of a "religion of the void"; he demonstrates how, in its various guises, the void structures Sarduy's texts and functions as a kind of constitutive absence from which they emerge (not unlike Lacan's "lack"). Situating Sarduy's corpus against the backdrop of 1960s Paris—where the (self-)exiled Cuban writer first entered the world of literary publishing through his work with Éditions du Seuil—Guerrero argues that the recurrent turn to emptiness is a feature of Sarduy's modernity, a symptom of his attempt to grapple with the loss of a religious or ontological foundation of reality.⁷⁷ In a similar vein, Roberto González Echevarría opens his instructive *La ruta de Severo Sarduy* (1987) by postulating that his compatriot and close friend's texts "*sufren de la nostalgia del origen; ansiedad de regreso a una plenitud asolada, a un conocimiento perdido que se recupera al cobrar el tino.*"⁷⁸ And more recently, Rafael Rojas has compared Sarduy to the *modernistas* of the late-19th century (Darío, Casal, and company), showing how the experience of dislocation defamiliarized these writers to their native Spanish; through their travels abroad—primarily to France—they were able to perceive the Castilian language anew and in turn excavate its lost "essence."⁷⁹

Yet despite the ubiquity with which the void figures in Sarduy's work and the extensive scholarly attention it has attracted, critics have largely overlooked its link to the equally present, if more tacit, problem of neutrality. This chapter's focus on energy and fatigue brings into sharp relief the mutual inflections of the void and the neutral in Sarduy's thought. I begin with a brief discussion of Sarduy's engagement with French intellectuals from the 1960s to the 1980s. Here, I show how Sarduy's serendipitous friendship with Roland Barthes (for whom the neutral, as he put it, was always an elusive object of desire) transformed the former's philosophy and art in important ways.

Shifting from Sarduy's critical essays to his fiction, my next section looks at the shape the neutral acquires in Sarduy's work in terms of aesthetic form. I take as my case study *Pájaros de la playa* [*Beach Birds*] (1993), Sarduy's last novel, published shortly after his death from AIDS-related complications. Set in a clinic that brings to mind Fidel Castro's

⁷⁷ Gustavo Guerrero, "The Religion of the Void," in *Between the Self and the Void: Essays in Honor of Severo Sarduy*, ed. Alicia Rivero-Potter (Boulder: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1998), 31-47.

⁷⁸ ["they suffer from a nostalgia for the origin; an anxiousness to return to a destroyed wholeness, a lost knowledge that is recuperated by coming to one's senses"]. Roberto González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, (Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1987), 3.

⁷⁹ Rafael Rojas, "Mariposeo sarduyano," in *La vanguardia peregrina: El escritor cubano, la tradición y el exilio* (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de cultura económica, 2013), 60-89.

hugely controversial AIDS sanatoriums of the late 1980s and early 90s (the so-called “sidatorios”), the novel, as critics have rightly pointed out, can be read obliquely as a meditation on HIV/AIDS; while the ward’s patients suffer from an illness referred to only as “*el mal*,” they exhibit symptoms that include skin lesions (a clear allusion to Kaposi sarcoma) and an almost paralyzing fatigue. Indeed, from the outset the novel’s narrative structure is organized around the oscillation between velocity and stasis, between mobility and immobility. I argue that the fatigued body, needing to exert maximal force in order to perform the most minimal gesture, reduces, or neutralizes, the narrative’s speed (to adopt Gérard Genette’s helpful term). Throughout my analyses, I place the novel in dialogue with Sarduy’s earlier writings on the Baroque and the Neobaroque, paying special attention to their treatment of the question of energy. Central to his theories of the baroque are the seemingly disparate—but interestingly convergent—fields of astronomy and Buddhism. Both domains take the void as their organizing principal: in the case of cosmology, the void is associated with the Big Bang, black holes and Keplerian and Galilean theories of planetary orbit; in the case of Buddhism, it is linked to the principle of *Śūnyatā*—usually translated as “emptiness” or “nothingness.” While Buddhism is a recurring trope in Sarduy’s work (see, for instance, his novel *Maitreya*, whose titular character is figured as the “future Buddha”), my focus here will be primarily on the link to cosmology, since one of the protagonists of *Pájaros*, named simply “El Cosmólogo,” spends his days pondering the mechanisms of the universe.

My conclusion sets forth two tasks. I first turn to *Epitafios* [*Epitaphs*, 1994], a collection of poems that speak to the capacity of art both to register one’s own death and to preserve some kind of futurity. Here, in a move that, I admit, runs the risk of biographical determinism, I consider the ways in which Sarduy inscribes a version of himself into his later work in order to ask what it might mean to continue to write when one’s energy has been depleted, or when one confronts the imminence of his own death.

Sarduy and Barthes at the Café de Flore

How did the “neutral” find its way into Sarduy’s lexicon? In what follows, I want to sketch an intellectual biography in order to re-trace, with González Echevarría, “*la ruta de Severo Sarduy*.”⁸⁰ This path stretches across three decades and leads us from Cuba’s inland provinces, to the streets of Havana—ablaze with revolutionary fervor—and finally to Paris’ *rive gauche*.

Sarduy was born on February 25, 1937 in Camagüey, the hometown of fellow writers Gertrúdis Gómez de Avellaneda and Nicolás Guillén. As he once put it, the city’s geographic location—tucked between the bustling port of Havana and the island’s mountainous eastern (*oriente*) region—was something of an obstacle to his early formation as a writer: “*Nada llega a las provincias*,” he remarked, “*y cuando llega, está completamente trasnochado. Con las revistas literarias, por ejemplo ocurría que un número de Orígenes, y luego de Ciclón, era para nosotros—en Camagüey—en pleno 1955, digamos, una verdadera*

⁸⁰Here, I rely primarily on the second chapter of Roberto González Echevarría’s meticulous *La ruta de Severo Sarduy* (Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1987), 15-62. See, too, http://www.severo-sarduy-foundation.com/en_vida.htm for a detailed timeline written by the author’s sister.

joya bibliográfica."⁸¹ In spite of these initial constraints, Sarduy eventually succeeded in stepping onto the literary scene. He published his first poem in the local newspaper with the help of poet Clara Niggemann, and in 1955 his work appeared in *Ciclón* (1956-1958), an influential literary magazine directed by José Rodríguez Feo (who, along with José Lezama Lima, had previously run the journal *Orígenes*).

Sarduy's literary career took a critical detour in 1956. It was in that year that the Camagüeyan writer first left the province for Havana, where he enrolled in the Universidad de La Habana's Facultad de Medicina. Frequent student strikes at the university (a sign of the growing anti-Batista, pro-revolutionary sentiment⁸²) and possibly his own lack of interest in a medical career would put an end to his studies. Nonetheless, he continued to establish a name for himself as an up-and-coming poet and essayist. In 1957, Sarduy met Guillermo Cabrera Infante—editor of the journal *Carteles*—who published his "*El seguro*," a story that voiced the young writer's (short-lived) commitment to the revolutionary cause and to a Sartrean notion of *littérature engagée*.

Toward the end of 1959, nearly a year after Batista had been deposed and Castro had taken office, Sarduy received a scholarship from the Cuban government to study art criticism at the École du Louvre. He set sail from Havana en route to Europe on December 12, never to return to his native island. Over the course of the next few years, Sarduy befriended a number of French writers and intellectuals who would have a formative impact on his art and thought. In 1965, he started collaborating with the *Tel Quel* group,⁸³ through which he met Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, Jacques Lacan, and, perhaps most importantly, Roland Barthes.

Sarduy and Barthes quickly became intimate friends and bonded over a mutual interest in structuralism (not to mention, too, what we might loosely call a kind of shared "gay" cultural sensibility⁸⁴). Indeed, at one point Sarduy had been enrolled as a student in one of Barthes's courses at the École pratique des hautes études, of the Sorbonne. Beyond the space of the classroom, the two would often explicitly refer to each other in their work. Barthes, for example, dedicates a section of *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) to Sarduy's novel *Cobra*, published a year earlier.⁸⁵ And in one of the *epifanías* of *El Cristo*, Sarduy recounts their regular rendezvous at the Boulevard Saint-Germain's famous Café de Flore over the span of twenty-odd years.

⁸¹ ["Nothing comes to the provinces, and when it does arrive, it's completely outdated. With literary magazines, for example, it would happen that an issue of *Orígenes* or, later, of *Ciclón*, would be for us—in Camaguey—in 1955, a true bibliographic gem"]. Severo Sarduy, "Abajo el latifundio de la cultura," *Revolución*, September 1959, 2, quoted in González Echeverría, *La ruta*, 17-18.

⁸² See Mikhail Kalatozov's film *Soy Cuba* (1964), which at one point depicts the student strikes around the time of the Castro-led revolution.

⁸³ In 1966, he published his essay "Sur Góngora: La métaphore au carré" in the magazine.

⁸⁴ Montero has similarly referred to a certain "gay sensibility" in Sarduy's art, highlighting the obvious risk of essentialism that the notion implies. See "The Queer Theories of Severo Sarduy."

⁸⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 8.

A common tendency among scholars of Sarduy is to paint in broad strokes a picture of his relationship with Barthes at the expense of the minute, but revelatory, details; critics often point, for example, to the pair's work together with *Tel Quel*, and allude generally to Barthes's writing on structuralism as one point of reference in Sarduy's aesthetic praxis. I want to suggest, however, that the two shared more than a serendipitous and long-lasting friendship, or even vaguely overlapping theoretical affinities. Indeed, as I will demonstrate below, we can pinpoint exact moments in each of the writers' work where the other's analytical voice seeps through. This is not to say that the two voices necessarily—or ever—harmonize, but rather that they inflect one another in striking ways (even when they appear to be at odds). My focus here will again be on the figure of the neutral.

As far as I can tell, Valentín Díaz is the only other critic to have read both thinkers in tandem through the lens of neutrality. He opens his short essay, "Roland Barthes y Severo Sarduy," with a reference to the Brazilian concrete poet and literary critic Haroldo de Campos, who uncovers two strains in Barthes's thought: the first has to do with the French semiotician's more familiar structuralist work on the signifier (*Writing Degree Zero* and *Mythologies*, for instance); the second meanwhile, characterizes a "baroque" Barthes, a Barthes

do corpo (como há um Marx do corpo, o da "educação dos cinco sentidos", como "tarefa da história universal"). Este o Barthes que, a meu ver, mais solicita a posteridade, mais desgarrá para o futuro. Sem esquecer que o Barroco, enquanto tradição antinormativa e prática lúdica e liberadora do signo, é também uma profunda vocação latino-americana...⁸⁶

For Díaz, what Campos identifies here as a certain "Latin American" quality in Barthes's thought can be attributed primarily to the latter's friendship with Sarduy. Indeed, Díaz argues that it was not until the publication of Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (which, again, makes an overt reference to Sarduy), that one could begin to discern his gradual "barroquización." In that essay, Barthes tries to imagine a liminal position that emerges in the gap between pleasure and bliss, a stance that, as he puts it, might cause the paradigm to "falter." He writes:

Pleasure/Bliss: terminologically, there is always a vacillation—I stumble, I err. In any case, there will always be a margin of indecision; the distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the

⁸⁶ [of the body (just as there is a Marx of the body, of the "education of the five senses" as a "task of universal history"). This is the Barthes that, in my view, most solicits posterity, most disrupts (or leads astray) for the future. Without forgetting that the Baroque, as an antinormative tradition and liberating and playful practice of the sign, is also a profoundly Latin American vocation...."]. Haroldo de Campos, "Sobre Roland Barthes," in *Metalinguagem & outras metas* (San Pablo: Perspectiva, 2006), quoted in Valentín Díaz, "Roland Barthes y Severo Sarduy" (presentation, VII Congreso Internacional Orbis Tertius de Teoría y Crítica Literaria, La Plata, May 18, 2009).

meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse incomplete.⁸⁷

We should understand this third term not as kind of dialectical synthesis, but rather as an anomaly, an “eccentricity” that, at a later moment in his career, Barthes connects to a new vision of modernity. This “eccentric modernity” disrupts the stronghold maintained by Eurocentric teleology, and thereby reinvigorates philosophical thought. According to Díaz, we can trace its roots to Sarduy’s essays on the Baroque and the Neobaroque, which position Latin America as both a new epistemic “origin” and a “*salida de líneas bloqueadas a las que el pensamiento europeo había llevado*”⁸⁸ [“an exit out of the blocked paths to which European thought had led”]. Hence Campos’s reference to a “baroque” Barthes whose vocation can best be described as “Latin American.”

Díaz concludes his essay by affiliating Sarduy’s *vacío* with Barthes’s neutral. While he does not actually uncover the iterations of the “neutral” in Sarduy’s work (as I do above), he nevertheless proposes that we think of the neutral as a

forma cuya condición es una idea excéntrica de la modernidad: se trata de ese hueco que no es ni uno ni otro y que, como espera, des-orbita al sujeto o lo lleva a ser siempre el otro centro de la elipse, la figura de la cual, según Severo Sarduy, el Barroco no es sino una *retombée*.⁸⁹

Here, Díaz’s analysis turns on the figure of the ellipse, a leitmotif in Sarduy’s writing. The image brings together the domains of cosmology, geometry, mathematics, rhetoric, and art. By definition, ellipses are composed of two focal points; the sum of the distance from any place on the figure’s circumference to these points is constant. In order to understand the particular function of the ellipse in Sarduy’s thought, we must follow his close engagement with German astronomer Johannes Kepler. In his essay *Barroco* (1974), Sarduy contraposes Kepler’s theory of elliptical planetary orbit to Galileo’s notion of heliocentrism (itself a radical break from the geocentric model of the universe that had long held sway). After observing the errant and non-circular path taken by Mars, Kepler developed his three laws of planetary motion, the first of which postulated that the planets moved in an ellipse around two foci: while the visible sun was one, the other was “*igualmente operante, igualmente real, pero obturado, muerto, nocturno, el centro ciego, reverso del yang germinador del Sol, el ausente*” [“equally operative, equally real, but sealed up, dead, nocturnal, the blind center, the reverse of the germinating yang of the sun, the absent

⁸⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang: 1975), 4.

⁸⁸ Díaz, “Roland Barthes y Severo Sarduy,” 4.

⁸⁹ [“a form whose condition is an eccentric idea of modernity: that gap that is neither one nor the other, and that de-centers the subject and leads him to become the other center of the ellipse, the figure of which, according to Severo Sarduy, the Baroque is none other than a *retombée*”]. *Ibid.*, 7.

one].⁹⁰ Weak, invisible, absent, and the *yin* to the sun's *yang*,⁹¹ this other focal point nonetheless predicates and exerts pressure on the system. One can understand, then, why Sarduy might have turned to the figure of the ellipse in order to articulate his notion of the void, or the missing center, and how the image resonates so clearly with Barthes's conception of the neutral: Kepler's ellipse "baffled" (to echo Barthes once more), the paradigm that had been set in place by Galileo. Díaz's analysis thus offers a productive starting point for thinking about the convergences between the two terms. But my interest in this chapter is to push this link further by honing in on the trope of fatigue, a question that, interestingly enough, Barthes took up explicitly near the end of his life.

In the late 1970s, Barthes gave a series of lectures at the Collège de France that were later gathered into three volumes. The second book of the series, titled *Le Neutre*, attempts to follow the movement of the concept of the neutral across a wide range of texts and disciplines, from linguistics to psychoanalysis and from the hard sciences to literature and mysticism. Early on, Barthes warns us that he will not be arriving at a definition, because to do so would be to reinforce a structure or paradigm that, as I indicated above, the neutral actually aims to "baffle" (the neutral, if it "is" anything, is that which "*déjoue le paradigme*."⁹²). Instead, he gives us "*une dictionnaire [...] de scintillations*," a dictionary of scintillations. As in some of his previous work, such as *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (published the same year as the lectures), these twinklings take the shape of figures organized around an arbitrary scheme: alphabetical order, or whatever books happen to be lying on one's shelf. Among them we find an entry for fatigue. Here, Barthes enlists the help of Maurice Blanchot, so let me turn first to the source-texts.

Blanchot's short but forceful "*L'instant de ma mort*" ["The Instant of My Death"] narrates the story of a young Frenchman captured in his home by Nazi troops in the midst of World War II. Forced outside, the man stands in front of a firing squad awaiting his death. By either the stroke of pure luck, or the workings of fate, an explosion occurs nearby, channeling the soldiers' attention away from the present scene and toward the neighboring

⁹⁰ Severo Sarduy, "Barroco," in *Ensayos generales sobre el Barroco*, (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), 178.

⁹¹ The reference here to Chinese philosophy is not random. As has been well-documented, both Sarduy and Barthes spent time in Asia and studied Buddhism and Eastern philosophy: the former visited India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) roughly within the same period that the latter traveled to Japan (a journey he famously recounted in *Empire of Signs*) and then China (detailed in his recently translated *Travels in China*) (in fact, the trip to China organized by the *Tel Quel* group). For a compelling discussion of Orientalism in Sarduy, see Julia A. Kushigian, *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue with Borges, Paz, and Sarduy*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991). On Barthes and Orientalism, see Ridha Boulaâbi, *L'Orient des langues au XXe siècle: Aragon, Ollier, Barthes, Macé*, (Paris: P. Geuthner Éditions, 2011); Lisa Lowe, "The Desire of Postcolonial Orientalism: Chinese Utopias of Kristeva, Barthes, and *Tel quel*," in *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991); Diana Knight, "Barthes and Orientalism," *New Literary History* 24, no. 3 (1993): 617-633; and Lucy O'Meara, "Japonisme and Minimal Existence in the *Cours*," in *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2012), 118-162.

⁹² Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre: Cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 31.

town. The young man, we are told, subsequently retreats to a distant forest, where he hides in safety for some time.⁹³ What specifically captures Blanchot's attention in this anecdote is the temporal gap between the moment when the man first beholds the squad's raised rifles and his almost immediate escape from the grip of death. Blanchot writes:

Je sais—le sais-je—que celui que visaient déjà les Allemands, n'attendant plus que l'ordre final, éprouva alors un sentiment de légèreté extraordinaire, une sorte de béatitude (rien d'heureux cependant),—allégresse souveraine? La rencontre de la mort et de la mort?⁹⁴

And shortly after:

Demeurait, cependant [sic], au moment où la fusillade n'était plus qu'en attente, le sentiment de légèreté que je ne saurais traduire: libéré de la vie? l'infini qui s'ouvre? Ni bonheur, ni malheur. Ni l'absence de crainte et peut-être déjà le pas au-delà. Je sais, j'imagine que ce sentiment inanalysable changea ce qui lui restait d'existence.⁹⁵

Recalling the story of the mountain climbers with which I opened this chapter, we might ask whether Blanchot's *instant de la mort* offers a new way of understanding Sarduy's *espacio neutro*. Although the former is organized around the axis of temporality, and the latter is more overtly concerned with space, the two resemble one another quite closely. Take, for instance, Blanchot's point above that, facing death, the Frenchman feels "*ni bonheur, ni malheur*," neither happiness nor unhappiness, suggesting an intermediary neutral state free of positive or negative valences. It is striking, too, how both writers repeat the negation "ni" in order to frame their discussions: the "ni" channels our attention

⁹³ A disclaimer: it is unclear whether the story is based on factual testimony, or whether, even more interestingly, it is autobiographical (the text's title, after all, invokes the first person); nevertheless, I refer to it here because it brings into relief the problem of recounting and representing a near-death experience (the central issue at stake in Sarduy's piece) and what it means to do so when this "experience" is not one's own.

⁹⁴ ["I know—do I know it—that the one at whom the Germans were already aiming, awaiting but the final order, experienced then a feeling of extraordinary lightness, a sort of beatitude (nothing happy, however)—sovereign elation? The encounter of death with death?"] As it turns out, the soldiers are part of the Russian Liberation Army, which, led by Andrey Vlasov, fought under German command. Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The instant of my death/Demeure: fiction and testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 5.

⁹⁵ ["There remained, however, at the moment when the shooting was no longer but to come, the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from life? the infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence."] Ibid., 9.

from one position to another, without settling on either (Barthes's neutral, as I will demonstrate shortly, operates in a similar way).

Further, both accounts emphasize the importance of affect. Following Fredric Jameson, I take affect here to refer to the "global waves of generalized sensation" experienced by the body in isolation; unlike "named emotions" (Jameson's phrase), affect "somehow eludes language and its naming of things."⁹⁶ And as Francine Masiello puts it (via Jameson), we might understand affect as "something you feel in your bones," something that situates us in a "pure present."⁹⁷ This distinction between emotions and affects in terms of language is perhaps what Blanchot has in mind when he refers to the young man's untranslatable "*sentiment inanalysable*" ["unanalyzable feeling"], and perhaps what Sarduy means when he invokes an unidentified "*algo*" ["something"] in the mountain climbers' story. Taken together, both Blanchot's and Sarduy's meditations thus point us to a chronotope (to borrow Bakhtin's concept⁹⁸), a neutral time-space that better enables us to comprehend the body's phenomenological experience as it passes from one state to another, or, alternately, as it lingers in an ambiguous zone between both.

We find echoes of this claim once again in another of Blanchot's works. In the opening pages of his *L'entretien infini* [*The Infinite Conversation*] (1969)—the text that Barthes cites explicitly in *Le Neutre*—Blanchot stages a conversation between two individuals stricken with fatigue. Here, weariness indexes both the conditions of possibility for the conversation (one speaker feels compelled to speak about his fatigue) and its limit (because he is weary, the speaker becomes nearly inarticulate). Near the end of the book's introduction, Blanchot proposes the following:

La fatigue est le plus modeste des malheurs, le plus neutre des neutres, une expérience que, si l'on pouvait choisir, personne ne choisirait par vanité. O neutre, libère-moi de ma fatigue, conduis-moi vers cela qui, quoique me préoccupant au point d'occuper toute la place, ne me concerne pas.—Mais c'est cela, la fatigue, un état qui n'est pas possessif, qui absorbe sans mettre en question.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 29.

⁹⁷ Masiello, *The Senses of Democracy*, 102. See, too, Masiello's phenomenological reading of poetry in *El cuerpo de la voz. poesía, ética y cultura* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2013).

⁹⁸ Bakhtin famously defines the *chronotope* thus: "We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature [...] What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time [time as the fourth dimension of space]." M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 84.

⁹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), xxi. ["Weariness is the most modest of misfortunes, the most neutral of neutrals; an experience that, if one could choose, no one would choose out of vanity. O neutral, free me from my weariness, lead me to that which, though preoccupying me to the point of occupying everything, does not concern me.—But this is what weariness is, a state that is not possessive, that absorbs without putting into question." Maurice

Neutrality is at once a quality of fatigue (“*le plus neutre des neutres*” [“the most neutral of neutrals”]) and an external force that, through apostrophe, might relieve one of her fatigue (“*O neutre, libère-moi de ma fatigue...*” [“O neutral, free me of my weariness”]). In a sense, we might glimpse in this duality the shape of the neutral itself; neither the thing nor its other, neither inside nor outside, the neutral emerges somewhere in-between. Moreover, the neutral seems to catalyze the complete dissolution of the boundaries separating the individual from her surroundings—it “absorbs without question,” inaugurating a relationship that Blanchot calls non-possessive.

Following his reading of Blanchot, Barthes supplies us with the following etymology:

Fatigo: faire crever (des chevaux). Cf. français: être crevé. On reconstitue bien l’image: “crever”, par coup ou pression, à la suite de quoi dégonflement lent, progressif, plénitude qui se vide, tension de parois qui se relâche. L’image topique = celle du pneu crevé qui se dégonfle. Cf. Gide vieux: je suis un pneu qui se dégonfle. Dans l’image même, une idée durative: qui ne cesse de pencher, de se vider. C’est l’infini paradoxal de la fatigue: processus infini de la fin.¹⁰⁰

An initial puncture—a rupture, an explosion—that begins an “endless process of ending”: we are fatigued not because of a complete lack of energy (or, to dwell with the metaphor of the tire, because we have run out of air), but because we cannot reach the end. In this respect, fatigue operates within a boundless economy in which, as paradoxical as it seems, our resources are inexhaustible. Like the interlocutor of Blanchot’s infinite conversation who is incapable of removing herself from the dialogue, the fatigued subject inhabits a perpetual present—detached on the one hand from a long-gone past figured as an originary break, and on the other from an ever-retreating, illusory future. Fatigued, we are neither fully energized nor, as Deleuze might have it, totally exhausted, “dried up...extenuated...dissipated.”¹⁰¹

Fatigue, then, seems to be entwined with desire: worn out, we desire an end to the conversation, to our work, to our travail—perhaps even an end to desire itself? In this regard, it is no wonder that “*la fatigue*” is but one coordinate of the “desire for the neutral,” the phrase that, as Barthes tells us in his summary of the lectures, would have been a more appropriate title (*Le Neutre* 211). At this point, we might recall Asunción Silva’s Fernández

Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xx.

¹⁰⁰ Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 43. [*Fatigo*: to wear out {*faire crever*} (horses). Cf. French: *être crevé* {to be exhausted}. We easily reconstruct the image: “burst, by blow or pressure,” following which a slow, progressive deflation; fullness that empties; walls whose tension slackens. The topical image = that of the flat tire that deflates. Cf. the older Gide: I am a tire that flattens. In the very image, an idea of duration: what doesn’t stop leaning, emptying itself. It’s the paradoxical infinity of weariness: the endless process of ending.

¹⁰¹ Deleuze, “The Exhausted.”

(from Chapter One) and the bouts of weariness that punctuate his pursuit of Helena. It is only upon encountering her tombstone (“*¿Su tumba? ¿Muerta tú?*”) that he simultaneously reaches the end of his quest, the end of his story, and the end of the novel. In this example, the culmination of Fernández’s wearisome journey coincides with death, a link Sarduy also makes explicit in his *sueño*, where, again, he associates fatigue with a “*muerte simulada*” and “actual” death with a “*letargo diferente*.”

In what follows, I want to ask how this conception of fatigue emerges on the level of aesthetic form. Sarduy’s final novel, *Pájaros de la playa* (1993), his text that most overtly takes up this question both in terms of narrative structure and diegetic representation, provides a rich site for addressing this question. Fatigue, my analyses will show, provides Sarduy with the principle trope through which to experiment with narrative time.

Beach Birds

Toward the end of 1991, Sarduy and his longtime partner François Wahl attended a performance of American choreographer Merce Cunningham’s ballet *Beach Birds*, which had made its debut in Zurich a few months earlier. Set to music composed by John Cage (Cunningham’s partner), the piece plays on the illusion of movement in stasis. Here, the audience beholds eleven dancers in uniform costume: they all don a white unitard cut across the upper chest by a black yoke stitched to long black sleeves and paired with black gloves. The dancers’ feet are pressed together, their knees are slightly bent, and their arms are extended somewhere between ninety and 180 degrees. At first glance, they appear to be standing completely still.

A few seconds into the performance, however, the audience notices that the bodies onstage are not, in fact, inert, but are swaying back and forth, slowly and listlessly, as if they were hovering in mid-air or floating on water. The background music—resembling a serene ocean breeze, or perhaps waves pressing softly against the seashore—seems to cause the barely perceptible drift of the dancers’ bodies: in this regard, the bodies make visible the otherwise invisible movement of air. We now see how the black silhouette of the costume’s chest piece, set against the bright white lower part of the unitard, comes to life in the shape of the “birds” to which the work’s title refers: the dancers’ extended arms are the birds’ steady wings, and the whiteness of the unitard is, perhaps, the sky or the clouds through which they glide. Alternately, we might read the whiteness of the costume as a representation of, say, a seagull’s breast and belly set against the black feathers of its wings. In this case, the dancer-birds might be preparing to take off into flight, with their wings spread open and their limbs flexed. Gradually, the music’s tempo increases with the addition of a piano, rainstick, and violin, and the bodies follow suit, picking up their pace and beginning to disperse in multiple directions around the stage.

As Wahl remarked after his lover’s death, this performance altered the path of what would turn out to be the Cuban writer’s final novel.¹⁰² Sarduy initially entitled his text *Caimán* [Alligator]; together with his earlier works *Colibrí* [Hummingbird] (1984) and *Cocuyo* [Firefly] (1990), the book was intended to complete what we might call a “zoological trilogy” (or as Wahl put it, “*une trilogie animale*”). Sarduy began drafting the

¹⁰² François Wahl, “Severo de la rue Jacob,” in Severo Sarduy, *Obra completa*, 1500.

book in the fall of 1990, about a year before seeing Cunningham's ballet. Around that time, he also learned that he was HIV-positive. By the time the couple attended the performance, Wahl tells us, Sarduy had already been experiencing intense spells of fatigue and weakness, signs of the disease's progression.

We do not know for certain why the piece had so great an impact on Sarduy's project. In Wahl's view, the writer was drawn to the ballet's "*structure mobile-immobile*," its play, as I suggested earlier, on the oscillation between movement and paralysis. In any case, the Cuban eventually discarded the novel's original title and replaced it with *Pájaros de la playa*, an obvious allusion and homage to Cunningham and, not coincidentally, a pun on the Spanish "*pájaro*" (a term that means both "bird" and, particularly in the Caribbean, the pejorative "fag" or "homosexual"¹⁰³).

To demonstrate the affinity between the two works, I want to consider the first few lines of the novel:

En la arena rojiza dejaban un momento sus huellas los pies fuertes de los corredores. Pasaban veloces, concentrados en el ejercicio, como si pensarán en cada músculo que contraían, atareados en esa ofrenda cotidiana a la salud. Los cuerpos tensos brillaban excesivamente dibujados, casi metálicos, barnizados por el sudor; en mechones mojados, el pelo se le pegaba a la piel.

Se alejaban sin mirar siquiera un momento a los raros bañistas que tomaban el sol, o que se reponían de los titubeos etílicos de la noche anterior con el aire del litoral.

Palmeras muy altas de penacho frondoso verde oscuro: las únicas verticales del lugar.

Hacia el interior de la isla, más allá de la arena, un macizo de rocas se extendía por varios kilómetros que sólo frecuentaban nudistas intolerantes y camaleones de cresta roja.

Los nudistas, parados en las piedras más altas, alzaban los brazos tensos hasta que las manos se tocaran sobre la cabeza, inspirando aire puro, el aire vivo de la costa; luego iban bajándolos poco a poco, expulsando el mismo aire ahora contaminado por el interior del cuerpo opaco y pulmonar. Eran pájaros de la playa antes de emprender el primer vuelo, ensayando las frágiles alas, prestos a afrontar el viento en remolinos del mar.¹⁰⁴

[The powerful feet of the runners left tracks momentarily on the reddish sand. The runners sped by, concentrating on their exercise as if thinking about each muscle they tightened, absorbed in their daily offering to health.

¹⁰³ Sarduy thus seems to be resignifying the pejorative phrase, much in the same way that "queer" and "gay" have been repurposed. For more on sexuality and its ornithological metaphors, see Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, "Queer ducks, Puerto Rican patos, and Jewish feygelekh: Birds and the cultural representation of homosexuality," in *Centro Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007).

¹⁰⁴ Severo Sarduy, *Pájaros de la playa*, in *Obras II: Tres novelas* (Mexico: Fondo de cultura económica, 2011), 293. Henceforth cited in-text as *Pájaros*.

Exaggerated outlines, their taut, almost metallic bodies glistened, varnished with sweat; wet locks of hair stuck to their skulls.

They went off into the distance, without glancing for a moment at the few bathers basking in the sun or recovering from their drunken staggering of the night before by breathing the coastal air.

Tall palms topped with dark green leafy tufts: the only verticals in sight.

Toward the interior of the island, beyond the sand, a mound of rocks stretched for several kilometers, frequented only by intolerant nudists and red-crested chameleons.

The nudists stood on the highest rocks, raising their tensed arms until their hands touched above their heads, inhaling the pure air, the live air of the shore; then they began to lower them little by little, expelling the same air now contaminated by the insides of their opaque pulmonary bodies. They were beach birds just before embarking on their first flight, rehearsing their fragile wings, ready to tackle the oceanic whirlwinds.¹⁰⁵

Like Cunningham's ballet, *Pájaros de la playa* fluctuates between movement and stasis, and between speed and slowness. As Wahl intimated and as I will discuss in more detail later, the novel is structured around a set of dualities that ultimately refuse to coalesce into neat syntheses: against the erect bodies of the runners and the palm trees, we encounter the recumbent nudists lying on the sand; against the athletes' linear race towards a concrete goal, we follow the beachgoers' crooked staggering from the previous night's drunken festivities; against the "*ofrenda cotidiana a la salud*," we inhale the contaminated air expelled from the nudists' "opaque pulmonary bodies" (a double of the "*envase opaco*" I discussed earlier); and against the runners' inorganic machine-like physique, we behold the animalistic *raros bañistas* who commune with the chameleons and, by the end of the passage, metamorphose into birds.¹⁰⁶

There is one dyad, however, that inflects the novel's form more than the others. If in this opening scene Sarduy reinvigorates the early-twentieth century's pervasive insistence on speed and human-machine amalgams (à la Marinetti's Futurism, or a symptom of what Joyce refers to in *Ulysses* as the "velocity of modern life"), he does so in order to provide an acute contrast to the figure that recurs throughout the story that follows: the ill and (prematurely) aging body nearly paralyzed by fatigue. Indeed, the majority of the characters whom we meet in the novel are identified primarily in terms of their energy levels; in the book's second chapter, the narrator succinctly introduces them as "*los que la energía abandonó*" (*Pájaros* 296) ["the ones whom energy has abandoned" (*Beach Birds* 15)]. As my readings will elucidate, the undulating movement of the patients' bodies within

¹⁰⁵ Severo Sarduy, *Beach Birds*, trans. Suzanne Jill Levine and Carol Maier (Los Angeles: Otis Books, 2007), 9. Henceforth cited in-text as *Beach Birds*.

¹⁰⁶ Here again we cannot help but notice Sarduy's ludic use of *pájaro*; the term evokes a clear link to queerness in its coupling with the phrase *raro* ("odd," "strange," but also a curious echo of Rubén Darío's *Los raros*, his 1896 catalogue of "eccentric" *fin-de-siècle* writers).

the halls of the Moorish ward—similar to the listless drift of Cunningham’s dancers—shapes the rhythm of the narrative itself. The text displaces us constantly from past to present, and from the position of the omniscient third-person narrator to the diaries and poems revealing a first-person speaker’s intimate psychic life, all of which lends the novel its hybrid form. Throughout, the future looms on the horizon as a nebulous *telos* that some of the characters aspire to, but which they never attain within the scope of the plot’s unfolding.

An important point to keep in mind is that the novel never reveals the name of the illness from which the characters suffer; instead, the narrator assigns it the almost mythic label “*el mal*,” a descriptor that also attributes a moral dimension to the disease.¹⁰⁷ Its symptoms include rapid weight loss (which the patients attempt to counter with a host of homeopathic remedies), diarrhea, tremors, skin lesions, and, most frequently, a debilitating muscle fatigue. At one of the several points in the text where one diegetic level merges with another, we come across the diary of “*El cosmólogo*” [“the cosmologist”], a patient who self-identifies as “*el historiador de la enfermedad, y no sólo su víctima*” (*Pájaros* 325) [“not only its victim, but the historian of the disease” [*Beach Birds* 55]]. Mobilizing the double meaning of “*historia*” (both “story” and “history”) the cosmologist assumes the position of first-person narrator in order to detail the patients’ treatment regimen:

He aquí, el “menú” de cada día: en los pies, Fongamil, entre los dedos, y Diprosone, en la planta; en la rodilla, penicilina; en el testículo, Borysterol.

Los tazones diferentes—en uno hay un paisaje marino, quizá tropical, que lo decora y distrae de su contenido—aportan Visken, Nepressol, Depakine, Malocide, Adiazine, Lederfoline, Retrovir (AZT) o en su lugar Videx (DDI), Inmovane. El último es sólo un somnífero. Además Cortancyl—en ayunas—, Zovirax, Diffuk y, si es preciso, Atarax.

El Teldane—antialérgico—, el Doliprane—analgésico—y el Motilium—antivomitivo—son opcionales. (*Pájaros* 368)

[So here’s the daily “menu”: Fongamil on the feet and between the toes, and Diprosone on the sole of the foot; on the knee, penicillin; on the testicle, Borysterol.

The different bowls—on one of them there’s a seascape, perhaps tropical, which decorates the bowl and distracts one from its content—hold Visken, Nepressol, Depakine, Malocide, Adiazine, Lederfoline, Retrovir (AZT), or in its place Videx (DDI), Immovane. The last one is only a sleeping pill. Also Cortancyl—before breakfast—, Zovirax, Diffuk and if necessary, Atarax

Teldane, an allergy pill, Doliprane, for aches and pains, and Motilium, for nausea, are optional. (*Beach Birds* 114)

¹⁰⁷ For a commentary on the moral values attached to certain illnesses (and in particular cancer and HIV/AIDS), see Susan Sontag’s seminal essays “Illness as Metaphor” and “AIDS and its Metaphors.” For a critical response to the latter essay and to Sontag’s privileging of aesthetic (or “writerly”) form over content, see D.A. Miller’s “Sontag’s Urbanity,” *October* 49 (1989): 91-101.

This exhausting, though certainly not exhaustive, cartography of the body, coordinated around a catalogue of bizarre names, might at first appear to be just an additional element comprising the fictional world of the novel—and it is, but it is also an historical reference that moves us beyond the text’s frame. Some readers might be struck in particular by the cosmologist’s allusion to Retrovir, also known as azidothymidine, or AZT. AZT was originally developed by Dr. Jerome Horwitz in the 1960s to treat cancer; two decades later, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, the drug was discovered to have properties that were thought to be effective against HIV. After a series of clinical trials, AZT was approved by the FDA in 1987, and soon thereafter became a staple of the early drug “cocktails” of the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁰⁸ The treatment, however, was met with mixed reactions; for many patients, the drug caused side-effects that were tantamount or worse than those produced by the virus itself (muscle fatigue was often cited as one of the medication’s primary adverse effects); they therefore frequently opted not to take it. As the narrator puts it at an early moment in the novel, it is uncertain whether the source of the patients’ general malaise is “*el mal en sí mismo, o los paliativos y placebos con que trata de retardarse su progresión*” (*Pájaros* 324) [“the malady itself, or the palliatives and placebos with which they try to delay its progression” (*Beach Birds* 54)].

This casual reference to AZT—ensconced in a list of equally dizzying combinations of letters and names—thus invites us to read “*el mal*” as an index of AIDS, an interpretive gesture that numerous critics have performed. Guillermina De Ferrari, for instance, sets the text against the backdrop of Castro’s Cuba of the final decades of the twentieth century. For De Ferrari, the pentagonal building in which the novel is set—not quite a hospital, but also not exactly a prison or a sanctuary—can be read as a cipher for the Cuban government’s controversial policy to quarantine its HIV-positive citizens in state-run sanatoriums (the “*sidatorios*,” a play on SIDA, the Spanish acronym for AIDS). De Ferrari links the novel’s setting to Los Cocos, the AIDS hospital in the town of Rincón, which also, curiously enough, happened to be the same location of the former San Lázaro leper colony (and let us not overlook the eerie resonance between the town’s name—Spanish for “corner”—and the project of social removal that it hosted). In De Ferrari’s view, we can interpret this site as an allegory of “the effects of AIDS on a utopian conception of society.”¹⁰⁹ That is, in order to safeguard (or immunize, we might say) its utopian ideals, the Castro-led government had first to identify and then to isolate those deemed a threat to the body politic; here, the rhetoric surrounding “carriers” and the “4-H” list (“homosexuals, haemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians”) further buttressed a conception of national identity premised on heterosexuality, health, and autochthonous, as opposed to foreign, birth (all of which, too, reinforced the revolutionary image of the Guevarean *hombre nuevo*). Wahl, for his part, offers an alternative reading. While he agrees that the novel thematizes the onset of AIDS, he locates its geographic frame of reference not in Cuba, but in the Spanish Canary Islands

¹⁰⁸ Simon Garfield, “The rise and fall of AZT,” *Independent*, May 1993.

¹⁰⁹ Guillermina De Ferrari, “Illness and Utopia in Severo Sarduy’s *Pájaros de la playa*,” in *Vulnerable States: Bodies of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 76. For further information on sexuality post-1959, see Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

of Tenerife and Lanzarote, where Sarduy had given lectures around the same time that he began drafting the text:

Que le cadre du récit soit une île, et tropicale, est essentiel. Il est étrange qu'on n'y ait, le plus souvent, pas reconnu les Canaries—mais Severo lui-même n'en avait pas eu d'abord conscience; il introduisit par la suite des notations qui devaient faire signe (l'île est soeur symétrique de Cuba, sise de l'autre côté de l'Atlantique; le vent y est africain).

Les références visuelles ou culturelles sont, comme toujours, multiples. L'île est une synthèse de Lanzarote et Tenerife, l'ascension mêle les volcans de Lanzarote et le Teide. Le Pentagone est pour une part une mosquée, mais qui doit quelque chose à l'hôtel Las Salinas (Lanzarote) [...]¹¹⁰

My aim here is not to determine which of these two readings is the more accurate. It bears noting, however, that a number of De Ferrari's premises are incorrect; she claims, for instance, that Cuba is never mentioned in Sarduy's text, even though the signifier *cubano* is scattered throughout the book's pages.¹¹¹ This minor detail does not completely derail De Ferrari's compelling association between the novel's setting and Castro's "*sidatorios*," but it does nevertheless weaken her allegorical reading insofar as it casts a bright light on what she all too easily assumes to be hidden. This leads me to my next point: rather than interpret the novel allegorically, perhaps a better approach would be to heed Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's call for a "surface reading." Indeed, as I demonstrate above, even though the novel never explicitly names the illness, it does provide us with a series of signposts that all point to AIDS as their incontrovertible referent. Therefore, one need not dive beneath the "surface" in order to excavate hidden meaning, as an allegorical reading would require, but can instead take at face value what lies out in the open.

Neither directly named nor totally codified, then, AIDS disrupts the stable division between inside and outside, between hidden and exposed, and thereby challenges both our hermeneutic practices and the logic of exclusion and interment undergirding Castro's forced quarantines; it operates in the novel as something of an "open secret," a kind of neutral figure that shapes our understanding of how the virus circulates within the body of

¹¹⁰ Wahl, "Severo de la rue Jacob," 1501. ["That the story's frame is an island, and a tropical one at that, is essential. It is strange that, most often, one does not recognize the Canaries—but even Severo himself was at first unaware of this connection; he soon after began inserting notes that signaled [the novel's location] (the island is Cuba's symmetrical sister, situated on the other side of the Atlantic, the wind there is African). As always, the visual or cultural references are multiple. The island is a synthesis of Lanzarote and Tenerife, its ascension blends the volcanoes of Lanzarote and the Teide. The Pentagon is partly a mosque, but it bears a certain resemblance to the Las Salinas hotel (in Lanzarote)..."]

¹¹¹ See, for example, the chapter titled "*Abejas lunares (Cuarenta años atrás)*" ["Lunar Bees (Forty Years Earlier)"], where, during a flashback, we meet an "*excéntrico musical cubano*" ["musical Cuban eccentric"].

the text and the bodies of its characters.¹¹² I want to foreground here that what we might call the novel's "recessive disclosure" of AIDS (to adopt Anne-Lise François's apt phrase¹¹³) is grounded primarily in its use of fatigue as both a formal strategy and diegetic trope. And beyond the world of the story, its author was embodying—experiencing—a facet of the reality he was imagining. I expand on this last point in my conclusion, where I attempt to theorize the ways in which illness, and fatigue more specifically, both constricts and expands the conditions of possibility for writing. For now, I want to isolate a few key moments in the novel where the question of fatigue emerges most saliently.

Anti-Aging Creams, or *Cosmos* and Cosmetics

At an early point in the story, the narrator details the residents' daily schedule: regular blood exams check for the presence or absence of *el mal*; attendants arrive at the same time every day to distribute meals and to help the patients dress; pills are counted and placed into small cups; and, like clockwork, a group of young men—wizened and frail (aged beyond their years, the narrator notes)—congregates in the Pentagon to pass the empty time. The narrative moves slowly from one point to the next, from one step in the process to another, appearing at first to lead us toward some kind of finale—but the cycle repeats itself the following day, and the day after that, and so on and so forth, until one starts to feel the *taedium vitae* weighing her down. In the "*vasta casona con muros aún sólidos y arabescos*" (*Pájaros* 296) ["vast mansion with Moorish walls that still stand solid" (*Beach Birds* 15)], the rhythm of this clinical routine—quantified in terms of vials of blood, heartbeats, clocks, and the absolute value of weight measured by a scale—harmonizes with the syncopated steps of the fatigued patients whose every movement poses a herculean task.

Consider the chapter entitled "*¿Y si se tratara de una pura simulación?*" ["And if this were a mere simulation?"]. The present scene involves two of the clinic's attendants and Siempreviva (Immortelle in the novel's English translation), a resident who had voluntarily moved in with "*los que se consideraban como apestados, 'porque eran jóvenes, y porque no hay nada peor que la soledad'*" (*Pájaros* 304) ["the men who considered themselves plague-ridden, 'because they were young and there's nothing worse than loneliness'" (*Beach Birds* 23)]. Here, the aides attempt to help Siempreviva take her monthly bath, a banal task that, within the space of the ward, acquires new meaning. Interrupting her ritual application of blush, anti-aging creams, and concealer (which serve to hide the signs of aging, we are informed), the attendants announce their entrance into Siempreviva's *boudoir*:

¹¹² See, too, Erving Goffman's foundational *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, and in particular his discussions of visibility, information control, and passing (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

¹¹³ François proposes an ethos of "recessive action" and illuminates how the "open secret as a gesture of self-canceling revelation permits a release from the ethical imperative to *act* upon knowledge." Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.

—Venimos para el baño mensual—anunció el ayudante—. ¿Prefiere escobilla o esponja?

—¿Qué más da?—respondió Siempreviva, que constataba los estigmas del tiempo ante el espejo japonés—. Me baño día por día sin la ayuda de nadie. Eso sí: me tienen que poner ustedes en esa tumba de agua tibia. Yo, si resbalo, me rompo toda. Prefiero esponja.

Así, envuelta en un invisible sudario, uno por los brazos y otro por los pies, depositaron los risueños del cuerpo huesudo y recurvado, con un mechón de pelo rojo colgando del occipucio, como una crin de brasas, en el agua desinfectada y lustral.

—Me perdonan—aclaró Siempreviva—si no me enjabono yo misma. Hay movimientos que ya me son imposibles: casi todos. Es el cansancio.

—Todos estamos cansados, señora. Hasta los pájaros. ¿No ve cómo caen rendidos en la cúpula y no viajan ya rectos, en un solo vuelto hasta el litoral?

—No es el mismo cansancio—protestó Siempreviva—. El mío es de otro mundo. Como si no tuviera bordes. Algo que se convierte en el propio cuerpo, en el aire de la respiración.

—Como cuando uno toma ron en verano y luego sale al sol...

—Y aún más—añadió Siempreviva—. Llega un momento en que ya no hay diferencia entre uno mismo y el cansancio. Son, o somos, la misma cosa. Entonces nos consolamos con imágenes de la euforia pasada, con la remota alegría del cuerpo... (*Pájaros* 319-320)

[“We’re coming for your monthly bath,” announced the attendant. “Do you prefer a brush or a sponge?”

“What does it matter? replied Immortelle, who attested to the stigmas of time in her Japanese mirror. “I bathe myself every day without anyone’s help. One thing’s for certain: you will have to put me into that tomb of warm water. If I do it, and slip, I’ll break everything. I prefer a sponge.”

Thus, wrapped in an invisible shroud around the arms and feet, the bony bowed body was lifted by the smiling duo, a lock of red hair hanging from her occiput like a fiery mane, into the disinfected and shiny water.

“You’ll forgive me,” declared Immortelle, “if I don’t soap myself. There are movements I find impossible, almost all of them. It’s the fatigue.”

“We’re all tired, madame. Even the birds. Don’t you see how they fall exhausted upon the dome and no longer travel in a straight line, in a single flight to the coast?”

“It’s not the same fatigue,” Immortelle protested. “Mine is otherworldly. As if it had no limbs. Something that turns into the body itself, into the air I breathe.”

“Like when you drink rum in the summer and then walk out into the sun...”

“And what’s more,” added Immortelle. “There comes a moment in which there is no difference between oneself and the fatigue. They are, or we

are, one and the same thing. Then we console ourselves with images of past euphoria, of the body's remote joy..." (Beach Birds 47-48)

"*Son, o somos, la misma cosa*": in this quick shift between the third-person to first-person plural, Siempreviva enacts the very dissolution of boundaries characteristic of her definition of fatigue. For her, fatigue blurs the separation between self and other and could even be said to dissolve the notion of "self" altogether; in the condition she is describing, the body becomes one with its fatigue. No wonder, then, that Sarduy places her in front of a mirror, the object that renders the material body and its virtual image identical.¹¹⁴ Along these lines, Siempreviva strikingly proclaims that her "otherworldly" fatigue causes the body to vanish into thin air, losing its shape and blending with its surroundings. Much like the *apagón* in Sarduy's dream, or the resemblances one discerns in Epstein's notion of *la fatigue*, Siempreviva's weariness opens up a world of new connections and encounters. Here, furthermore, tactility becomes the privileged source of relation: the attendants' hands lift Siempreviva's body and lower it into the tomb-like tub, which bears an obvious metonymic relationship to death (insofar as it poses a risk of slipping), but also, perhaps, to one's return to the aqueous womb or the origin (the void?).

Notice, too, that the attendant responds to Siempreviva's protest by claiming that "*todos estamos cansados*." This collective *todos* at first seems to bond the employees to the patients over a shared lack of energy; in this sense, the pronoun could be said to call into question the self-evident boundary separating "healthy" from "ill," which the novel suggests should be understood as unstable temporal positions rather than fixed identities. But Siempreviva is sure to differentiate her transcendental fatigue from the attendants' mere lassitude; where the former seems to preserve something of the separation between self and the other, the latter completely undoes it.

The distinction between one kind of fatigue and another notwithstanding, what is interesting here is that the attendant's *todos* also includes the birds that every so often crash into the Pentagon's glass dome; like the mansion's listless residents zigzagging slowly through the halls, the weary birds deviate from their normal line of flight. As will soon become clear, this path also maps onto the one the reader takes through the pages of the text. Indeed, on at least two occasions the narrator suspends the "*enrevesado relato*" (*Pájaros* 375) ["topsy-turvy tale"¹¹⁵ (*Beach Birds* 123)] in order to provide us with a metafictional reflection on the act of storytelling, *tout court*. He declares: "*economicemos los pormenores, que sólo sirven para entorpecer la narración, derivando hacia lo anecdótico y secundario la mariposeante*"¹¹⁶ *atención del lector*" (*Pájaros* 336) ["Let's scrimp on the

¹¹⁴ The question of simulation, as I alluded to earlier in my discussion of Sarduy's anti-essentialism, is something of an obsession in the writer's work. See, in particular, his essay *La simulación*, in *Ensayos generales sobre el Barroco* (1987).

¹¹⁵ The word "*enrevesado*" could also mean "confusing," or "inaccessible," and bears a relationship to the phrase "*al revés*" or "backwards."

¹¹⁶ Sarduy's use of the word "*mariposeante*," a variation on "*mariposa*," or "butterfly," can be read as yet another parodic re-appropriation of anti-queer slang; the word is particularly striking here, too, in light of Cuban critic Roberto Fernández Retamar's infamous and rather offensive attack on

details, which only serve to slow down the narrative, deflecting the reader's already flighty attention toward anecdotes and trivia (*Beach Birds* 73). The irony here, of course, is that, up to this point, the prose has been anything but economical. This moment comes soon after the narrator has already supplied us with an intricately detailed account of daily life in the ward, and a meticulous description of Siempreviva's ornate, baroque room (embellished with all of the jewelry, old editions of *Harper's Bazaar*, and vintage clothing she has accumulated over the last several decades)—it also comes after an abrupt flashback in which we learn that the ward's resident *grande dame* (*née* Sonia) was something of a socialite in her day. The distracted narrator's abrupt interjection thus succeeds in diverting our "*mariposeante atención*" even *further* away from whatever constitutes the linear action of the plot. In other words, *contra* his own goal, the narrator slows us down even more: he spends time reflecting on the need to get back to the story, without actually doing so.

To reiterate: our slow and constantly inhibited movement through the text is analogous to the movement of the fatigued body through the space of the *casona*. But I want to take this claim further: the dynamic between characters and milieu, between reader and text, mimics the mechanism by which Retrovir (AZT) abates the virus' progression. The drug works by blocking reverse transcriptase, an enzyme that HIV uses to convert its RNA into DNA and thereby multiply in the host's body. Thus, in curtailing our linear progress through the novel, the narrator appears to enact (if unintentionally) the same kind of obstruction that Retrovir is meant to effectuate vis-à-vis the virus—we are slowed down, our movement brought to a near stand-still, and it is precisely here that we can begin to discern how fatigue (one of AZT's main side-effects) shapes aesthetic form.

Towards the end of the novel, Siempreviva begins to exhibit signs of early onset dementia: she converses with invisible acquaintances, is unable to differentiate the past from the future, and cannot orient herself in space. Distraught by the sudden disappearance of her two love interests (El Caimán [the Cayman] and El Caballo [the Horse], whose alternative remedies, they claimed, would mitigate the toxic effects of Western medicine), she eventually escapes in search of the sea, "*el origen*," as she puts it. Here, she comes across a pile of ruins lying in an enclave near the coast. The fragments of basalt and stone trigger a memory. Siempreviva realizes that those same materials once laid the bedrock for a house designed by "the Architect," a character whom we meet during one of the novel's various flashbacks. Forty years prior to the present scene, the Architect had envisioned a small dwelling buried underneath the sand. His plan in building this subterranean lodge was to listen during the day to the "*rumor de la marea y, por la noche, hundido en sus estratos, el casi imperceptible de la Tierra que gira, o el del origen, el eco de la explosión inicial*" (*Pájaros* 333) ["the sound of the tide and, at night, submerged in those strata, the almost imperceptible sound of the Earth turning, or the hum of the origin, the echo of the initial explosion" (*Beach Birds* 67)]. The Architect inhabited the space for some time, until it was destroyed by a hurricane. "*Resignado*," the narrator tells us, "*sin fuerzas para una nueva empresa, el arquitecto lo abandonó todo*" (*Pájaros* 335) ["resigned, without energies for a new undertaking, the architect abandoned everything" (*Beach Birds* 68)]. What the architect seeks here is nothing short of material evidence for the Big Bang theory.

Sarduy's so-called "*mariposeo neobarthesiano*" in his response to the latter's 1971 edition of the literary journal *Mundo Nuevo*. See Rafael Rojas, "Mariposeo Sarduyano."

He attempts to locate the birth of the universe in an echo, a trace of an originary moment that he ultimately cannot find. This image brings to mind Barthes's tire that I discussed earlier; once punctured, the tire inaugurates an "endless process of ending" that, in the case of the Architect's quest, we might liken to the universe's infinite expansion.¹¹⁷ Perhaps, then, we might read the Architect's pursuit as a search for lost energy, a desire to locate an end that is also a beginning.

I mention this anecdote because it hinges on the relationship between cosmology and energy, which, as I have shown, are both connected in the novel and in Sarduy's essays on the Baroque to the trope of fatigue. For the remainder of this section, I want to redirect my attention to the cosmologist, who figures prominently in the text and in whose diaries we glean an interesting formulation of weariness. At first glance, the anonymous cosmologist could not be more different than Siempreviva. He, on the one hand, is known for his austere demeanor and his detachment from the other residents; Siempreviva, on the other hand, is recognized by her extravagant use of ornamentation—one of the other patients even goes so far as to declare that "*en ella lo accesorio, el detalle olvidable en los otros, era lo esencial*" (Pájaros 390) ["in her the essential was the accessory, what for others was the forgettable detail" (*Beach Birds* 145)]. The two nonetheless bond through their mutual relationship to an etymological root: *cosmos* (world, or universe). What they share, furthermore, is a common link to what we might call cosmic temporality: for Siempreviva, this is the time of cosmetics (whose stem is *cosmos*) meant to counter the aging process; for the cosmologist, this is the time of the void, the originary emptiness that lies at the center of the universe—something like a black hole, or the constitutive "nothingness" of the moment prior to the Big Bang.

One passage in particular brings into sharp relief the convergence between the two characters' *cosmovisión*. In one of the diary entries strewn throughout the novel, the cosmologist articulates a notion of illness that resonates almost perfectly with Siempreviva's "transcendental fatigue." "*Estar enfermo,*" he writes,

significa estar conectado a distintos aparatos, frascos de un líquido blanco y espeso como el semen, medidas de mercurio, gráficos fluorescentes en una pantalla.

La cura es una ruptura de amarres, de nexos; el cuerpo es libre y autónomo, arrancadas las sábanas.

[Being sick means being connected to various machines, vials of white liquid thick like semen, measurements in mercury, fluorescent charts on a screen.

The cure is a breaking of connections, of nexus, the body is free and autonomous, the sheets thrown off.] (*Beach Birds* 80)

Once again, illness is figured in terms of a series of connections between one's body and its environment. Here, as in the novel's opening scene, the body becomes a machine; it merges with the apparatus that records its vital signs and keeps it alive.

¹¹⁷ Sarduy comments on the Big Bang theory in various essays. See, in particular, *Barroco* and the more recent *Nueva Inestabilidad*.

Shortly after this passage, the cosmologist reiterates his focus on connection, this time echoing Siempreviva's point about fatigue's capacity to dissolve boundaries:

Identificarse completamente con algo: con la fatiga. Que no haya bordes, que no haya nada entre ella y yo. Nos absorbemos uno al otro en la mórbida unidad, como dos amebas que se devoran mutuamente, insaciables y enfermas.

Ahora no hay espectador. Nadie que mire, que nombre o que juzgue al otro; tampoco estado, objeto, ser diferente que afrontar. Todo se funde o se desvanece en la misma sed de unidad. (Pájaros 342-343)

[Identify yourself completely with something: with fatigue. So that between us there are no edges. We absorb each other into a morbid unity, like two amoebas devouring one another, sick and insatiable.

Now there are no spectators. No one who watches or judges the other; nor is there a different state, object, or being to face. Everything fuses or fades in the same thirst for unity. (*Beach Birds* 82)

The cosmologist imagines an originary state of complete fusion in which, as in Siempreviva's meditation, self and other merge. We have already seen other instantiations of this notion of fatigue-as-dissolution, or even ecstasy: in the tale of the mountain climbers who, having entered the *espacio neutro*, feel a sense of absolute serenity; in Blanchot's remark about the "*sentiment de légèreté extraordinaire, une sorte de béatitude*" felt by the Frenchman beholding his death; and in the epigraph from Díaz Rodríguez's *Ídolos rotos*, where Soria's fatigue gets registered as a kind of blissful fainting. What Sarduy adds to our discussion here is that this form of identification predicated on fatigue eradicates any notion of "self"; like the protean amoeba that cannot lay claim to any notion of identity because it faces the constant threat of being devoured by its double, we lose ourselves in fatigue. Since the other's gaze no longer exists, moreover, we cannot be interpellated as subjects.

For the cosmologist and self-identified *historiador del mal*, the consequences of this fusion, of this desire for unity, can be felt most immediately in terms of one's capacity to write. According to him, to assume fatigue means, chiefly, to stop writing, "*dejar de escribir, de respirar. Abandonarse. Dar paso libre al dejar de ser*" (Pájaros 352) ["even ceasing to write, ceasing to breathe. Abandon self. Allow cessation of being" [*Beach Birds* 95]. He adds: "*Aquí escribo, en esta ausencia de tiempo y de lugar, para que esa negación sea dicha y cada uno sienta en sí mismo esa inmóvil privación de ser*" (Pájaros 353) ["Here, I write, in this absence of time and place, in order for that negation to be stated and for everyone to feel within himself that same motionless deprivation of being" (*Beach Birds* 96)]. These two lines point us to a paradox. On the one hand, the cosmologist affirms that we must stop writing—as we must stop breathing—in order to merge with nonbeing (a state that, as I discussed earlier, is not quite synonymous with death). On the other hand, he writes precisely in order to ("*para que*") usher us into that static "deprivation of being." Thus, what we are left with is an unresolved tension between writing and erasure, between composition and decomposition.

This vacillation becomes especially apparent in the novel's penultimate chapter. Here, the narrator returns us to the coastal town where Siempreviva comes across the ruins of the Architect's long-lost abode. We find her wandering aimlessly, "*como una sonámbula*" ["like a sleepwalker"], possessed by the urgent need to capture the same "lunar bees" (known for their magical, invigorating jelly) she had pursued forty years earlier. The narrator recounts: "*Se levantó para seguirlos. Avanzar con ellos hacia el futuro y retroceder consigo misma, con el fardo lúgubre de su cuerpo, cuarenta años atrás*" (Pájaros 397) ["She rose to follow them. Move with them toward the future and go back in time with herself, with the lugubrious parcel of her body, forty years back" (*Beach Birds* 154)]. Siempreviva's fatigued body weighs her down and halts her forward-oriented trajectory, a journey that is at once progressive and regressive insofar as it also leads her toward a younger self. In the end, she decides that she "no longer had the drive for such efforts," for "old age returned, incurable, even more stealthily than the disease" (*Beach Birds* 154). She subsequently descends into the Architect's cave in search of some rest. At this point, the narrator interjects once more to tell us that he will relate the ending of the story only if "*la Pelona, siempre presta a golpear, [le] concede una tregua*" (Pájaros 398) ["Death, that bald woman, always ready to pounce, grants [him] a reprieve" (*Beach Birds* 155)]. The novel thus leaves us lingering in a neutral zone, one where the ending to the story—like the ending to the narrator's own life—remains indeterminate.

An Endless Ending, *un balance prepóstumo*

Around the same time that he was finishing *Pájaros de la playa*, Sarduy also wrote two other texts: a collection of poems titled *Epitafios* [Epitaphs] and "*El estampido de la vacuidad*" ["Explosion of Emptiness"], comprised of twenty short meditations on death. In the second fragment of "*El estampido*," Sarduy writes, "*‘Mi vida, me digo en un balance prepóstumo, ‘no ha tenido telos, ningún destino se ha desplegado en su acontecer.’*" ["My life'—I tell myself, deliberating pre-posthumously—has had no *telos*. No purpose nor destiny has unfolded in its passing"¹¹⁸]. He then recants this statement, claiming that his life has, in fact, had a *telos*, and that this *telos* is comprised of a "succession of frustrations, failures, illnesses and abandonments, the repeated blow of God's hand."¹¹⁹ Sarduy curiously conceives of teleology here not as a kind of linear progression, but rather as a cycle: a succession of illnesses, the repetition of God's blows. He thus recounts his life's travails from a neutral position huddled somewhere between the *pre* and the *post*.¹²⁰

This structure of repetition and cyclicity gets mobilized again in the opening of *Epitafios*. Consider the introductory poem's first line: "*Yace aquí, sordo y severo*" ["Here lies, deaf and severe"]. Here, the poet channels our attention toward the tombstone, where we

¹¹⁸ Severo Sarduy, "Explosion of Emptiness," trans. Suzanne Jill Levine, in *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists, and AIDS*, ed. Thomas Avena (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), 197.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹²⁰ For more on Sarduy's use of the term "prepóstumo," see Cristel M. Jusino Díaz, "Balance prepóstumo: temporalidad queer y literatura latinoamericana, 1983-1993," PhD diss., (New York University, 2015).

naturally expect to find the name of the deceased. Through a sleight of hand, Sarduy manages to inscribe himself into the epitaph and thereby foretell his own death: we first notice the pun on “severo”; but more subtly, we soon find that “*sordo y severo*” turns into “severo sardu y” through the substitution of the “a” and the “u” with two o’s. The letter “o,” materialized in the form of black ink against the white page, is a cipher for the void (or the absent center); in its doubling here we might also say that it brings us “full circle,” so to speak, to the image of the ellipse organized around two foci. In the end, like the ill fatigued bodies gliding aimlessly through space and time—alternating between mobility and stasis—the epitaph leaves us in a neutral realm, lingering somewhere between death and life.

CHAPTER THREE

Nomadismo en la fijeza: **Suspended Flow in Perlongher and González-Torres**

We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity.

-Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957)

¿Cómo imagina su momento perfecto?

Un relumbrón de éxtasis. Un instante—si precedero, persistente—de fusión, de salida de sí. Raras joyas de una duración intensa.

-Néstor Perlongher, interviewed in *Babel* magazine (1989)

No good outcomes with this disease
but good days, yes—that's the unit
for now, the day: good day, bad day.

-Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Joy. He's himself today! He knows me!" (1994)

Introduction

Cuban-American visual artist Félix González-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) (Fig. 1) consists of a pair of identical, rather nondescript, battery-powered wall clocks placed side-by-side. They touch at only one point, their outline forming the symbol for infinity (∞). Upon installation, the clocks are set at exactly the same time. These "perfect lovers" move in a precisely choreographed dance, both simultaneously marking the present moment before it disappears. Before long, however, the pair goes out of sync. As dictated by the law of entropy, one battery begins to run out of power before the other does, causing this clock's minute and second hands to slowly, almost invisibly, lag behind the other's. Time is thus thrown into disarray—it's "out of joint," as Hamlet might have it. Just as the still-functional clock tries to reunite with its partner (to recuperate a kind of lost continuity), so too do spectators attempt to orient ourselves in the *here and now*; confused, we behold the two clocks that indicate two different times, and our temporal experience is in turn split, doubled. Eventually, one clock comes to a complete stop while the other keeps ticking. Movement and stasis coincide, then, at least for a period, until the clock that's still working freezes as well. At this point, all of the batteries are replaced, the clocks are once more set to the same time, and, again, they immediately start to drift apart while nonetheless remaining fixed on the wall, touching each other, if only barely.

"*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*), which González-Torres began working on in 1987 (four years before his partner, Ross Laycock, died of AIDS-related complications), is exemplary of a recurring trope in the artist's sculptures wherein ordinary household objects—things such as clocks, pieces of candy, beads, and reams of paper—are used to mark the temporal

gaps between synchronicity and asynchronicity, and between continuous movement and complete stasis. We might think, for instance, of the stacks of paper—some printed with words, others left completely blank—that museumgoers are invited to take with us; or the curtains of dazzling beads that divide a gallery into different sections; or the image, blown up and printed on a billboard, of an empty bed and two pillows that bear the indentations of absent lovers. These installations alter our temporal experience by foregrounding the relationship between disappearance and recovery. In “Untitled” (*Last Light*) (Fig. 2), for example, twelve pairs of light bulbs are held together on a string. Here, loss occurs gradually, as one-by-one the bulbs go out, leaving the others in a kind of in-between state, waiting to follow suit—until, that is, all twenty-four bulbs, like the clock batteries, extinguish and are replaced with new ones and the process starts over. In each of these works, as I’ll discuss further at a later moment, the transition between loss and recuperation is ambiguous: it’s difficult to say when, exactly, loss has already occurred and when recovery has begun, namely because loss is generally figured in these pieces as an *ongoing* process, rather than a completed event. As a result, the movement of time that we typically map onto the coordinates “past,” “present,” and “future” gets warped, such that we’re left in a muddled and non-linear temporal frame, one that, as Elizabeth Freeman has argued, dislodges the “chrononormative” order that “binds us.”¹²¹

Taking *Perfect Lovers* as my point of departure, in this chapter I chart iterations of doubled temporalities in installations by González-Torres as well as essays and poems by Argentine poet, anthropologist, and activist Néstor Perlongher. Both González-Torres and Perlongher bore witness to the immense losses brought about by the first wave of the AIDS crisis¹²²—both, too, grappled with their own diagnoses and impending deaths in the 1990s. My argument is that we find in their works what I call a poetics of suspended flow in which the linear passage of time is neutralized by counter-gestures that impede our movement, such that we’re left in a defamiliarized *now* that is at once both mobile and static, and at the same time past- and future-oriented. This is a suspended present that is continuous and yet

¹²¹ Freeman defines “chrononormativity” as follows: “By ‘binds,’ I mean to invoke the way that human energy is collated so that it can sustain itself. By ‘time binds,’ I mean something beyond the obvious point that people find themselves with less time than they need. Instead, I mean that naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation: binding is what turns mere existence into a form of mastery in a process I’ll refer to as *chrononormativity*, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.” Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

¹²² The problem of etiology and “origin” is an especially vexed and semantically and ideologically charged one when it comes to the history of HIV/AIDS. As Perlongher remarks in his *O que é AIDS*, “As origens da AIDS são nebulosas. A indecisão clínica favorece a proliferação de mitos—cujos limites com o saber são, na sociedade contemporânea, algo difusos.” Néstor Perlongher, *O que é AIDS* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1987), 38. In the U.S. context (which I mention because San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York are usually identified as the “epicenters” of the crisis), the first deaths caused by *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), which was later associated with AIDS, were reported June 5, 1981. That same day, several cases of Kaposi’s Sarcoma (a rare cancer linked to a weakened immune system) were reported in New York City. See <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline> for a more detailed and extensive timeline.

ruptured and punctuated—or, in the words of Ross Chambers, “frayed”¹²³; it’s marked by what is simultaneously fleeting and endures, or, as Perlongher described his “*momento perfecto*” (see my epigraph above), what is “*si precedero, persistente*.”

I’ll begin by reading a selection of González-Torres’s works against the backdrop of the late-1980s and early 1990s, a period that coincided with the apogee of the AIDS crisis and Reagan-led neoliberal policy in the United States. Here, I’ll show how González-Torres’s installations are structured around the split temporality of waiting that, as several critics have demonstrated, marks the experience of the AIDS witness. Importantly, this form of waiting is not synonymous with total stasis, but rather combines movement with paralysis. That is, the AIDS witness who waits—for the death of a loved one, for the news of his test results, for the onset of his symptoms, for his own possible death—does so while inhabiting a warped but not totally frozen temporality. This is the temporality that we get a glimpse of, even if briefly, in *Perfect Lovers*: one clock continues moving while the other comes to a halt; the pair thus leaves us searching for new ways to orient ourselves in time, given that we can no longer rely on quantifiable measurement or a synchronized, unified present.

We find a resonant form of dual temporality, I argue, in the work of Perlongher, and especially in his later writing. My next section thus opens with an outline of some of the key features of the Argentine’s aesthetic project, looking closely at his engagement with and variations on the Cuban *neobarroco*. Rather than offer an exhaustive genealogy of the neobaroque, or much less a fixed definition of it (a topic of much scholarly conversation and disagreement), however, my aim is specifically to examine how Perlongher’s *neobarroso* (a “muddied,” Argentine version of the Caribbean aesthetic) offers us new ways to think about temporality, movement, and flow, and how it might be shaped by (even though it’s certainly not reducible to) the poet’s experiences with AIDS. Perlongher, in his writing on the neobaroque as well as on AIDS and politics, foregrounds (if tacitly) a form of doubled temporality that resembles the temporality we find in González-Torres’s installations: in both cases, steady movement comes up against blockages that constrain our progress toward a concrete end, leaving us in a mobile, rather than frozen, present.

As I’ll discuss in greater detail below, moreover, Perlongher turned time and again to Continental philosophy and its French strain in particular as a way of elaborating his own aesthetic and political theories. In his essays and poems, one finds a sustained engagement with thinkers such as Bataille, Guattari, and Deleuze; Foucault makes several appearances as well, but he isn’t quite as central an interlocutor as the other three¹²⁴. A few terms in specific that we’ve come to associate with these figures emerge throughout much of Perlongher’s critical and literary work: nomadism, becoming-, territory, and eroticism. What these concepts have in common, I’ll suggest, is an emphasis on movement; Deleuze and Guattari define nomadism, for instance, as movement within an *intermezzo* separating

¹²³ Chambers, focusing on Mark Doty’s poem “Rope,” describes the connection between the living and dead, and between the survivor who faces the task of narrating a disaster and his reader, as “frayed”: these links might be continuous, he notes, but “the continuity is severely stressed.” Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 247.

¹²⁴ In 1990, Perlongher even published an article in the Deleuze and Guattari’s journal *Chimères*.

distinct points (more on this later); and Bataille understands eroticism to be a way of recuperating our “lost continuity” with the world and with each other, which, for Perlongher, entails a “salida de sí,” a movement beyond or out of oneself. All of this being said, however, part of my claim is that even though Perlongher’s works either explicitly or implicitly emphasize movement, they nonetheless also incorporate counter-impulses that block our steady flow. My aim here is to show what happens to our temporal experience when we encounter these opposing forces.

By way of a conclusion, I turn once more to González-Torres who, like Perlongher, took eros (and its effect on bodily movement and coherence) to be a central feature of his art and politics. Here, I’ll focus on a selection of his famous candy spills, installations comprised of individually wrapped sweets that spectators are invited to interact with and consume. The weight of each of these works carries important symbolic value: some installations weigh as much as the artist’s lover, Ross, did prior to the onset of late-stage AIDS; others weigh as much as the combined total of Ross’s and González-Torres’s bodies; and in each instance, our own bodies merge with the work once we ingest its parts. Like the clock installation and the string of light bulbs, these candy fixtures hinge on the oscillation between depletion and replenishment: once the last piece of candy is consumed, the work disappears, but only until the installation is put together once again.

Waiting

Born in Guáimaro, Cuba in 1957, González-Torres spent his childhood and teen years in Puerto Rico before moving to New York City in the late 1970s. There, he pursued an undergraduate degree in photography at the Pratt Institute, and later went on to enroll in the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program. In 1987, he joined Group Material, a New York-based artists’ collective whose mission was to raise social awareness through public intervention; in addition to large-scale exhibitions, the collaborative carried out more subtle gestures aimed at altering social perception on a “micro,” quotidian level—for example, they included inserts in the pages of newspapers and posted signs in subways to alert members of the public to issues such as homelessness, gender and reproductive rights, and the Reagan administration’s violent nonchalance towards the AIDS crisis. González-Torres’ participation in the group provided an initial stepping-stone toward his own career as an independent artist. As several critics have pointed out, like Group Material’s praxis, his own art attempted to raise consciousness without dictating or prescribing specific meaning.¹²⁵ That is, his art, as critics tend to agree, privileges tacit insinuation over explicit exposure. This perhaps explains why nearly all of his work, with the exception of one commissioned piece, is untitled and only provides us clues to its meaning in the form of a parenthetical aside.

A recurring feature of González-Torres’s aesthetic project, as I suggested above, is its refusal of linear temporality and finitude. Take “Untitled” (Fig. 3), for instance, one of González-Torres’s “dateline” installations, a collection that he started to assemble in the late 1980s. Like other works in the series, all of which are comprised of a set of names, events, and dates, this one aims to subvert the normative conventions of historical

¹²⁵ See, for instance, Nancy Spector, *Félix González-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim, 1995).

chronology. In this particular instance, a solid black billboard was displayed in New York City's Sheridan Square between March and September of 1989. At the bottom of the billboard observers read from left to right (although I'm not sure that this order matters much) the following list of names, phrases, and dates printed in white italics: "*People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969*". As we read, we're shuffled back and forth from one point in time to the next. The lack of commas and periods, or any other punctuation for that matter, causes one element of the list to nearly fuse with another, so that "1985," for example, could just as easily tell us something about "People With AIDS Coalition" as it does "Police Harassment." In this way, the installation exhibits how the past intrudes upon the present, and how the present shapes our understanding of the past; too, it leads us to question the demarcations that we so tenaciously hold onto in order to make sense of our world. These entries, furthermore—from the mobilizations responding to the AIDS crisis, to Oscar Wilde, to the Supreme Court's 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision (which upheld the constitutionality of Georgia's sodomy laws)—comprise a markedly queer history: queer insofar as it's threaded together by events and figures having to do with the oppression of sexual minorities (particularly in the U.S. and the U.K., which is an important detail to note); but queer, too, in that it refuses a linear narrative that might lead us to a pre-determined end. Historical violence, the billboard declares, cannot be consigned to the graveyard of the past; the dead simply cannot bury the dead, to invoke Marx's formulation.¹²⁶

Art historian Adair Rounthwaite, in an insightful essay on the politically problematic curatorial practices involving González-Torres's sculptures, has noted that unlike figures such as David Wojnarowicz and Keith Haring, whose art is more overtly "political" and more explicitly thematizes queer issues (think of Haring's work with ACTUP, for instance), González-Torres approached the crisis with an "elegant, minimalist visual vocabulary," which lends his works their "'timeless' quality that allows them to continue to be presented as contemporary."¹²⁷ As a result of its "timelessness," curators have tended to describe his art as being pertinent to and reflective of the present moment, regardless of what the specific circumstances might be. Rounthwaite argues that this practice "dequeers" his art, stripping it of its particularities and rendering it more accessible (read: consumable) for a wider public. Against this easy transposability and, we might say, universalization, of González-Torres's work, Rounthwaite maintains that his art's "thematization of timelessness and continuity should be given historical grounding by being contextualized

¹²⁶ Heather Love, describing and advocating for a mode of queer scholarship marked by what she calls "feeling backward," shows how the post-Stonewall era gay rights movement, with all of its emphasis on linear progress, "has made it difficult to approach the past as something living—as something dissonant, beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present." Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9-10. It seems González-Torres's billboard similarly refuses the compulsion toward a linear form of progress.

¹²⁷ Adair Rounthwaite, "Split Witness: Metaphorical Extensions of Life in the Art of Félix González-Torres," *Representations* 109, no. 1 (2010): 36.

within AIDS witnessing practices.”¹²⁸ She draws here primarily on writing by Simon Watney, Jane Blocker, and Ross Chambers. For both Watney and Blocker, González-Torres is a “split witness”: someone who inhabits a kind of liminal temporality, divided between a “community of the living and a community of the dead.” In a provocative and moving essay from 1994—written two years before González-Torres succumbed to AIDS-related illness—Watney remarks that the artist’s works produce a temporal effect that he compares to Purgatory: “This is not denial. We know they’re dead,” Watney says about the friends he’s lost, “we also know we have to fight on behalf of the living. This is what Félix González-Torres’s extraordinary work is ‘about.’ We have rediscovered Purgatory.”¹²⁹ For Watney, Purgatory both names a threshold through which the soul passes, and enables the living to maintain some kind of close contact with the deceased through prayer. González-Torres’s works recuperate this contact, which, Watney notes, was dissolved as a result of the Protestant Reformation’s prohibition against the Catholic practice of indulgences.¹³⁰

We might say that this notion of Purgatory—in which the AIDS witness looks at once backwards and forwards, acknowledging loss and fighting “on behalf of the living”—underpins a modality of queer utopianism that, as José Esteban Muñoz so elegantly describes it, entails a “backward glance that enacts a future vision.”¹³¹ Muñoz’s argument proceeds from the premise that “queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality.” “We must strive,” he goes on, “in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality to think and feel a *then and there*.”¹³² I am compelled by Muñoz’s beautiful readings of Stonewall-era texts, and am sympathetic to his political project, but part of my aim in this chapter, as in this dissertation, is to identify conditions that might lead us to reassess this particular understanding of the present as always already totalizing, accessible, or cognizable; put differently, I am interested in identifying those experiential modes that render the *here and now*, which, I think, Muñoz too easily dismisses as a “prison house,” unfamiliar, strange, and maybe even queer¹³³. The phenomenological experience of split

¹²⁸ Ibid, 53.

¹²⁹ Simon Watney, “In purgatory: the work of Félix González-Torres,” in *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 162.

¹³⁰ To be sure, Watney is not, or not only, referring to a specific set of religious beliefs or practices here, but seems rather to be emphasizing how González-Torres’s works bring the living—those who have, at least for now, survived the crisis—into contact with their deceased loved ones. Thus, while he refers to Purgatory (and even provides a brief history of the Protestant Reformation), my sense is that the term operates in a more capacious way in his essay.

¹³¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 4.

¹³² Ibid, 1.

¹³³ I use the term “queer” here not to index a set of sexual orientations, or identitarian categories, but to identify a relationship marked by a feeling of unfamiliarity or being dislodged in regards to a given norm, or habit.

temporality produced by the AIDS crisis, as we see in González-Torres's pieces, is one example.

Ross Chambers's work on testimony and witnessing practices offers a lucid description of this form of doubled time. In *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting*, Chambers analyzes a set of texts written in response to the crisis through what he calls the "dual autobiography," a genre that "consists of an alignment, or rather a would-be alignment, between these two similar forms of suspension, anticipatory and retrospective (prospective)."¹³⁴ He goes on to remark that the collective experience of AIDS (at least in the West) has been marked by a form of waiting,

an experience of deferment (notably the deferment of mourning), an experience of community born of a shared proximity to death, and finally an experience of that community's isolation.

AIDS is defined in this genre, then, as an epidemic of suspended sentences, in the form first of all of waiting for the blow (the blow of HIV positivity, the blow of the onset of symptoms, the final blow of death) to fall; and also in the form, among survivors, of the inability and/or unwillingness to turn the page; a failure of mourning, whether through anxiety, anger, guilt, or a sense of prior urgencies, and hence a deferment of closure.¹³⁵

This notion of suspension in which closure is constantly deferred bears a striking resemblance to Sarduy's conception of the *prepóstumo* that I discussed in the previous chapter. Recall that Sarduy, reflecting on his prognosis in what would turn out to be one of his last pieces of writing, tells us from a "*balance prepóstumo*" that his life '*no ha tenido telos, ningún destino se ha desplegado en su acontecer.*' He then retracts and qualifies this statement: his life has, indeed, had a telos, but one that consists of "the repeated blows of God's hand." For both Chambers and Sarduy, then, one's "surviving the dying," as Chambers puts it, is marked by a doubled, Janus-faced orientation: the survivor is held in abeyance, simultaneously facing the past and the future, in a sort of ambiguous, stretched-out present, somewhere between the *pre* and the *post* that demarcate the boundary between life and death. This notion of suspended, doubled temporality is an apt lens through which to read Perlongher's poetry and essays. Like González-Torres's sculptures, Perlongher's writing situates us in a cyclical present in which steady flow reaches its limits; what we're left with is a transformed temporality that, as I'll show in the pages that follow, the Argentine poet likened to a kind of "nomadism in fixity," or movement without movement.

Embodied Politics

Born in the Argentine port city of Avellaneda in 1949, Néstor Perlongher was a vocal member of several different activist groups, both in his native Argentina as well as in Brazil. In 1968, he began collaborating with *Política Obrera* (PO) (later called *Partido Obrero*), a workers' rights organization that would inspire the poet's alliance with Trotskyism.

¹³⁴ Chambers, *Untimely Interventions*, 252.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 252-253.

Around that time, in the midst of Juan Carlos Onganía's military dictatorship, a small underground syndicalist group that, as it turned out, was comprised primarily of gay men, began meeting regularly in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. Led by Héctor Anabitarte, a former Communist Party member (he'd been expelled because of his sexual orientation), the group eventually took on the name *Nuestro Mundo*. *Nuestro Mundo*'s activism initially centered on union rights. In the wake of Juan Perón's ouster by the military in 1955, wages sharply declined and strikes became more frequent. It wasn't until the late-1960s that the organization, inspired to an extent by the Stonewall Rebellion and the mobilizations against police violence that were taking place in the U.S., began to foreground the rights of sexual minorities among its main causes.¹³⁶

In 1971, *Nuestro Mundo* joined forces with *Profesionales*, an association of professional writers, and formed the *Frente de Liberación Homosexual*. To be sure, the FLH was not a monolithic organization, but rather a coalition of different constituencies, each of which subscribed to its own set of political beliefs and practices. These included, for instance, *Nuestro Mundo* (still led by Anabitarte), *Grupo de Profesionales*, the lesbian collective *Safo*, anarchist groups (e.g. *Bandera Negra*), and gay Christian groups (*Emmanuel*, *Católicos*, *Grupo Cristiano*). In 1972, Perlongher, who had broken with the *Partido Obrero* as a result of its nonchalance, or outright hostility, toward "la cuestión homosexual," founded the group *Eros*, which then aligned with the FLH. Together, the members of *Eros*—mostly students and leftist intellectuals—read and discussed the work of Marcuse, Deleuze, Foucault, and others, in order to develop a political praxis that fought at once against capitalism and patriarchy.¹³⁷ One of their primary tactics was to print and disseminate pamphlets emblazoned with various slogans, such as "Machismo = Fascismo" and "El machismo es el fascismo de entrecasa."

As Perlongher tells us in the concluding lines of his "Historia del Frente de Liberación Homosexual de la Argentina," the FLH ultimately came to an end with the rise of

¹³⁶ Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquín Insausti, in a detailed article on the history of the *Frente de Liberación Homosexual*, examine the relationship between labor organization and gender and sexual rights: "Unions both obstructed and facilitated the formation of this political group of homosexual men," they note, referring here to *Nuestro Mundo*. "As was the case in many working-class and left-wing political organizations throughout Latin America during the late Cold War era, working-class struggle and resistance by Argentine unions against the military were presented as manifestations of manhood. This masculinization of political action did not create the most welcoming environment for homosexuals to organize as such. Symbolically, the presence of homosexuality constituted a challenge to the traditional male gender role anchoring union solidarity and workers' struggle. Yet daily life in the unions and among workers was prejudiced but not overtly hostile to homosexuality; a live-and-let-live attitude seemed to prevail." Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquín Insausti, "Dictatorial Rule and Sexual Politics in Argentina: The Case of the *Frente de Liberación Homosexual*, 1967-1976," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (2017), 300. On a related note, the scholarship on the Guevarean figure of the "hombre nuevo" that emerged in the wake of the Cuban Revolution is extensive. See, for instance, Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹³⁷ Cecilia Palmeiro, *Desbunde y felicidad: De la Cartonera a Perlongher* (Buenos Aires: Título, 2011), 33.

Videla's brutal military dictatorship in 1976: "La dictadura militar de Videla," Perlongher writes, "desata una persecución sistemática contra los homosexuales, que, además de imposibilitar toda forma de organización, obliga a destinar todas las energías a la supervivencia individual."¹³⁸ In 1981, following the group's dissolution and a series of attacks by the police, Perlongher left Buenos Aires for São Paulo, where the following year he enrolled in a Master's program in Social Anthropology at the University of Campinas. There, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork for his thesis on male prostitution, which he later published first in Portuguese and then in Spanish as *O negocio do michê* and *La prostitución masculina*, respectively. He would remain in Brazil until his death from AIDS-related complications in 1992.

It's crucial to note, as Cecilia Palmeiro so lucidly has, that both Perlongher's militancy as well as the FLH's broadly were rooted in a fundamentally embodied form of politics. This was the factor that distinguished groups such as Eros and the FLH from other activist organizations. "La revolución," Palmeiro notes, "no era de los otros, comenzaba en el propio cuerpo del sujeto." Referring to the work of Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli¹³⁹, she adds that "la propuesta política y erótica del cuerpo deseante de Perlongher resultaba subversiva porque se orientaba hacia los objetivos revolucionarios en tanto potencia del presente, no como postergación o residual postrevolucionario."¹⁴⁰ For Palmeiro, the subversive capacity of Perlongher's political praxis lay in its deployment of desire as a destabilizing force that activates the "potencia del presente." This, notably, is a politics of the present, one anchored firmly in the body, its desires, and its affects. Furthermore—and this point is key—this body, propelled by desire, appears to be in perpetual motion; according to Deleuze and Guattari, desire, coupled with beliefs, "are the basis of every society, because they are flows."¹⁴¹ As I'll show below, this desiring body, in all of its material composition (its fluids and its flesh), became an ineluctable feature of Perlongher's poetry as well. Nevertheless, the poet also renders in verse opposing tendencies that nearly bring this moving body to a halt, leaving us suspended in a warped temporal movement.

Trudging through Mud

Perlongher's writing is soaked in liquids: water, semen, blood, sweat, and the pus of decaying cadavers suffuse the lines of his poetry and prose. Languages intermingle and bodies traverse borders of nation, gender, socioeconomic class, (etc.), in a flow that resists

¹³⁸ Néstor Perlongher, "Historia del Frente de Liberación Homosexual de la Argentina," in *Prosa plebeya. Ensayos 1980-1992* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1997), 83. Henceforth cited in-text as *Prosa*.

¹³⁹ See Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli, *Fiestas, baños y exilios: los gays porteños en la última dictadura* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2001).

¹⁴⁰ Palmeiro, *Desbunde y felicidad*, 33.

¹⁴¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 219.

steady positions or fixity. Consider, for instance, the first few lines of the sixth part of his poem “Viedma,” included in his third collection *Hule* (1989):

Naviolas

Olas en bolas chupan la correa
de caucho que circuye
el elevado mascarón, de proa-
divagación que comunica
a lo alto el rumor de las hondas¹⁴²

Here, as is characteristic of Perlongher’s aesthetic project, surface (“lo alto”) crosses with depth (“las hondas”), and words fuse to form new ones, so that *navío* blends with *olas* to produce *naviolas*, which then drifts along with the current of the undulating waves that shape the poem’s movement and usher us from one line to the next. For communication to be successful, it must pass through *divagaciones*, meandering and circuitous digressions, rather than linear signification. We find a similar flow, this time across national borders, in “Escenas de la guerra,” the introductory poem of Perlongher’s first volume *Austria-Hungría* from 1980. Here, the reader encounters a carnivalesque scene in which *la murga*, a traveling musical theatre troupe popular in Argentina and other parts of the Southern Cone, marches down the streets of Warsaw in a “*Polonia/que no es/que no es.*” The poem simultaneously negates and affirms, as when the speaker declares that “*no es una murga,*” only to immediately remark that “*es una murga*” in the following line. Thus, we’re left with a constant tension that, not unlike the back-and-forth flow of the waves above, refuses to be transfixed into neat categories (*Poemas* 23).

These examples (and there are many others one could add to this list¹⁴³) display the poet’s longstanding opposition to essentialist or stable notions of identity. A cornerstone of his philosophy and political activism was Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “nomadism” and “becoming-.” In “Los devenires minoritarios,” written on the occasion of Guattari’s 1982 visit to Brazil (which had just elected its first democratic government following almost two decades of military dictatorship), the poet develops his idea of the “cartografía deseante.” The task of the “cartógrafo deseante,” he writes, adopting Guattari’s terminology¹⁴⁴,

¹⁴² Néstor Perlongher, “Viedma,” in *Poemas completos* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1997), 162. Henceforth cited in-text as *Poemas*.

¹⁴³ See, for instance, Perlongher’s extensive writing on the figure of the *travesti*, and in particular his essays “Nena, llévate un saquito” (1983), “El sexo de las locas” (1983), and “Matan a una marica” (1985), all of which are included in *Prosa plebeya*.

¹⁴⁴ During his visit, the French philosopher, accompanied by Brazilian psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik, met with the leader of the newly formed Workers Party, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (a.k.a. Lula). A few years later, Rolnik edited Guattari’s written observations and published them under the title *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*. See, too, Gary Genosko, *The Party Without Bosses: Lessons on Anti-Capitalism from Guattari and Lula* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2003).

no consiste en captar para fijar, para anquilosar, para congelar aquello que explora, sino que se dispone a intensificar los propios flujos de vida en los que se envuelve, creando territorios a medida que se los recorre [...] Carta, si se quiere, de navegación, kayak inestable sobre la turbulencia del torrente por las vicisitudes de las peregrinaciones nómades, los avatares de los impulsos de fuga, los (corto) circuitos de los afectos desmelenados [...] Características de esta cartografía serían, entonces, la multiplicidad y la simultaneidad. (*Prosa* 65-66)

This “cartography of desire” expands rather than delimits the borders of a given territory, creating new ones in its place; indeed, if by “territory” we mean a fixed or clearly defined space, Perlongher’s territory, then, would undo our understanding of the concept altogether¹⁴⁵. In this respect, what he’s describing in this passage is the constant movement that Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, call the shift between de- and re-territorialization, whereby habits are broken and then reconstituted. Here, Perlongher places us on a kayak that, much like the “naviola” of the poem above, follows a route whose coordinates are mapped onto the indeterminable and markedly non-linear paths of desire. The shape of this map, then, is constantly in flux; its contours bend and twist to match the ever-shifting terrain traversed by the “vicisitudes de las peregrinaciones nómades.” I’ll return to the question of nomadism shortly in order to trace its exact inflections in Deleuze and Guattari’s thought (Perlongher, we’ll see, adapts the concept in interesting ways), but suffice it to say for now that what stands out here is the degree to which Perlongher privileges flow and flux over stasis: “no consiste en captar para fijar,” he declares unequivocally.

This recurring celebration of and, indeed, “fixation” on fluidity is a feature not only of Perlongher’s writing, but of the neobaroque writ large. Recall, for instance, Sarduy’s image of the body-cum-container overflowing with liquids. Or we might think once more of Lezama Lima’s *Paradiso* (the neobaroque’s urtext if ever there were one), in which signifiers accumulate on the page, forming a seemingly endless stream of metonymic associations. Perlongher himself understood this emphasis on fluidity and resistance to stasis to be a quintessential feature of the neobaroque. In his essay “Caribe transplatino,” first published in 1991, the Argentine poet traces the traversals of the aesthetic¹⁴⁶ between

¹⁴⁵ Perlongher engaged similar questions in his ethnographic fieldwork as well. See, for instance, his ethnographic work *O negócio do michê: Prostituição viril em São Paulo* (Sao Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987). See too Ignacio López-Vicuña, “Mapping the ‘Gay Ghetto’: Perlongher’s *O negócio do michê* as Cartography of Desire,” *Chasqui* 41, no. 1 (2012): 159-169. For a detailed analysis of Perlongher’s engagement with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of territory, see Ben Bollig, “Perlongher and Territory,” in *Néstor Perlongher: The Poetic Search for an Argentine Marginal Voice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

¹⁴⁶ It bears noting that, as Perlongher put it in an interview with the Uruguayan poet Eduardo Milán, the neobaroque “no implica una escuela, ni siquiera un estilo,” but a poetics of fluid experience comprised of “una especie de flujos microscópicos que están atravesando de una manera medio subterránea las lenguas y los países.” Néstor Perlongher, *Papeles insumisos*, eds. Adrián Cangi and Reynaldo Jiménez (Buenos Aires: Santiago Arcos, 2004), 280. In a similar vein, Carlos Surghi notes

Cuba and the River Plate region (hence the title of his piece). “Invasión de pliegues,” he writes in yet another nod to Deleuze, this time referring to the latter’s study of Leibniz¹⁴⁷, “orlas iridiscentes o drapeados magníficos, el neobarroco cunde en las letras latinoamericanas; la ‘lepra creadora’ lezamesca mina o corroe—minoritaria más eficazmente—los estilos oficiales del bien decir” (*Prosa* 93). Perlongher thus identifies a link between the neobaroque aesthetic and Latin American writing, a move that his predecessor Lezama Lima had also made in his *La expresión americana*.¹⁴⁸

While other critics, most notably Omar Calabrese¹⁴⁹, don’t locate the neobaroque quite as firmly in the Americas, however, they all seem to agree that fluidity and the

that “más que un arte, un periodo o una estética imperante, el barroco enunciado en un sentido ampliante como *lo barroco*, nos remite a un estado de sensibilidad, nos habla de una percepción sobre lo real fugándose en el juego de formas que lo refleja. Por lo tanto, lo barroco no es el momento epigonal de un arte, sino que más bien es la constante tensión de un proceso artístico-cultural que está fundado sobre dos paradigmas, el cartesiano de la visión, que haría del barroco un arte de la sorpresa, y a la vez el paradigma spinoziano del movimiento como potencia y afecto, que haría del barroco un arte de la transformación.” Carlos Surghi, *Abisinia Exibar (tres ensayos sobre Néstor Perlongher)* (Córdoba: Alción Editora, 2009), 65.

¹⁴⁷ Perlongher glosses Deleuze’s theory of the Baroque, which centers on the infinite reproducibility of the fold, or pleated matter. In the opening pages of *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Deleuze affirms that “the Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds....Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity.” Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3. Nicolás Rosa, examining Perlongher’s particular use of folds, notes, “Deleuze estaría contento: qué interroga el barroco sino la extensión y la dinámica del plegado, pero el plegado de Perlongher es de papier-maché, de papel glaceado, satinado en la sátina de una superficie sin espesor. La transformación que opera Perlongher sobre la poesía barroca, el romanticismo y el modernismo americano pasa por una destrucción del código retórico y de la fisión de los enunciados, quebrantamientos en la extensión de lo mismo, torcer el cuello-cisne-signo desde Verlaine, González Martínez para *acabar* con Rubén Darío: la pasmación de la letra.” Nicolás Rosa, *Tratados sobre Néstor Perlongher* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Ars, 1997), 85.

¹⁴⁸ See in particular the book’s second chapter, “La curiosidad barroca.” José Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana* (México: Fondo de cultura económica, 1993).

¹⁴⁹ Calabrese uses the term “neobaroque” in a much more expansive way. As its title suggests, his *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* attempts to take the pulse of the *zeitgeist* of the last three decades of the twentieth century without necessarily accounting for the specificities of national or linguistic traditions. Here, Calabrese understands the neo-baroque as a category that unites art, science, philosophy, (etc.); while these apparently disparate fields do not share, necessarily, a direct link, according to Calabrese the “*motive* behind them is the same [...] the ‘neo-baroque’ consists of: a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change.” Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*, trans. Charles Lambert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), xii. It bears noting that, with the exception of Sarduy (whose cosmological theories, which I discussed in Chapter Three, he refers to only a few times), the Italian critic doesn’t focus on Latin American texts or thinkers in particular,

transgression of borders are some of its central traits. At a later moment in the same essay, for example, Perlongher brings us back to the question of territory, naming the neobaroque “una poética de la desterritorialización,” inasmuch as it

libera el florilegio líquido (*siempre fluyente*) de los versos de la sujeción al imperio romántico de un yo lírico. Se tiende a la inmanencia y, curiosamente, esa inmanencia es divina, alcanza, forma e integra (constituye) su propia divinidad o plano de trascendencia. (*Prosa 94*, emphasis mine)

And as Francine Masiello puts it,

the neobaroque (inspired by Lezama Lima) skips over clear referential connections, mixes registers and textures of speech, and emphasizes the artifice of telling; the accumulation of detail over linearity or ‘story,’ a fluid turn against permanence and inertia, words in play against each other become the neobaroque’s central project such that language almost becomes physical to the detriment of meaning.¹⁵⁰

Against the Romantic exaltation and sovereignty of the lyric “I,” Perlongher’s neobaroque poetics annihilates the self (“no es una poesía del yo, sino de la aniquilación del yo,” he writes at another moment), and in doing so, it lets loose a liquid flow of signifiers that inundate the blank page. As critics often point out, while the Golden Age baroque rests on a discernable set of referents to the classical period that ultimately enable us to locate

but instead shifts his attention toward an almost breathtaking list of examples taken from high culture to popular culture and from the arts to the sciences: in one fell swoop he conjoins Dante and Donald Duck, and moves with ease from the theory of fractals to the art of Keith Haring and Spielberg’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. What brings his analyses together is a close attention to formal detail, rather than, say, historical or political commonalities (this comes as no surprise, considering that, as Umberto Eco points out in the book’s foreword, Calabrese is above all a semiologist). While I certainly appreciate the malleability Calabrese ascribes to the “neobaroque,” I hesitate, though, to employ the term as loosely as he does; in this sense, I would align myself more closely with figures such as Lezama Lima, Sarduy, et. al., for whom the term indexes, at least partially, some degree of geographic specificity (which is by no means the same as an ontological essence). It seems that by taking into consideration questions of geography and national tradition, one might also be able to glean how the neobaroque as an aesthetic sensibility might bear some connection to local political landscapes, or possibly subvert dominant paradigms (one need only think here of *Paradiso*’s vexed publication history, or Sarduy’s responses to the Castro regime). Allen E. Young makes a similar point in his study of the baroque and its late-twentieth century variations when he writes that “it is in Hispanic and Latin American criticism that the notion of a contemporary baroque has had the most success. It is often taken as proprietarily Hispanic and traced to a certain contestatory, anti-colonial political stance, and is applied to writers with little in common except their continent or language.” Allen E. Young, “Baroque Poetics and the Logic of Hispanic Exceptionalism,” PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2012), vi.

¹⁵⁰ Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 70.

meaning (once, that is, we've sifted through the text's linguistic pirouettes and thick ornamentation), the neobaroque lacks such a foundation and instead turns on "la parodia, la carnavalización, la derrisión, en un campo abierto de constelaciones, sobre (o a partir de) cualquier estilo" ("La barroquización" in *Prosa*, 115). Palmeiro makes this point clear: "La diferencia entre barroco y neobarroco radica en que el barroco tendría una interpretación última, garantizada finalmente por la cosmovisión religiosa del siglo XVII, mientras que en el neobarroco hay una fuga total del sentido, *no hay fijación del flujo*."¹⁵¹

Perlongher's poetics, as we saw above in the examples of the flowing *naviolas* and the displaced *murga* that *no es una murga*, certainly demonstrates that "*no hay fijación del flujo*." Nonetheless, one of my intentions in this chapter is to qualify Palmeiro's assertion further to show how and where this flow nonetheless *slows down*, altering our experience of time. I want to suggest, in other words, that in addition to this focus on movement that we've come to associate with Perlongher's work (no surprise, given his own obsession with Deleuzian lines of flight and fugue), we should also pay attention to those points of obstruction where this movement risks coming to a halt, which, to be sure, isn't to say that it actually or totally *does*.

What we're left with is perhaps the motion of the *barro*, the mud that both lends the *neobarroso* its name and locates it in the River Plate region¹⁵². More viscous than watery, and at once both solid *and* liquid, *barro* causes us to struggle; it requires that we exert more and more force in order to get through it or else it immobilizes us in its path. No wonder, then, that in a reference to fellow Argentine writer Osvaldo Lamborghini's *Sebregondi Retrocede* (1973) (and note the backward turn of the poem's title), Perlongher compares the River Plate's neobaroque to "un marqués de Sebregondi, 'homosexual activo y cocainómano', *tropezando en el barro de su estuario*" (*Prosa* 115, emphasis mine). "Activo"¹⁵³ and addicted to cocaine, yet also stumbling and slowing down in the mud, Sebregondi performs, or is compelled to perform, the very gesture that I'm describing here: his movement is met with an opposing force that stalls his progress.

Jorge Panesi, in his essay "Detritus," similarly points to this problematic in Perlongher's work. In keeping with the metaphor of mud, he asks: "¿Es el barro o lo barroso

¹⁵¹ Palmeiro, *Desbunde y felicidad*, 25. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵² Palmeiro reads the *barro* in terms of Perlongher's parodic play between surface and depth. She writes, "El neobarroso, versión rioplatense del neobarroco, estaría jugando con el engañoso efecto de profundidad de la cultura argentina: el fondo de barro del Río de la Plata (o del Riachuelo), en el que las cosas parecen sumergirse cuando en realidad están más cerca de la superficie de lo que parecen." Ibid. For an analysis of the ways in which Perlongher rewrites the Golden Age baroque through the trope of the queer body and its surfaces, see Jacqueline Bialostozky, "Aesthetics of the Surface: Post-1960s Latin American Queer Rewritings of the Baroque," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2016).

¹⁵³ A *double entendre*: the literal translation is "active," but the term is also used (often, but not always, among gay men) to refer to the sexual partner who penetrates (the "activo," the "top," penetrates the "pasivo," the "bottom").

la traducción del flujo?; ¿el barro seco, la territorialización?”¹⁵⁴ What I want to affirm, in response to these questions, is that we can identify in Perlongher’s writing a liminal moment between deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and between the *flujo* of the *barro* (which, at the risk of over-literalizing the trope, I want to add, isn’t as free-flowing as Panesi seems to imply) and the concrete stasis of its dry clay form. That is, even though Perlongher’s texts sweep us away with their linguistic outpour, this doesn’t mean that we don’t also, at least sometimes, encounter blockages in our path. To visualize this dynamic, we might recall once more González-Torres’s twin clocks: what I have in mind here is analogous to the effect produced when one clock continues moving while the other remains frozen in time. This, I’ve suggested, is akin to a form of temporal suspension wherein the passage of time, which we might envision as the flowing waters of the Río de la Plata, is neutralized by a counterforce (the mud?) that causes it to slow down.

Let me return to “Caribe transplatino,” where Perlongher supplies us with a more precise vocabulary with which to name the motion I’m describing. At an early point in his essay, he cites Lezama Lima who, as a result of his severe asthma¹⁵⁵, almost never left his home in Havana. Perlongher writes:

La [poética] del barroco es una divinidad *in extremis*: bajo el rigor maniático del manierismo, la suelta sierpe de una demencia incontenible. Mas, si demencia, sagrada: por primera vez, “la poesía se convierte en vehículo de conocimiento absoluto, a través del cual se intenta llegar a las esencias de la vida, la cultura y la experiencia religiosa, penetrar poéticamente toda la realidad que seamos capaces de abarcar. Poética del éxtasis: éxtasis en la fiesta jubilosa de la lengua en su fosforescencia incandescente.

Paseo esquizo del señor barroco, nomadismo en la fijeza. Son *los viajes más espléndidos*: “los que un hombre puede intentar por los corredores de su casa, yéndose del dormitorio al baño, desfilando entre parques y librerías. ¿Para qué tomar en cuenta los medios de transporte? Pienso en los aviones, donde los viajeros caminan sólo de proa a popa: eso no es viajar. El viaje es apenas un movimiento de la imaginación. El viaje es reconocer, reconocerse, es la pérdida de la niñez y la admisión de la madurez. Goethe y Proust, esos hombres de inmensa diversidad, no viajaron casi nunca. La imago era su navío. Yo también: casi nunca he salido de La Habana. Admito dos razones: a cada salida empeoraban mis bronquios; y, además, en el centro de todo viaje ha flotado siempre el recuerdo de la muerte de mi padre. Gide ha dicho que toda travesía es un pregusto de la muerte, una anticipación del fin. Yo no viajo: por eso resucito.” (*Prosa* 94-95)

The reference here to ecstasy—etymologically linked to the Greek *ekstasis* (ἔκστασις,

¹⁵⁴ Jorge Panesi, “Detritus,” in *Lúmpenes peregrinaciones: ensayos sobre Néstor Perlongher*, eds. Adrián Cangi and Paula Siganevich (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1996), 46.

¹⁵⁵ Perlongher, interestingly enough, titled one of his poems “Abisinia exibar” after the name of Lezama Lima’s asthma medication.

a moving outside of or beyond oneself, from *ek-*‘out’ and *histanai-*‘to place’)—once more underscores the importance of movement to the baroque and neobaroque. Indeed, Perlongher turned time and again to Bataille’s notion of *erotisme* (one form of which is the ecstatic dissolution of the self), in order to mobilize his own aesthetic theory and political praxis. However, in the above passage, he appears to qualify, nuance, and in a sense *constrain* the frantic movement that we might typically associate with ecstatic rapture. Turning again to Lezama Lima, Perlongher demonstrates how the Cuban writer embodies what he names “nomadismo en la fijeza,” a kind of movement-in-place. What I want to underscore here is that Perlongher’s understanding of ecstasy—the fundamental feature of neobaroque poetics—thus inflects his conception of nomadism, and both terms intersect to produce the type of static motion that Lezama Lima so quintessentially performs. In other words, if the (neo)baroque is a “poética del éxstasis,” and if “Lezama Lima” (as proper name and historical figure) stands in both as something of a metonym of this poetics *and* what Perlongher identifies as “nomadismo en la fijeza,” then it follows that this type of ecstasy also has something to do with a movement that coincides with stillness, a kind of abated, tempered, suspended movement.

Perlongher, as he is wont to do, is implicitly engaging the work of Deleuze and Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the French philosophers maintain that the nomad

has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse of what happens with the sedentary. [...] A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the *intermezzo*.¹⁵⁶

They go on to add:

The nomad distributes himself in a smooth space; he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle. It is therefore false to define the nomad by movement. Toynbee is profoundly right to suggest that the nomad

¹⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 380. Perlongher offers a gloss of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory in his essay “Avatares de los muchachos de la noche,” where he discusses the nomadic movement of the Brazilian *michê*, a male prostitute who accentuated his masculinity in order to attract clients. Perlongher writes, “Una vez iniciado en el negocio, las trayectorias de los *michês* son nómades, en varios sentidos. El primero, ya considerado, es la errancia sexual, la cual no es caótica. El nómade, observan los autores de *Mil Mesetas*, tiene un territorio, sigue trayectos rutinarios, va de un punto al otro, establece localizaciones; pero *no* para de circular, de derivar. Los puntos son sólo consecuencia y no principio de la vida nómade: ‘Aunque los puntos determinen los trayectos, ellos están estrictamente subordinados a los trayectos que determinan.’ Aunque se trate de una trayectoria entre dos puntos, es el ‘*entredeux*’ lo que toma consistencia, es ese *entre* lo que se materializa.” (*Prosa* 51)

is on the contrary *he who does not move*. Whereas the migrant leaves behind a milieu that has become amorphous or hostile, the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advances, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge. Of course, the nomad moves, but while seated, and he is only seated while moving (the Bedouin galloping, knees on the saddle, sitting on the soles of his upturned feet, a “feat of balance”). The nomad knows how to wait, he has infinite patience.¹⁵⁷

Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis rests on what at first glance seems to be an irreconcilable difference between the nomad and the sedentary; whereas for the former the points of the path matter less than the path itself and, ostensibly, the perpetual movement that constitutes it (such that life emerges as an “intermezzo”), the latter lingers in the same location without moving. But the above passages present us with an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari affirm that “of course, the nomad moves”; on the other hand, they declare bluntly that the nomad “is he who does not move.” So does or doesn’t the nomad move? Both—and he does so *simultaneously*; hence the image of the Bedouin traveler seated firmly fastened with a saddle on his galloping horse. Perhaps even more interestingly—and most pertinent to the focus of this chapter—is that Deleuze and Guattari configure this movement-in-stasis, which we might conceive of as a uniquely spatial phenomenon (what with the recurring lexicon related to territory and maps), in terms of time: the nomad “knows how to wait, he has infinite patience.” This waiting, I want to propose, returns us to this chapter’s introduction: the nomad, like the asynchronous (im)perfect lovers of González-Torres’s installation, like the AIDS witness, is at once mobile and immobile—and the effect of this doubled state-of-being is registered principally as a form of suspended, infinite temporality.

For Perlongher, then, Lezama Lima is the perfect example of a sort of *nomadismo en la fijeza* that combines movement and stasis.¹⁵⁸ Like Goethe and Proust, the author of *Paradiso* lets his imagination wander the world while his physical body stands still, moving, if at all, only through the corridors of his Havana apartment; in this respect, he emblemizes a position that is at once both nomadic *and* sedentary (or, indeed, entirely

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 381.

¹⁵⁸ It bears mentioning once more that Perlongher took recourse to Deleuze and Guattari’s critical lexicon in his anthropological work, in which he likened the *michês* cruising the streets of São Paulo to nomads. As Ben Bollig points out, however, Perlongher’s use of the term “nomad” here is a bit erroneous: “Furthermore,” Bollig notes, “while Perlongher highlighted the randomness in the *michê’s* wanderings and the amount of time spent between points, his focus on movement overlooks a key part of Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the nomad, specifically their insistence that he nomad clings to smooth space and is not therefore characterized by movement, but by stillness.” Bollig, *Néstor Perlongher*, 64. Bollig makes a valid point, but it seems that Perlongher’s reading of Lezama Lima demonstrates that, at least in one instance, the poet understood the nuances of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept, which is to say that I don’t think he entirely, or always, overlooked its apparent contradictions.

nomadic in the strict sense Deleuze and Guattari outline above, which accounts for both movement and stillness).¹⁵⁹

Perlongher remarks in his essay “La barroquización” that it’s precisely this seemingly paradoxical duality that makes the baroque and its neobaroque variant so difficult to pin down:

Algo no muy fácil de captar, porque la nomadización barroca suele ser, paradójicamente, *in situ*—como en el caso de Lezama Lima, que prácticamente nunca salió de La Habana, yendo y volviendo de la librería al gabinete, envuelto en la bruma de los vapores contra el asma. (*Prosa* 116, emphasis mine)

“Yendo y volviendo”: Lezama Lima’s “nomadismo en la fijeza” is thus more recursive than linear or progressive. Moreover, despite remaining *in situ* and ostensibly within our purview, this baroque nomadism “no es muy fácil de captar”: it at once beckons and evades our grasp.

As striking as Perlongher’s description of Lezama Lima’s particular nomadism is, however, he spends little time exploring *why* the latter rarely left his home. In the passage cited above, Lezama Lima identifies two reasons for his aversion to travel, both of which Perlongher quickly cites and then passes over. First, Lezama tells us that as a result of his asthma every trip worsened his lungs, causing him to have to return home; and second, he associated travel with finitude and specifically the death of his father. He thus gives us two coordinates that might better help us understand what this *nomadismo en la fijeza* looks like: it has something to do with the body’s ability to move in time and space (and in this particular example breathing is the key element¹⁶⁰), and its cyclical structure might be read as a constant deferral of death’s closure, a suspension of sorts, to echo Watney and Chambers once again.

This brings me to my next point. While I don’t want to suggest that we take this isolated case as proof of a general rule¹⁶¹, I do think it’s quite telling that Perlongher,

¹⁵⁹ To be sure, I don’t think the French philosophers would actually consider Lezama Lima a *nomad*, but I nonetheless want to emphasize here how Perlongher is adapting the term in order to arrive at his own understanding of baroque and neobaroque poetics, one that, as I show, emphasizes movement in stasis.

¹⁶⁰ For a rich discussion of Lezama Lima’s asthma and its effect on his writing, see William Rowlandson, “Asthma and its Symbolism: The Respiratory Aesthetics of José Lezama Lima,” in *Latin American and Iberian Perspectives on Literature and Medicine* (New York: Routledge, 2015). Lezama Lima’s reference to Proust above is even more interesting in light of the fact that both he and the French novelist lived with asthma (a detail that Rowlandson mentions briefly). On Proust, asthma, and breathlessness, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “The Weather in Proust,” in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁶¹ Perlongher mentions Góngora’s shipwrecked sailor before moving to the example of Lezama Lima and is careful not to erase the differences between the two—the former exemplifies a kind of schizophrenic movement while the latter’s motion is less frenzied. They coincide, Perlongher would argue, in that both exhibit “nomadismo en la fijeza.”

elaborating a theory of the neobaroque, turns—and returns—to his Cuban predecessor, explicitly mentioning (even if only in passing) the latter’s asthma and its effect on his bodily movement. In other words, it seems that Lezama Lima helps us glean how, at least according to one lineage, the neobaroque might have something to do with a *tempered* motion that by no means comes to a halt, but isn’t quite as unfettered as some accounts would suggest. To take this claim further, Lezama Lima enables us to distill a strain of thinking about the neobaroque aesthetic that, perhaps over and against Perlongher’s own view (“Se trata en el plano de la escritura, de *hacer un cuerpo*,” he writes, without further qualification¹⁶²), foregrounds not just “the body,” but various specific bodies, bodies that, perhaps, are asthmatic, or fatigued (à la Sarduy’s “beach birds”), or symptomatic of AIDS. What I am proposing here is that in reading Lezama Lima through Perlongher, we might get a glimpse of a particular modality of neobaroque writing that takes as its guiding trope the debilitated body whose movement, perhaps even only periodically, approximates but does not quite reach complete stasis.

Before I go on, let me return briefly to “La barroquización” because I think it gives us a better glimpse of this form of suspended, slowed down, flow. Here, Perlongher focuses on the use of ornamentation that epitomizes baroque and neobaroque writing:

La obsesión por la corporalidad de la palabra ya estaba presente en los escritores anteriores que el barroco transfigura. Pero la corporalidad barroca sobrecarga con tanto refinamiento el cuerpo aludido, que lo sepulta bajo el peso de los florilegios y de las coronas. (*Prosa* 116)

The baroque’s dense embellishment occludes the body only to make it felt through the sensuous dimensions of the written word (at an earlier point, Perlongher even asks “¿Cómo hacer sensual un verso?”). Furthermore, the jewels and gems that cram the blank page weigh this body down, nearly bringing it to a halt; at the same time, and in an analogous fashion, we too are slowed down, our attention suspended and channeled toward concrete objects as the text draws us into its scenes of thick description absent, or practically absent, of plot-driven movement. Here we can begin to draw connections, as Àngel Rama has,¹⁶³ between the neobaroque and the earlier baroque, but also to the *fin de siglo* modernists and

¹⁶² *Prosa*, 140. Palmeiro remarks, too, that “se trata...de poner *el cuerpo*.” *Desbunde y felicidad*, 19. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶³ Rama writes, “Todo poeta actual, admire a Darío o lo aborrezca, sabe que a partir de él hay una continuidad creadora, lo que ya puede llamarse una tradición poética, que progresivamente fue independizándose de la tradición propiamente española hasta romper con ella en la década del cuarenta, atreviéndose a un cotejo universal. Esta continuidad no la puede filiar en los mejores productos decimonónicos anteriores a Darío y los modernistas, y si acaso puede reivindicar repentinos, parciales maestros, en la América colonial, es dentro de la línea que Darío revaloriza antes que ningún otro en la cultura hispánica: la del barroco, con la cual su arte tiene puntos de contacto estrechos, u dentro de la cual elige los cuatro maestros que prefiere de las letras peninsulares: Gracián, Teresa, Góngora, Quevedo.” Àngel Rama, *Rubén Darío y el modernismo* (Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1985), 11.

their European interlocutors. Recall, for instance, the “lujo enervante” with which Asunción Silva fills the *salón* of his *De sobremesa*. Or an even more apt image: the tortoise whose shell, in *À rebours*, Huysmans’ des Esseintes decides to encrust with a bouquet of precious stones; paralyzed by the extra weight of the gems, the tortoise eventually succumbs to the pressure and dies.¹⁶⁴ In these works, as I show throughout this dissertation, the ill body becomes the predominant trope through which what I’m calling neutralized time, or suspended flow, gets registered: this might take the form either of the cyclical vacillation between hyperactivity and total paralysis (think of José Fernández’s frenzied pursuit of Helena punctuated by lapses of absolute inactivity), or of the drifting, slow-moving bodies of Sarduy’s patients suffering from “el mal.”

I want to clarify here that I am not suggesting that *all* of Perlongher’s work (or the *neobarroco/neobarroso*, for that matter) is “about” illness, or that the ill body is *the* singular trope that organizes his aesthetic or political projects.¹⁶⁵ As I mentioned earlier, he also wrote prolifically about eroticism and understood his art and politics to be grounded in eros (to reiterate: for him, the baroque—which he shapes into his own sensibility—is a “poética del éxtasis: éxtasis en la fiesta jubilosa de la lengua en su fosforescencia incandescente”). As Palmeiro succinctly puts it, the Argentine’s *neobarroso* can be summarized as an “exploración poética de una experiencia que es fundamentalmente erótica y política.”¹⁶⁶ What I do want to claim, however, is that these two thematic strands—illness and eroticism—intertwine in striking ways, such that one often finds in his works that the body that experiences the pain and symptoms of AIDS is the same body that dissolves (or perhaps desires to dissolve) in the pleasures of erotic communion. In this sense, I would maintain that we are able to locate in some of Perlongher’s writing examples of what literary critic David B. Morris has recently termed “medical eros,” which he describes as “the operations of desire within the context of health and illness.”¹⁶⁷ In Perlongher’s writing, then, illness and eros merge, ultimately producing a doubled, suspended form of temporality.

In the remainder of this chapter, I’ll first examine more closely the role of Bataillean *erotisme* in Perlongher’s thought. Then, I’ll focus on a selection of poems—primarily his last two collections—in which we see clearly the interplay between motion and stasis. From there, I’ll conclude by returning to González-Torres as a way of visualizing what I have been calling a poetics of suspended flow.

Disappearing Acts

¹⁶⁴ “Elle ne bougeait toujours point,” the narrator observes, “il la palpa; elle était morte. Sans doute habituée à une existence sédentaire, à une humble vie passée sous sa pauvre carapace, elle n’avait pu supporter le luxe éblouissant qu’on lui imposait, la rutilante chape dont on l’avait vêtue, les pierreries dont on lui avait pavé le dos, comme un ciboire.” J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), 103.

¹⁶⁵ He also wrote about topics such as the Malvinas, the figure of Evita (and her cadaver), male prostitution, (etc.).

¹⁶⁶ Palmeiro, *Desbunde y felicidad*, 21.

¹⁶⁷ David B. Morris, *Eros and Illness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 7.

Toward the end of his life—a little over a decade into the AIDS epidemic and a few years after his own diagnosis—Perlongher engaged more frequently with Bataille’s work on eroticism as a way of discerning the transformations brought about by the crisis. In the opening lines of “La desaparición de la homosexualidad,” originally published in the leftist literary and political magazine *El Porteño* in 1991, the poet describes a carnivalesque scene of jubilation. Here, hordes of revelers gather in unison, occupying the streets, or perhaps the central plaza, of an unidentified city. They don headdresses made of iridescent feathers; their bodies are adorned with gems and sequins, and their faces are masked with metallic paint. Particles of pink dust fill the atmosphere—accumulating here, dissipating there—leaving their trace on the partygoers’ flesh. But this campy performance of Dionysian festivity slowly, almost imperceptibly, fades from view. “Toda una mampostería kitsch,” Perlongher writes, “de una impostada delicadeza, de una estridencia artificiosa

se derrumba bajo el impacto (digámoslo) de la muerte. La homosexualidad (al menos la homosexualidad masculina, que de ella se trata) desaparece del escenario que tan rebuscadamente había montado, hace mutis por el foro [...] Toda esa melosidad relajante de pañuelitos y papel picado irrumpiendo en la paz conyugal del dormitorio, por ellas (o por ellos: ah, las elláceas), a gacelas subidas y por toros asidas y rasgadas, convertido en un campo de batallas de almohadones rellenos de copos de algodón hecho de azúcares pero en el fondo, siempre, como un dejo de hiel, toda esa parafernalia de simulaciones escénicas jugadas normalmente en torno de los chistes de la identidad sexual, derrúmbase—diríamos, por inercia del sentido, con estrépito, pero en verdad casi suavemente--, en un desfallecimiento general.¹⁶⁸

What does it mean for homosexuality to disappear, to leave the stage? To answer this question, we first need to understand how Perlongher is using the term “homosexual.” It seems the phrase operates in multiple ways throughout the essay. For one, it names what Perlongher describes as “una criatura médica.” Drawing largely on the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Perlongher reminds us that the modern, Western category of “homosexual” has a history, and is a byproduct of interlocking discourses (a “dispositif,” as Foucault tells us) that took the body as their site of knowledge-production and exercise of power. We can trace its longer lineage to the figures of the sodomite, the pervert, and the invert in the late-19th century.¹⁶⁹ Soon after the “homosexual” emerged, he (and I use the male-gendered pronoun here to highlight Perlongher’s reference to “la homosexualidad

¹⁶⁸Néstor Perlongher, *Prosa plebeya. Ensayos 1980-1992* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1997), 85. Henceforth cited in-text as *Prosa*.

¹⁶⁹ Foucault writes: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

masculina”) receded into the shadows of society, bearing the traces of what Perlongher, echoing Oscar Wilde, calls the “amor que no se atreve a decir su nombre” (*Prosa* 86).

In the 1960s and 70s, though, this love not only started to speak its name, but began to shout it out loud: one could hear “los clamores esplendorosos” that signaled “la salida de la homosexualidad a la luz resplandeciente de la escena pública” (*Prosa* 86). As I remarked above, in the wake of the Stonewall riots and the subsequent formation of the Gay Liberation Front in the northern hemisphere, and the creation of *Nuestro Mundo* and the FLH in the Southern Cone, homosexuality re-emerged into the public sphere, even if only for a short time; recall that, as Perlongher tells us, Videla’s military dictatorship—and its practice of torture and disappearance—put a brutal end to any form of political opposition. To be sure, this isn’t to say that the decades comprising what would later be called the “sexual revolution” were completely free of political backlash or repression, or that they had ushered in a kind of utopia. Nonetheless, what Perlongher emphasizes is that mass mobilizations for the rights of sexual minorities stretching across the hemispheric divide created an atmosphere of celebration, affirmation, and protest, and that this radically altered the landscape of gay life.

The onset of the AIDS crisis in 1981, however, brought with it a renewed medicalization and sterilization of bodily practices. In his article “El orden de los cuerpos,” which first appeared in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* in 1987, Perlongher discusses how the discursive explosion surrounding the virus—what Paula Treichler has called an “epidemic of signification”¹⁷⁰—congealed with the more “physical” symptoms of the disease. “En la emergencia del Sida,” he remarks,

no se sabe que es más pavoroso: si los efectos devastadores de la enfermedad en el propio plano de los cuerpos físicos, minados por una sucesión impresionante de molestias; o si otros efectos menos “físicos” en el plano de la llamada moral pública, que no por ser “discursivos”, dejan de incidir en la programación contemporánea de los cuerpos, sus pasiones y su tránsitos.

Ambos planos parecen casi indisociables. El Sida incide en un punto particularmente delicado para la sociedad moderna: la sexualidad. Las operaciones desencadenadas durante su irrupción rebasan el dolor personal de las crecientes víctimas, para extenderse al cuerpo social como un verdadero dispositivo de moralización y normalización de las uniones sensuales, derivado de las olas de pánico. Sobre la enfermedad en sí, no se sabe aún lo suficiente. Se percibe, sin embargo, la dimensión de las transformaciones y regulaciones pasibles de ser implementadas a la sombra del pavor que el mal provoca.

He concludes his essay with the following declaration coupled with something of a recommendation:

Se enuncia en el episodio del Sida, cierto orden de los cuerpos, en una empresa terapéutica de regulación de la sexualidad. Reveladoramente, se

¹⁷⁰ See Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

excluyen las cualidades intensivas, los laberintos del deseo en que se envuelven los goces sensoriales. En el proceso de medicalización y control de la vida, de confiscación e interdicción de la muerte (en el cual cierta ilusión de inmortalidad es sutilmente vencida) se conseguirá bloquear los puntos de fuga, las líneas de ruptura que encienden los encuentros pasionales. O, quizás, se trate, en las poblaciones afectadas, de un inestable equilibrio entre la potencia del deseo y el miedo de la muerte. Al fin, la dimensión del deseo no debería ser menospreciada si se trata de salvar la vida. (*Prosa* 43-44)

Perlongher underlines here how, with the emergence of the AIDS crisis, new forms of regulation and medicalization brought the sensual, desiring body under control. The social panic surrounding the transmission of the virus, furthermore, created “cierto orden de los cuerpos,” a process of normalization that, by virtue of being predicated on a set of norms, moralized certain behaviors and classified certain bodies as abnormal and pathological (here we might recall the noxious rhetoric surrounding the so-called “4H” group: homosexuals, Haitians, hemophiliacs, and heroin users”).¹⁷¹

Against the stronghold of what, following Morris, we might call medical logos,¹⁷² Perlongher reaffirms the vital importance of desire; in order to effectively respond to the epidemic, he proclaims, “la dimensión del deseo no debería ser menospreciada si se trata de salvar la vida.” Perlongher’s approach thus attends to the erotic dimension of the experience of illness, which, *contra* (or perhaps in addition to¹⁷³) the imperative to rationalize, order, quantify, and sterilize (render “hygienic”), preserves the intensity of desire in all of its labyrinthine movement.

This returns us to the question I raised above: what does it mean, then, for homosexuality to “disappear”? In the post-script to his essay “Avatares de los muchachos de la noche,” a sort of preamble to *O negocio do michê*, Perlongher gives us something in the way of answer:

Podría, sin embargo, pensarse que la homosexualidad como fenómeno de masas y particularmente sus aspectos más ofensivos y agresivos—como el sexo anónimo y promiscuo, propio, por añadidura, de la prostitución—

¹⁷¹ See also Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

¹⁷² Morris contraposes medical logos to medical eros, and aligns the former with biomedicine, broadly: “*Biomedicine*, under the alias medical logos, views illness as calling for scientific knowledge, for evidence-based treatments, and for public policies governed by statistical, cost-benefit analysis. It enclosed the patient within concentric systems of logos or reason that affect every aspect of medical care, from electronic records and computerized diagnoses to research agendas, training modules, state-of-the-art hospitals, and automated reimbursement programs. Every procedure must have its designated billing code.” Morris, *Eros and Illness*, 7.

¹⁷³ It’s important to note that, in spite of his vocal stance against the “mirada clínica,” Perlongher nevertheless indicates—if quickly and in passing—that he isn’t *completely* opposed to biomedicine: “Esto no debe querer decir (confieso que no es fácil) estar contra los médicos, ya que la medicina evidentemente desempeña, en el combate contra la amenaza morbosa, un papel central” (*Prosa* 88)

estarían desapareciendo. Una mutación radical del paisaje sexual parece acercarse a una velocidad tal que hace cambiar rápidamente todos los esquemas de análisis. Como hipótesis, podría señalarse cierta tendencia a la disolución de la homosexualidad en el cuerpo social, la cual pasaría a ser vista como una condición erótica posible y no necesariamente como un *modus operandi* sexual y existencial totalmente diferenciado. (*Prosa* 57)

For Perlongher, the disappearance of homosexuality entails not so much the dissolution of an identity category (and, to be sure, as I noted above he was a vocal critic of notions of “identity”), but rather the loss of a collective *way of life*, a “modus operandi.” Specifically, this way of life is marked by the intensity of desire and its capacity to subvert and throw into disarray the dominant order, understood as state power: it’s offensive and aggressive; it’s taboo; and it’s radically celebratory (it’s a “fiesta del apogeo, el interminable festejo de la emergencia a la luz del día”)¹⁷⁴. What’s more—and this is a crucial point of Perlongher’s analysis— following the emergence of AIDS, the burgeoning discourse related to prevention fundamentally altered “el plano de los comportamientos sexuales y particularmente homosexuales,” such that the festive scene of bodies comingling described above started to fade with the looming threat of death.¹⁷⁵ Sexual behaviors that were deemed to pose a “risk” to the social order and to the self were scrutinized and medicalized, leading to a renewed focus on the individual at the expense of the collective fusion that, it seems, had characterized the previous decades: “La homosexualidad se vacía de adentro

¹⁷⁴ I’m reminded here of Samuel Delany, whose understanding of “Gay Identity” (capitalized in the original) resonates to an extent with Perlongher’s views on homosexuality insofar as both seem to move beyond essentialist understandings of identity and instead hold that we must always contextualize it. Delany writes: “In those terms, Gay Identity is a strategy I approve of wholly, even if, at a theoretical level, I question the existence of that identity as having anything beyond a provisional or strategic reality. Nor do I seek what Jane Gallup has written of so forcefully as some sort of liberation from identity itself that would lead only to another form of paralysis—“the oceanic passivity of undifferentiation” (*The Daughter’s Seduction*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1982, p. xii). For me, Gay Identity—like the joys of Gay Pride Day, weekends on Fire Island, and the delight of tickets to the opera—is an object of the context, not of the self—which means, like the rest of the context, it requires analysis, understanding, interrogation, even sympathy, but never an easy and uncritical acceptance.” Samuel R. Delany, “Aversion/Perversion/Diversion,” in *Longer Views: Extended Essays* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 142-143.

¹⁷⁵ Literary critic Alberto Sandoval, who’s written extensively about his own diagnosis and experiences with HIV/AIDS, offers a moving account of the end of the post-Stonewall era of joyous celebration: “[It] started with the Stonewall riots in 1969 [and] was over by 1982 with the intrusion of AIDS. We all witnessed when Thanatos killed Eros with the mirrored dance ball on the dance floor. Gone with it were the beams of light that penetrated every single heart to the beat of Donna Summer’s erotic cadence of ‘love to love you baby.’ Gone were the dancing bodies covered in sweat, smelling sex, desiring an orgasm that would be fatal attraction.” Alberto Sandoval, “Politicizing Abjection: Towards the Articulation of a Latino AIDS Queer Identity,” in *Passing Lines: Sexuality and Immigration*, ed. Bradley Epps, Keja Valens, and Bill Johnson González (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005), quoted in Lina Meruane, *Viral Voyages: Tracing AIDS in Latin America*, trans. Andrea Rosenberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 31.

hacia afuera, como un forro” (*Prosa* 89).¹⁷⁶ Perlongher, in “La desaparición” even goes so far as to postulate that “la reacción de gran parte de los homosexuales frente a las campañas de prevención está siendo la de dejar de tener relaciones sexuales en general” (*Prosa* 89). In the wake of the AIDS crisis, Perlongher adds, homosexuality has been normalized to such a degree that it’s been rendered “banal”; what Foucault has called “societies of discipline” have been replaced by Deleuzian “societies of control.”

So how might we revive this way of life, or stop it from disappearing? How might one counter what Ben Bollig, referring to Perlongher’s essay, has called “the perceived dead end of AIDS”?¹⁷⁷ In the conclusion of “La desaparición” Perlongher tells us that, now that sexuality’s been “sterilized,”¹⁷⁸ we must search for

otras formas de reverberación intensiva, entre las que se debe considerar la actual promoción expansiva de la mística y las místicas, como manera de vivir un *éxtasis ascendente*, en un momento en que el éxtasis de las sexualidad se vuelve, con el Sida, redondamente *descendente*. (*Prosa* 90)

This form of mysticism requires that we “abandonamos el cuerpo personal. Se trata ahora de salir de sí” (*Prosa* 90). In order to recuperate the lost intensity of sexuality, we must engage in practices that dissolve the boundaries separating us from each other. This self-dissolution, Perlongher notes, can take multiple forms. It finds its most detailed explanation in the work of Bataille.

Turning to Bataille’s *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, Perlongher identifies several distinct modes of fusion that might produce “una salida de sí,” in all of which the concern is

¹⁷⁶ Again, Perlongher seems at first glance to oppose the rhetoric around safe sex, but I don’t think I’d go so far as to claim that he was completely against condom use, for instance (note the comparison above to the “forro,” whose related term “látex” appears in several poems and often signifies a kind of viscous barrier); rather, the poet seems to be taking the pulse of drastic changes as they were in the process of occurring, without necessarily prescribing a specific course of action (or inaction). In other words, I think his relationship to medicine and the rhetoric around public health was ambivalent at most. While he certainly understood the necessity and benefits of biomedicine (see footnote 52), he was also aware of the “side-effects” produced by the newly intensified medicalization of life and sex. For more on the discourse surrounding safe sex and HIV transmission, especially as it’s related to intimacy and kinship, see Tim Dean’s provocative *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁷⁷ Ben Bollig, “Néstor Perlongher and Mysticism: Towards a Critical Reappraisal,” *The Modern Language Review* 99, no. 1 (2004): 79.

¹⁷⁸ I use the term “now” here to refer specifically to Perlongher’s present—the early 1990s—not my own. Given current debates surrounding the use of and access to Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and its effect on the risk of HIV transmission (as well what some see to be concomitant shifts in sexual practices, such as condom use), I think it’s necessary to historicize Perlongher’s hypotheses.

to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity,” as Bataille puts it.¹⁷⁹ He writes,

Sabemos gracias a Bataille que la sexualidad (el “erotismo de los cuerpos”) es una de las formas de alcanzar el éxtasis. En verdad, Bataille distingue tres modos de disolver la mónada individual y recuperar cierta indistinción originaria de la fusión: la orgía, el amor, lo sagrado. (*Prosa* 87)

Orgiastic ecstasy, Perlongher describes, dissolves the boundaries of the body, but this effect is only temporary, since the ego ends up being restored once the event is over. Love, in all its sentimentality, produces a more long-lasting “salida de sí,” but still preserves a vestige of an autonomous object. It’s only by merging completely with the sacred, or the cosmic, that the “salida de sí” becomes definitive.¹⁸⁰

Continuity and discontinuity, for Bataille, at first might seem to index a predominantly spatial relationship: the discontinuous individual is spatially isolated from his surroundings (boundaries remain intact), whereas, conversely, the continuous individual loses his sense of self and enters a vast, unified space comprised of indistinct objects. I want to suggest, though, that we can also think of these terms temporally¹⁸¹. That is, in a similar way to “nomadism” and “territory” (discussed earlier), continuity and discontinuity also register different modes of experiencing—embodying—the passage of time. In what follows, I will unpack this assertion by focusing on a selection of Perlongher’s poems.

Poetry is a particularly apt textual form for registering the effects of eros for several reasons. First, as Perlongher puts it in his essay “Poesía y éxtasis” (1991), poetry, like ecstatic rapture, “no pasa por el plano de la comunicación, sino, primeramente, por esa suerte de chispa interior que da la conexión de las almas en trance.” He goes on to claim that “la forma del éxtasis [...] es la poética” (*Prosa* 151-153)¹⁸². Bataille’s conception of

¹⁷⁹ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 15.

¹⁸⁰ Here, we might remember Sarduy’s cosmologist and Siempreviva, for whom fatigue—not just any fatigue, but “otherworldly fatigue”—blurs the lines separating the self from the rest of the universe. In this sense, fatigue and cosmic eroticism—while perhaps different in terms of intensity (fatigue, it seems, is a *weakened* affective state, whereas eroticism, as Perlongher points out, is intense) nevertheless produce similar effects.

¹⁸¹ For more on temporality as it relates to Bataille’s notions of the sacred and the profane, see Suzanne Guerlac, “‘Recognition’ by a Woman!: A Reading of Bataille’s *L’Erotisme*,” *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 90-105.

¹⁸² For more on eros, mysticism and Perlongher’s poetics, see Nicolás Rosa, *Tratados sobre Perlongher* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Ars, 1997); Carlos Surghi, “Barroco y éxtasis en Néstor Perlongher,” *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, no. 86 (2014): 215-235; Felipe Cussen, “Éxtasis líquido: Néstor Perlongher y la poesía visionaria en Latinoamérica,” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 38, no. 76 (2012): 173-190.

poetry resonates to a large extent with Perlongher's. Poetry for the French philosopher best renders in text his notion of continuity. He writes, "poetry is one of our foundation stones, but we cannot talk about it.

I am not going to talk about it now, but I think I can make my ideas on continuity more readily felt, ideas not to be fully identified with the theologians' concept of God, by reminding you of these lines by one of the most violent of poets, Rimbaud.

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? L'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea.¹⁸³

Poetry is what cannot be translated into language ("we cannot talk about it," "no pasa por el plano de la comunicación"), and so it has to be "felt." Moreover, as we see in the excerpt from Rimbaud, it produces an effect that Bataille likens to the violence of eroticism: it blurs the boundaries between objects and, I would add, between the reader's body and the body of the text through the aesthetic encounter. Strikingly, too, it "leads to eternity," which indicates that, for Bataille, continuity is indeed a temporal category. If continuity is eternal, though, we are left wondering what type of temporality belongs to discontinuity. The poems I will examine below all thematize the vacillation between erotic fusion and discontinuous isolation and exhibit the effects this tension has on our experience of time. In some cases, they hinge on gestures of restraint, slowing time down to the point of near complete crystallization, and in other cases they mobilize a grammar of the present continuous, setting us in motion, but a motion that, like the nomad's *intermezzo*, doesn't appear to lead us anywhere in specific.

The Present Continuous

During his years in Brazil, and especially toward the end of the 1980s, Perlongher began to experiment with non-Western and "traditional" medicinal practices and forms of mysticism. Around 1987 or 1988 he became a member of Santo Daime, a syncretic religion based in the Brazilian Amazon, and participated in a series of ayahuasca rituals—a common practice among members of the sect. Perlongher later recounted his experiences in an essay entitled "La religión de la ayahuasca," different versions of which were published in French, Brazilian, and Argentinean periodicals.

In the opening lines of the essay, Perlongher provides readers with a detailed description of the ceremony. Rays of light emanate from lamps hung on the walls, music

¹⁸³ Bataille, *Erotism*, 25.

fills the room and produces a synesthetic blend with the smells circulating through the dense atmosphere. In this church, men and women gather separately, and everyone wears matching white shirts or blouses, and pants or skirts. In the center of the room hangs a large cross, the Cruz de Caravaca, which symbolizes the second coming of Christ. The group recites a series of prayers that combine Christian biblical scripture with folk Catholicism and spiritism. Once the prayers have been recited, the *ayahuasca*, or sacred drink, is distributed and ingested. The drink is made by macerating *yagube*, a vine found in the Amazon, and mixing it with tropical shrubs, such as the *chacrona* and the *rainha*, which possess hallucinogenic properties. Perlongher tells us that, upon drinking the substance, one experiences an intense burning sensation, which then leads to vomiting (a “salida de sí,” we might say). But this pain immediately transforms into an ecstasy that “se siente como una película de brillo incandescente clavada en la telilla de los órganos o en el aura del alma” (*Prosa* 156). Here, the soul is first separated and then liberated from the visceral body, and is thus free to wander aimlessly.

At a later point in the essay, Perlongher refers to Nietzsche in order to trace the resonances between the effect of *ayahuasca* and what the German philosopher calls the Dionysian impulse, named after the god of wine and irrational revelry. What they have in common, Perlongher affirms, is that both disrupt the boundaries separating one individual from the next; in other words, the Santo Daime *ayahuasca* ceremony is Dionysian in the Nietzschean sense insofar as it leads to a fusion with the cosmos, or an “éxtasis colectivo.”¹⁸⁴ But, as we know from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, this dissolution of individuality poses the risk of complete annihilation. Here, Perlongher remarks that the Dionysian frenzy is “un veneno que conduce a la pura destrucción” (*Prosa* 165). So, in order to counter this destructive impulse, we need the help of Nietzsche’s Apollo, the god of reason and order. Perlongher observes, “Precisaría de la armonía del elemento apolíneo que le diese una forma, para poder mantener la lucidez en medio del torbellino” (*Prosa* 165). This is where poetry comes in: poetry renders in textual form the ecstatic dissolution of the self, but it does so, notably, by removing the poet from the scene; the first-person “I” dissipates and becomes “others”—“Está del otro lado. Dado vuelta. Es otros,” writes Perlongher in “Poesía y éxtasis” (*Prosa* 151).

Shortly before his death, as the symptoms of late-stage AIDS were becoming more severe, Perlongher separated from the Santo Daime religion because of its opposition to Western medicine. Nevertheless, as Bollig has shown, the poet’s experiences with the group had a visible impact on his last body of poems, gathered in the collections *Aguas aéreas* (1991) and the posthumous *El chorreo de las iluminaciones* (1993). While some critics, such as Osvaldo Baigorria, deny a link between the poet’s diagnosis and his turn to esoteric

¹⁸⁴This form of ecstasy bears a striking resemblance to the notion of fatigue that I discussed in the previous chapter, insofar as both experiential modes dissolve the boundaries through which the self coheres. Enlisting the help of Jean Epstein and Maurice Blanchot, I illustrated how the fatigued individual loses her sense of self and in turn begins to perceive the world anew, creating connections that otherwise might have gone unnoticed. This new state is akin to what Epstein called *la coenesthésie*, an experiential mode characterized by “une certaine confusion d’idées.” “Les frontières,” Epstein remarked, “les limites de séparation des classes et des ordres lui échappent.” In short, fatigue moves us beyond ourselves, even as it seems to impede our movement altogether.

rituals,¹⁸⁵ moreover, Bollig points out that even though Perlongher joined Santo Daime prior to his diagnosis, he nonetheless had already sensed the virus' impact on the terrain of sexuality and politics. With these remarks in mind, I want to turn now to a few of Perlongher's last poems in order to examine how the tension between ecstasy and order shapes their form.

Let me begin with poem XX of *Aguas aéreas*:

Zambullen la ondulación chispas de espumas suave, verde claro, en reflejos de magma vegetal que a la madera de la proa astillan, al hacer estallar en el derretimiento el fragor de la luz. Ruido de espumas y olor de aguas mareosas en el deslizamiento (todo se vuelve lento) por el Purus y las madejas de remolinos entroncados que hacen de galería a la hirsuta piragua. En el desliz con fija idea de luz. En el rielar, sublime resplandor. No más que un instante ígneo en la numinosa constelación de lejanías (porque nos alejamos de la costa interior para internarnos por túneles de ramajes, severa incrustación del palo en la madera) para que, aún resbalando en la humedad, lleven de lleno a la fijeza movediza del magma en la reverberación de cristalerías de celofán con un tul de anahuac que al dejarse mover por el suspiro una red de levezas dé al paso tembloroso del ánade en las aguas, un plus de irisación.
(*Poemas* 274)

What immediately stands out in this poem (as in nearly all of Perlongher's poetry) is the emphasis on the bodily senses: the poet is training us to perceive the scene not—or not *only*—through the lexical meaning of the words, but through our sense of audition (“ruido de espumas”; “fragor de la luz”) that combines with our sense of smell (“olor de aguas mareosas”) which then blends with our senses of touch and sight (“celofán con un tul de anahuac”). Moreover, this scene, like the one represented by the “naviolas” that I discussed at an earlier moment, centers on the undulating movement of a boat (“la proa”) that seems to circulate rather than unfold linearly. Here, furthermore, this movement almost comes to a complete halt: the “magma vegetal” creeps down the page so that “todo se vuelve lento,” thus altering the reader's experience of time. The poet later describes this magma in terms of its stiffness, its “fijeza movediza,” suggesting that the substance is at once firmly congealed and yet easily malleable or moveable (perhaps, then, it's another example of Perlongher's Lezamean “nomadismo en la fijeza”). This poem thus produces meaning through a series of tensions: against the liquid flow of the “aguas” through which the ducks glide smoothly, we have the rigid but fragile “cristalerías de celofán”; and “luz,” which constantly evades our grip, is transfixed in the form of a “fija idea.”

As in poem XX, in which the passage of time is constrained so that we're ultimately left moving slowly, if at all—like the viscous magma whose rhythm we mimic as we pass from one word to the next—other poems enact similar gestures of suspension and restraint. Take, for instance, “El mal de sí,” included in *El chorreo de las iluminaciones*:

¹⁸⁵ Baigorria writes, “Al contrario de lo que puede pensarse, su enfermedad no parece haber tenido influencias sobre esta nueva dirección de sus intereses: Perlongher descubre que es HIV positivo en el 89, en Francia, bastante después de haber conectado con la iglesia del Santo Daime.” Osvaldo Baigorria, “La Rosa Mística de Luxemburgo,” quoted in Ben Bollig, *Néstor Perlongher*, 195-196.

Detente, muerte:
 tu infernal chorreado
escampar hace las estanterías,
la purulenta salvia los baldíos
de cremoso torpor tiñe y derrite,
ausentando los cuerpos en los campos:
los cuerpos carcomidos en los campos barridos por la lepra.

Ya no se puede disertar.

Ve, muerte, a ti.
Enconchate sin disparar el estallido de la cápsula.
Escondida que no seas descubierta.
Pues una vez presente todo lo vuelves ausencia.
Ausencia gris, ausencia chata, ausencia dolorosa del que falta.

No es lo que falta, es lo que sobra, lo que no duele.
Aquello que excede la austeridad taimada de las cosas
o que desborda desdoblado la mezquindad del alma prisionera.
Mientras estamos dentro de nosotros duele el alma,
duele ese estarse sin palabras suspendido en la higuera
como un noctámbulo extraviado. (*Poemas* 355)

From its first line, the poem restrains our movement, interpellating death and imploring it to stop in its track (“detente, muerte”). Here, death and eros merge, materializing in the form of the viscous pus oozing down the emptied bookshelves and onto the sheet of paper on which the poem is printed. We might even read this substance as ejaculate, which adds another layer to our understanding of “salir de sí” and further infuses the phrase with an erotic charge.

As critics such as Bollig and Tamara Kamenszain¹⁸⁶ have suggested, the poem’s title could be read as a play on SIDA. ““Sí” at once indicates an affirmation as well as a form of inward reflexivity. But the word could also be interpreted as, say, a positive test result confirming one’s diagnosis. This textual ambiguity seems to be hinted at in the single verse that divides the poem in half: “ya no se puede disertar.” But what is “it” that can’t be discussed or put into language? In order to answer this question, let me return to the previous two lines: “ausentando los cuerpos en los campos/ los cuerpos carcomidos en los campos barridos.” “Cuerpos...campos...cuerpos carcomidos...campos.” Notice here the repetition of the harsh “k” in the first syllable of each of these words. In order to produce this sound, we need to perform a voiceless velar stop, an occlusive annunciation technique that requires us to obstruct the airflow in our vocal tracts, and is usually associated with the letters “k” and “c.” Thus, for a moment, we are suffocated, our voice taken from us. In this way, the poem punctuates with a series of abrupt pauses—suspensions—the steady

¹⁸⁶ See Kamenszain’s epilogue to the *Poemas completos* edited by Roberto Echavarren.

flow of time that emerges in a line such as “la purulenta salvia los baldíos,” whose repetition of the letter “l” moves us along steadily from one word to the next. I would even venture the claim that it is in these fleeting moments that the poet envisions, and indeed attempts to enact, his own death, a scenario that cannot be rendered through direct communication, if at all¹⁸⁷. Perhaps he gestures toward this possibility by absenting himself from the poem: the only first-person subject position, strikingly, is pluralized in the form of the “nosotros” whose interiority (“estamos dentro de nosotros”) is a source of pain.

It bears noting that Perlongher repeats the use of the voiceless stop in “Cadáveres,” arguably his most well-known poem. Published in 1987, a few years into the transition from Videla’s dictatorship to neoliberal democracy, “Cadáveres” attempts to bear witness to—and re-present—an ineffable scene, this time one that involves the horrors of the previous years: “y, sin /embargo,/en esa c...que, cómo se escribía? c...de qué?” the poet asks, signaling his inability to record in written language, or indeed to vocalize, the violence of Videla’s regime. Alternately, we might read in this particular moment the very fact of the dictatorship, insofar as the poet—suffocated and faced with a series of questions (who’s asking them?)—registers torture through the fits and stops of his breathing. As in “El mal de sí,” this stanza suggests that, in order to access poetic truth, we need to suspend our firm commitment to what Perlongher referred to as “communication.” That is, we need to adopt new practices of reading that attend more directly to the affective or sensorial dimensions of the text¹⁸⁸. Further, the resonances between the two poems add a new dimension to the “desaparición de la homosexualidad” that I examined above: “desaparición” points us at once to the brutal practice of disappearances carried out during the Guerra Sucia, as well as to the loss of life, and ways of life, resulting from the AIDS epidemic.

Let me return to “El mal de sí.” As I mentioned earlier, the poet assumes here the first-person plural and thus merges with a “nosotros.” But this collective is not the product of erotic fusion, as Perlongher’s other writing might lead us to think. Rather, it seems to be comprised of a group of unidentified individuals whose inward turn (“estamos dentro de nosotros”) opposes the “salida de sí” that we saw elsewhere. This gesture—the source of the poet’s pain—is also linked to a form of suspension: “duele ese estarse sin palabras suspendido en la higuera/como un noctámbulo extraviado.” The state-of-being verb “estar” is left in the infinitive (and therefore dislocated temporally) and, interestingly, made reflexive with the addition of the suffix *se*. The poet concludes the poem by describing a rather violent, if also eerily and tragically tranquil scene in which someone—or something—hangs from a fig tree, suspended from its branches and rendered voiceless (“sin palabras”). Like the night owl that’s lost its way, whatever or whoever is suspended here oscillates between two points—perhaps life and death—without settling permanently on either.

Like “El mal de sí,” “Canción de la muerte en bicicleta,” written shortly before Perlongher’s death, is structured around a form of temporal suspension that constrains our

¹⁸⁷ Derrida discusses the impossibility that inheres in the syntagm “my death.” See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

¹⁸⁸ For more on the relationship between poetry and embodiment, see Francine Masiello, *El cuerpo de la voz: poesía, ética y cultura* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2013) and Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

linear movement. The poem is comprised of twenty-eight stanzas interspersed with a repeated couplet that reads “Ahora que me estoy muriendo/Ahora que me estoy muriendo.” This repetition gives the piece a musical and ludic quality that resembles something of a child’s playground tune, or a *ronda*; this playfulness, however, contrasts starkly with the poem’s content. Here, the poet recounts his own death as it’s in the process of occurring: “ahora, ahora, en este instante digo,” he writes, as if to try to capture the “now” before it disappears. What distinguishes this piece from the vast majority of Perlongher’s poems, aside from its obvious structural qualities, is that, while Perlongher nowhere uses the first-person singular “yo,” he nonetheless inserts a lyrical “I” into the text through the present continuous tense. Consider, for instance, the following stanzas:

Ahora que me estoy muriendo
Ahora que me estoy muriendo

Como ornamentos o condecoraciones
las manchas, los zarpullidos del sarcoma
mueven en la soberana oscuridad
manoplas cual tentáculos de espanto. (*Poemas* 357, emphasis in original)

Death is figured here as an ongoing process, one that the speaker claims as his and his alone. What’s more, this death—signified through the ornamental stains and rashes (the “zarpullidos,” an alternate spelling of “sarpullidos”) caused by sarcoma (a sign, perhaps, of AIDS), is at once present and mobile: it’s fixed in the “now” (“estoy”) but this “now” is in constant flux (“muriendo”). Thus, death entails a kind of cyclical movement; like the wheels of the bicycle that lends the poem its title, death performs a circular motion that brings us to the same point over and over again.

What I’ve been calling a poetics of suspended flow, wherein time is at once mobile and static—a “fixed nomad” we might say—is a central feature of Perlongher’s poetry; it appears most vividly, as I’ve shown here, in the poet’s final works, where, building on issues he had long addressed in his writing (eroticism, nomadism, etc.), he begins to thematize the emergence of the AIDS crisis, if obliquely. By way of a conclusion, I want to turn once more to González-Torres, in whose installations, I’ll demonstrate, we find similar iterations of suspended temporality.

In “Conclusion”: González-Torres’s Endless Supply

For art critic Nancy Spector, in González-Torres’s sculptures and installations, “the body is everywhere present...yet it is rarely visible as such.”¹⁸⁹ Perhaps no work exhibits this form of absent presence as lucidly as the artist’s photograph of an empty bed (Fig. 4). Here, we behold what appears at first to be a rather unremarkable sight, or perhaps a non-descript advertisement plastered on a standard billboard. A bed is covered in white linens and pushed against a white wall. Two pillows bear the markings of two bodies: we don’t know exactly to whom these bodies belong, but the ripples and folds in the rumpled sheets suggest that they occupied the bed not too long ago. The image thus beckons us toward an

¹⁸⁹ Nancy Spector, *Félix González-Torres*.

intimate scene, but one that, crucially, takes place in the public sphere. Indeed, in 1992 this same billboard was reproduced twenty-four times and scattered throughout New York City. And more recently in 2012, it was re-commissioned as part of the MoMa's Print/Out exhibition. Critics have rightfully read the piece against the historical and political landscape in which it was produced. A few years prior to the work's dissemination, the Supreme Court decreed in the *Bowers v. Hardwick* case that the constitution's guarantee of the right to privacy did not "confer a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy." Thus, in confronting members of the public with a scenario we'd typically associate with intimacy and domesticity, González-Torres raised important questions about access, and the privilege that any claim to privacy presumes. For the purpose of this chapter, what I want to highlight is that his photograph also asks that we encounter the body through its trace. That is, the image conjures the body precisely through its absence—or to put it differently, it evokes embodiment through disembodiment. In the case of the image of the bed, we might add that the body is made present, or re-presented, as a byproduct of a loss that has already occurred. In other words, we seem to encounter the scene only once the body has been made absent. This is an important detail that distinguishes this piece from González-Torres' other work.

To be sure, loss—and the loss of the beloved's body, or even one's own—is a familiar subject in much of his art. But unlike the image of the vacant bed, many of his other installations attempt to register loss *as it occurs*, without offering any closure or finitude; to return to Perlongher, we might say that they perform the *presente continuo* that we find in a poem such as "Canción de la muerte en bicicleta." These works situate us in a cyclical timeframe, one that we might describe as a kind of endless process of ending.

Two works in particular exemplify this form of present continuity: "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (Fig. 5) and "*Untitled*" (*Loverboys*) (Fig. 6). Both installations are comprised of a spill of candy pieces wrapped either in multicolor cellophane (as in the case of the portrait of Ross), or blue-and-white waxpaper (in *Loverboys*). Here, as with nearly all of González-Torres's art, autobiography adds layers of meaning to the object through the parenthetical aside. González-Torres identified the Ross in the first installation's nontitle as Ross Laycock, his longtime partner whom he'd lost to AIDS in the early 90s. According to the artist's specifications, furthermore, the spill of candies was meant to weigh exactly 175 pounds, Ross's ideal "healthy" weight. As spectators approach the installation, we're invited to take with us a piece of it, and thus, over time, the work disappears, mirroring Ross's diminishment, or his progressive disembodiment, what, in the lexicon related to HIV/AIDS would be called "wasting." In this way, the work not only forces us to bear witness to Ross's death, but also suggests that we are somehow complicit in it. Herein lies its political potential: it wrests us out of our complacency and our nonchalance. And it accomplishes this by invoking, or provoking, our bodily senses; the dazzling cellophane-wrapped candies lure us in with their promise of sweetness, requiring that we transgress the threshold separating artwork from viewer. Once we ingest the candy, our bodies merge with Ross's, producing something of an erotic union, to recall Bataille's definition.

Loverboys hinges on a similar dissolution of boundaries and fusion of bodies. The main difference between the two pieces is that González-Torres inserts himself more directly into this work. The installation weighs in at 350 pounds, the sum of his ideal weight combined with Laycock's. Given that the candies are identical, moreover, spectators are unable to distinguish one piece from the next, or one body from the other. What's

important to note here is that, when we take a piece of candy, we consume not just *any* metaphorized body, but the body of a queer, HIV-positive, man. González-Torres's works thus infuse the erotic, or perhaps the merely pleasant, with a sense of grief and lament. Too, they challenge the rigid distinctions that, especially in the 80s or 90s, but even today, pathologized certain bodies as "carriers."

At first glance, it seems that these installations were created with the sole purpose of being destroyed. And indeed, one could make the claim that this is exactly what happens. Each piece of candy that we take is an irreplaceable original, and with each subtraction, the pile as a whole loses its old shape and acquires a completely new one. Nonetheless, it's important to consider here that prior to his death González-Torres stipulated that the candy supply be replenished indefinitely. I bring this point up because it allows us to identify in his work two ostensibly competing impulses: on the one hand the installation invites its own dissolution, its own disembodiment; but on the other hand, part of its meaning derives from its re-constitution, or its re-embodiment. This tension, as I suggested earlier, positions us in a cyclical, rather than linear, mode of time. The "end" looms on the horizon, but, perhaps counter-intuitively, it marks a continuity rather than a complete rupture. González-Torres's art, like Perlongher's poetry and essays, like Sarduy's fatigued beach birds, and like Asunción Silva's José Fernández (who switches in the blink of an eye between frantic hyperactivity and complete paralysis), thus hinges on an alternate temporality, one that, as I've argued throughout this chapter, resembles a form of suspension in which movement is constantly restrained.



Figure 1. "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*) (1991)

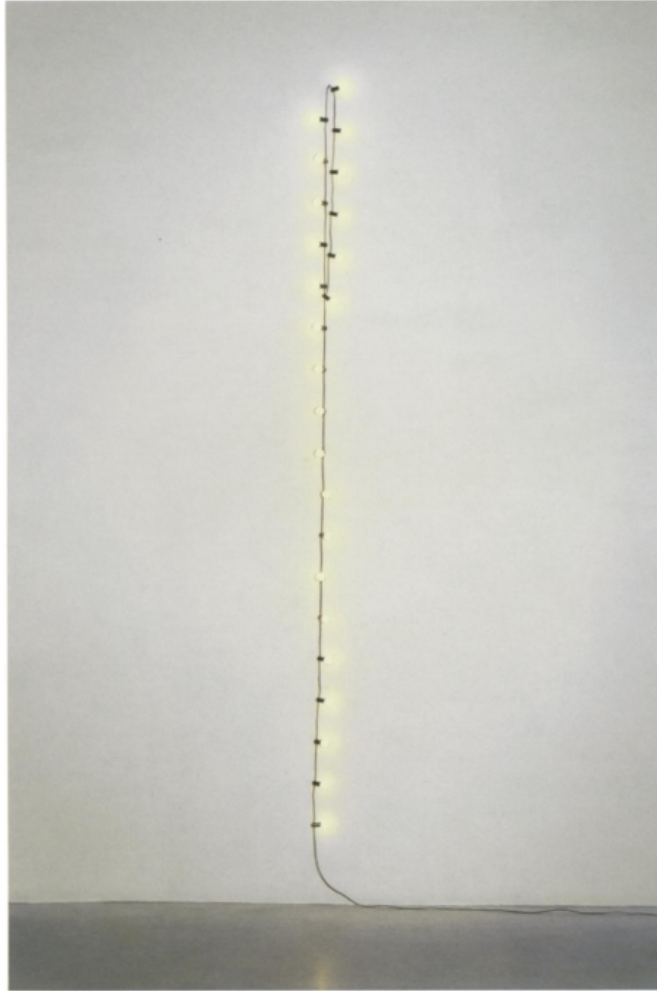


Figure 2. *"Untitled" (Last Light)* (1993)

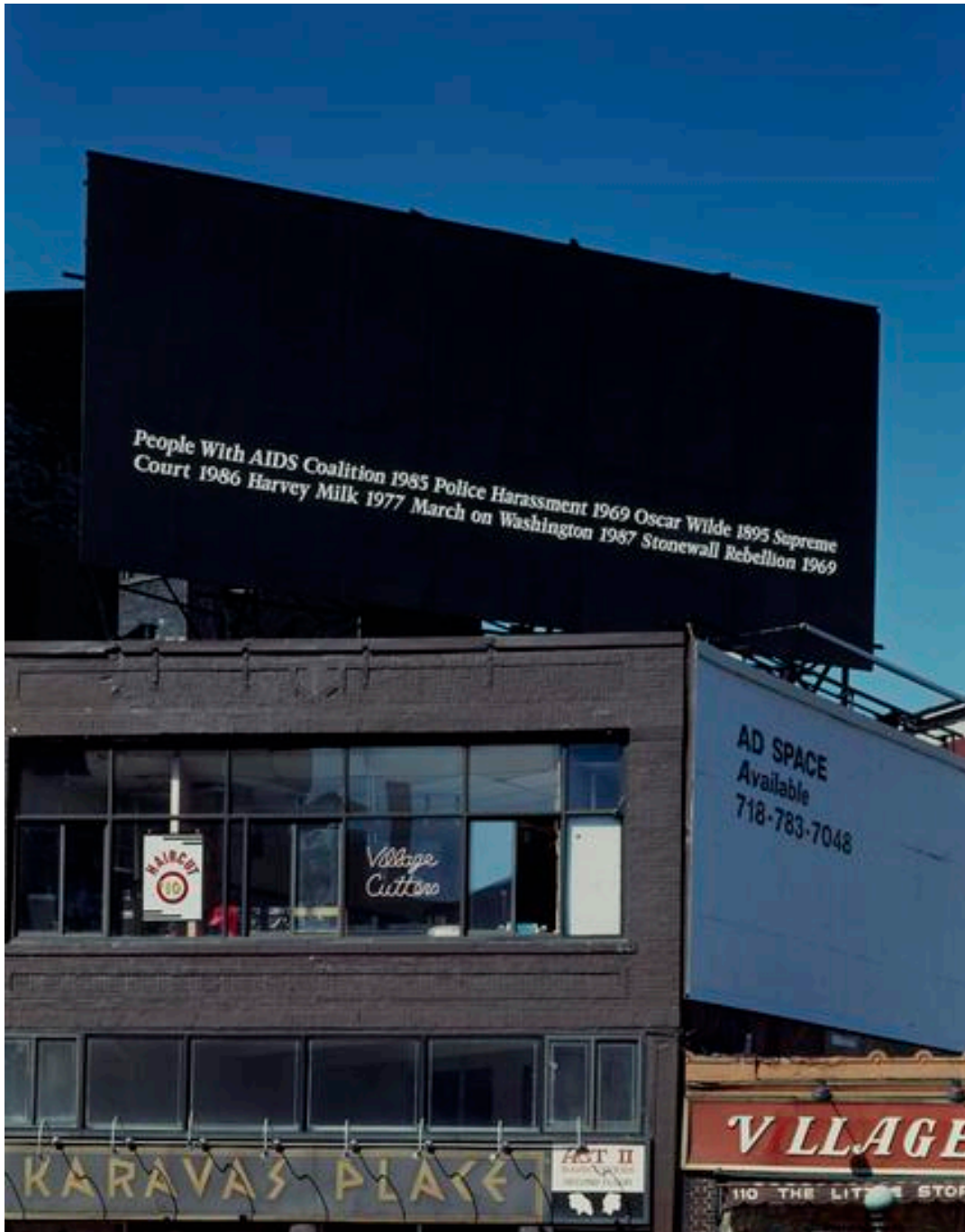


Figure 3. "Untitled" (1989)



Figure 4, "Untitled" (1991)



Figure 5, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) Endless supply of candies; ideal weight is 175 pounds.



Figure 6. *Untitled (Loverboys)* ((1991). Endless supply of cellophane-wrapped blue-and-white candies; ideal weight is 350 pounds.

CODA

In Search of an Ending

Chilean novelist Diamela Eltit's short story "Colonizadas" ["Colonized"] (2009) is a meditation on the bond between a mother and daughter—a bond that, as the story's title suggests, sometimes takes the form of an all-encompassing co-dependence or "colonization." Aside from their harmonized movements and thoughts, what connects the story's first-person narrator to her mother is that both are grappling with illnesses that are never explicitly named. The daughter's gradual blindness and hearing loss (symptoms of her condition) are compounded by her medication's side-effects, which include heart palpitations, dry mouth, cough, and involuntary gesticulations. Her mother's illness is worse, she tells us without going into much detail: "Mi madre está más enferma que yo. Mucho más.

Basta verla para entender que su estado es terminal. Es terminal, dijo el médico, el médico que nos atiende a las dos, el médico que nos obliga a innumerables exámenes, el médico que nos hace respirar una y otra vez, el médico que nos deriva por interminables pasillos hasta las frágiles salas donde nos pinchan y por la orden de ese mismo médico nuestra sangre va llenando copiosamente los tubos, un día y otro. O dos veces al día, tan seguido que es inhumano o insensato. Demasiada sangre. Aun así, pese a su terrible diagnóstico, ella se entregó a mí. Lo hizo abusando de su condición de madre terminal: atenderme, cuidarme, atenderme y cuidarme. Infatigable para que yo mejore o reviva, no sé.¹⁹⁰

[My mother is sicker than I am. Much sicker. It's enough to see her to understand that her condition is terminal. It's terminal, said the doctor, the doctor that attends to both of us, the doctor that forces us to undergo countless exams, the doctor that makes us breathe over and over again, the doctor that leads us down endless hallways to the fragile rooms where they prick us and by the order of this same doctor our blood copiously fills the tubes, day by day. Or twice a day, so frequently that it's inhumane or senseless. Too much blood. Even so, despite her terrible diagnosis, my mother dedicated herself to me. She did it against her condition of terminal mother: attend to me, care for me, attend to me and care for me. Tireless so that I can get better or revive, I don't know.]¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Diamela Eltit, "Colonizadas" in *Relatos enfermos*, ed. Javier Guerrero (México, D.F.: Literal Publishing, 2015), 113.

¹⁹¹ Translation mine.

This opening passage pivots on a central tension that will structure the remainder of the story. On the one hand, Eltit's narrator underscores here that her mother's illness is terminal; indeed, throughout the text, she refers to her mother time and again as "mi madre terminal," thus suggesting that terminality is a quality both of her mother's sickness as well as her maternity. On the other hand, in spite of these constant references to endings, time appears to stretch out *ad infinitum* as we pass through the "interminables pasillos" of the clinic and undergo countless medical procedures, filling the numerous test tubes with "demasiada sangre" not once, but twice daily. This elongated time emerges syntactically, moreover, in the cyclical repetition of phrases that seem to spill from one clause into the next: "es terminal. Es terminal...el médico que...el médico que..." Near the end of the story, the narrator further sustains this antinomy in a reference to her doctor, whose devout Catholicism (emblemized by the rosary with which he sleeps) promises neither more nor less the chance for a cure than the "medicamentos tras medicamentos" that "nos [mantienen] demasiado enfermas pero vivas"¹⁹² ["medications upon medications...that keep us too sick but alive."].

"Colonizadas" thus invites us to think about a temporality of illness marked simultaneously by terminality and endlessness. Eltit's narrator and her mother both inhabit, albeit unequally, a time-space that we might liken to Sarduy's "prepóstumo" discussed in Chapter Two: the mother's terminal diagnosis (a diagnosis whose repetition throughout the story almost seems to undo its emphasis on finitude) makes omnipresent an imminent "end," but this end is constantly deferred as a result of the medications that keep both her and her daughter alive, yet sick. What the story thematizes and enacts, then, isn't *only* the temporality of terminal illness, but also chronic illness; here, medication functions as a form of alleviation of symptoms (at best) or mere preservation of the present (at worst), and not necessarily a cure. To slightly revise Foucault's formulation, we might say that this medication "makes live," but doesn't quite "let die."

Chronic Instability

By way of a conclusion—if, indeed, "conclusion" is the most appropriate term to use here—I want to take Eltit's short story as a point of departure for reflecting on the temporality of an illness that toggles between terminal and chronic states. As I mentioned above, "Colonizadas"—and in particular its last scene—gives us a glimpse of a specific temporality that emerges when terminal illness is no longer understood to be a definitive end, but rather an *ongoing* mode-of-being; although the mother is "terminal," both she and her daughter—"una enferma grave"—are still given medications that prolong their lives. Put differently, the last lines of Eltit's text leave us wondering what happens when illness becomes the new status quo. This form of illness, which might have signaled a rupture from a previous norm, now instantiates its own set of habits, customs, behaviors, (etc.) that potentially constitute a new norm. I am invoking here Georges Canguilhem. In *The Normal and the Pathological*, Canguilhem—one of Foucault's inspirations—famously drew on the work of German neurologist Kurt Goldstein (author of *The Organism*) in order to argue that

¹⁹² Eltit, "Colonizadas," 124.

diseased bodies were bound to new sets of norms particular to their disease, rather than fixed norms that characterized healthy states; this understanding of disease marked a departure from previously held notions that, I'd argue, continue to hold sway in some spheres, which understand pathology strictly in terms of aberration.¹⁹³

To be sure, I am not suggesting that this new *habitus* is identical to a homogenous present that simply extends into the future; rather, as we see in the case of "Colonizadas," and as I'll explain further below, it's distinguished by patterns and routines that one follows in cyclical fashion, but that also entail a degree of precarity and unpredictability. In this regard, we might understand this form of illness in terms of a kind of *chronic instability*, wherein the *now* stretches out, but isn't quite as stable as it might at first glance appear to be.

In this Coda, I would like to offer a few remarks about this temporal mode by focusing on shifts in the discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS over the last two decades. I take HIV/AIDS as my case study here for a number of reasons. First, it brings this dissertation into the present moment. The primary works I examined in Chapters Two and Three—from Sarduy's *Pájaros de la playa* to Perlongher's late poems and González-Torres's installations—either explicitly or implicitly index the AIDS crisis; crucially, however, they were all produced prior to 1996, the year that inaugurated the "decade of HAART" (Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy).¹⁹⁴ This brings me to my second point: the history of AIDS—which, it is important to note, we don't all experience in the same way—took a critical turn with the discovery of new drug therapies for obstructing the virus' replication in the host's body. It was then that AIDS was transformed (again, for some, but certainly not all patients¹⁹⁵) from a so-called "death sentence" into a "manageable chronic disease."¹⁹⁶

Prior to that moment—as I discussed in Chapter Two—the primary drug available for treating HIV was AZT, a cancer medication that was originally discovered in the 1960s and that was thought to possess properties that might be effective against the virus. However, AZT—the toxic side effects of which were often more immediately debilitating than the virus' own—was only able to *slow down* HIV's multiplication, without halting it completely. With the advent of HAART—whose discovery was first made public at the Eleventh International Conference on AIDS in Vancouver in 1996¹⁹⁷—scientists were able

¹⁹³ See Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 1989) and *Writings on Medicine*, eds. Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

¹⁹⁴ John G. Bartlett, "Ten Years of HAART: Foundation for the Future," <https://www.medscape.org/viewarticle/523119>.

¹⁹⁵ We need to keep in mind here, of course, that not everyone has equal access to antiretroviral medications; furthermore, some people with HIV continue to develop AIDS, and while death rates have sharply declined since the early decades of the crisis, fatalities still occur, due to factors such as access to medications, drug adherence and resistance, testing, environmental hazards, (etc.).

¹⁹⁶ Allison Webel, "How HIV became a treatable, chronic disease," <https://theconversation.com/how-hiv-became-a-treatable-chronic-disease-51238>.

¹⁹⁷ For a timeline, see <https://www.iasociety.org/Conferences/Previous-Conferences/Timeline>

to curtail the virus' progression fully, thus ushering in a new stage in the disease's epidemiology. Due to the new antiretroviral medications, patients' viral levels became "undetectable," and they were subsequently able to live longer lives. This transformation, I want to suggest, then, is analogous to the shift we see in Eltit's story: in both instances, medication provides not a cure, but a form of sustenance-in-disease.¹⁹⁸

Literary critic Eric Cazdyn's *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (2012) offers a helpful way of framing this new temporality. Linking—as his book's title suggests—changing practices in biomedicine to broader phenomena in late capitalist culture and politics, Cazdyn identifies what he calls a "new chronic mode":

a mode of time that cares little for terminality or acuteness, but more for an undying present that remains forever sick, without the danger of sudden death. The maintenance of the status quo becomes, if not quite our ultimate goal, what we will settle for, and even fight for. If the system cannot be reformed (the cancer eradicated, the ocean cleaned, the corruption expunged), then the new chronic mode insists on maintaining the system and perpetually managing its constitutive crises, rather than confronting even a hint of the terminal, the system's (the body's, the planet's, capitalism's) own death.¹⁹⁹

Cazdyn, it bears underscoring here, is not entirely *against* this temporal mode: he discusses how, due to advances in drug therapies, medical conditions that were formerly life-threatening have become chronic and treatable (and here he refers to his own experience with a rare form of leukemia, which, thanks to new medications, no longer poses the same risk of death that it once did). Nevertheless, his argument is that this new form of temporality extends the "brutal logic of the present"²⁰⁰ *in perpetuum*. As a result, he claims, we have lost the disruptive force of the terminal and therefore are no longer able to envision a different, more egalitarian future, one that would by necessity be predicated on the end—the death—of the present.

Cazdyn's provocative assertions offer us a rich point of entry into thinking about how the temporal logic of chronic illness underpins the logic of neoliberal politics—and, to relate his discussions to my own, he even mentions HIV/AIDS as a prime example of this type of temporal mode²⁰¹. Nevertheless, my aim in this Coda is to complicate his paradigm

¹⁹⁸ A clarifying note: I use the term "disease" here with some reservation, since I don't think HIV-positivity is exactly synonymous with "disease" or "being ill."

¹⁹⁹ Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰¹ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have analyzed, specifically within the African context, the striking coincidence of late-capitalist economic policy and the emergence of HIV/AIDS. In their essay "Beyond Bare Life: AIDS, (Bio)Politics, and the Neo World Order," they contend that "it is impossible to contemplate the shape of late modern history, in Africa or elsewhere, without the polymorphous presence of HIV/AIDS, the signal pandemic of the global here and now. In retrospect,

a bit by asking how chronic illness might *also* preserve a degree of terminality. This is the temporal form I identified in Eltit's story, where the terminal mother and her "seriously ill" daughter are both administered drugs that sustain a "sickly present" (but a present that, importantly, also runs the risk of its own demise). And, I want to argue here, perhaps *against* the standard narrative, it might also be the type of temporality produced by HIV/AIDS in the age of HAART.

To demonstrate my point, I want to look briefly at *We Who Feel Differently*, an online journal of queer politics, art, and criticism curated by Colombian visual artist Carlos Motta. "Time is Not a Line," one of the journal's most recent issues, guest-edited by artist and AIDS activist Ted Kerr, brings together commentary on HIV/AIDS in the era of undetectability and Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), a pre-emptive drug (Truvada) that has been proven to effectively block HIV infection.²⁰² In a conversation about medicine and the steadily shifting boundary between HIV-positivity and negativity, Motta (who's HIV-negative and on PrEP) and HIV-positive art critic Nathan Lee discuss what it means to live with the virus at a time of rising PrEP use. At a rather moving moment in the piece, Lee underlines how, in spite of important medical advances, "there still remains a

decisive line between the infected and the uninfected regardless of all the changes happening. Part of this has to do with the fact that successful combination therapies are still very new, really new. They have only been around for less than 20 years, and every time we think we've found a way to eliminate HIV we find it hiding some place else. I know the HIV virus has been powerfully suppressed in my body, but I also know that it is lingering in various tissues. I know it is inside my body and probably [sic] not ever, fully going to abandon me. One of the exciting and scary things about HIV is how it has become this huge experiment we are all going through: We are all experimenting on our bodies, with chemicals, with new concepts and politics and practices. I think there are ways in which one can command this experimentation and deploy it in highly directly, self-conscious ways. But we also don't know what the future of any of these things is. I don't know what it will mean to take my pills 40 years from now, what the effects will be, and what the HIV lingering in my body might start to do.

So one of the things that the blurring of the HIV categories hasn't changed is still that the virus lives inside me. [...] So the question of HIV's presence in my body is not that it is a foreign agent per se, but that it's foreign with a specific agenda, a potential that it wants to activate. These

the timing of its onset was uncanny. The disease appeared like a *memento mori* in a world high on the hype of Reaganomics, deregulation, and the end of the Cold War." Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 173.

²⁰² See <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/research/biomedicalresearch/prep/index.html>.

things mark me as positive in a very particular way that no amount of Truvada will change.²⁰³

These remarks make abundantly clear how, even though it's perhaps become a chronic condition, HIV-positivity also entails a degree of precarity, unpredictability, and possibly even terminality. Lee refers here to the open-ended nature of the disease: we're still living in an age of experimentation full of nebulous uncertainties—uncertainties related on the macro level to innovations in the pharmaceutical industry (will there ever be a cure?), and on the micro-level to the virus' latency within the individual's own body (when might the virus "want to activate"? and what might its effects be?). To frame his points differently, we might consider the following: the HIV-positive patient whose viral load is undetectable still remains "positive" (with all of the ideological weight that status carries) and, like the characters of Eltit's story, must still take medication regularly and must still undergo routine medical exams. These exams, moreover, might—at least in theory—indicate that the medications are no longer working, or that there's been a sudden spike in viral load or a decline in T-cell count, or any other number of unpredictable scenarios. It's this coexistence between the long-term and the unstable that I have in mind when I refer in this Coda to a temporality of "chronic instability," one in which it doesn't suffice to think of the future as a mere extension of the present, as Cazdyn perhaps suggests.

The texts I have examined throughout this project—from late-nineteenth century *decadentista* writing to the neobaroque poetics of the 1980s and early 1990s—display a recurring focus on the ill body as a trope through which to theorize shifts in temporality. As I have demonstrated, moreover, they accomplish this, by and large, by deploying dense ornamentation as the primary aesthetic strategy with which to experiment with both narrative and poetic time; the opaque scenes of ornate interiors that abound in writing by figures such as Asunción Silva—like those that will come to distinguish the later *neobarroco*—obstruct our steady progress, such that we're slowed down, held in a suspended (but not monolithic) present, a gesture that, I've argued, mimics the constrained motion of the ill bodies we've encountered.

Yet, even though our progress is constrained, the notion of an "end" nonetheless looms on the horizon. So, for instance, we might remember Fernández of Asunción Silva's *De sobremesa*, whose diary entries—punctuated by his sporadic bouts of an unidentified illness—culminate in the scene where he comes across Helena's tomb; and Sarduy's *pájaros* who patiently await their own deaths—some of them, such as the *cosmólogo*, even express a wish to expedite the process (the only cure, both he and Siempreviva contend, is a complete detachment from all connection); or Perlongher's poets, suspended in a kind of movement-in-stasis that, I showed, marks the temporal experience of the AIDS witness who confronts the very real possibility of his diagnosis and subsequent death. As a "final" gesture, this Coda, I hope, adds new layers to these earlier analyses by showing how the

²⁰³ Carlos Motta and Nathan Lee, "There is a Tremendous Ferocity in Being Gentle," *We Who Feel Differently* 3 (2014), <https://wewhofeeldifferently.info/index.php>.

example of chronic illness complicates this emphasis on finitude; chronicity, I've suggested, sometimes makes painfully concrete a kind of *ongoing* uncertainty.

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